Repetition, Improvisation, Tradition: Deleuzean Themes in the Folk Art of Bengal

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Abstract
In this paper, I use Gilles Deleuze's concept of repetition to understand how craft technique becomes an embodied practice as a form of habit which allows for innovation. Deleuze enables us to think of practice as unselfconscious and habitual as it is based on past synthesizations; but, precisely because no two acts can ever be the same, repetition also engages with the idea of difference. His idea of repetition and difference allows us to think of creativity as emerging from everyday craft practices. I elaborate on this idea through a detailed examination of a set of pictorial narratives about the 9/11 crash on the World Trade Centre in New York, executed by folk artists of Bengal who appropriate modernist techniques of "facification" and fragmentation into their traditional compositions. For Deleuze the face is the site where ideas of habit, social role, and individuated self consciousness are problematised. When seen as a fragment that can be detached from the body, the face can travel to other sites, which may then acquire properties of expressivity and individuation. Such techniques have been used very effectively in narrative forms, such as the comic book. I contrast the narrative compositions of the Bengali folk artists with the comics' form of storytelling (a subject of experimentation that I encountered in the course of my fieldwork) and end with some thoughts on the process of oral composition.

Artisanal Practice, Embodied Knowledge, and Artistic Innovation

Artisanal learning is conventionally thought to be a product of habitual practice.[1] Apprentices learn by rote, patiently copying the gestures of the master craftsman until they have internalized the techniques of their craft (Farr 2008). This kind of bodily knowledge that comes from a mode of doing is considered necessary for the deep knowledge of the way the material actually behaves in the hands of the crafts person, enabling her[2] to evolve a set of templates or schemas that can be adapted to respond to different cues from the environment, often creating works of great aesthetic value in spite of limited conceptual knowledge (Siva Kumar 2006). The aesthetics of such practices generally foreground skill and technique rather than novel conceptualization, and creativity is viewed as a kind of improvisation rather than self-conscious expression. How then does novelty emerge in artisanal practice? And is there any space for individual self expression? Is there such a thing as communal creativity or is that quality always associated with individuals? In a famous essay on the Russian fairy tale, the structuralist Roman Jakobson (1966) said that artistic innovations that are of significance are always brought about by individuals. However, in folk cultures with predominantly oral traditions, such innovations fade away unless they are absorbed into the expressive repertoires of the larger community. For this to happen

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the imprint of the author must be forgotten, i.e., for the work to become popular it must be anonymous, treated as common property by the community at large.

In this essay, I attempt to chart a middle ground between the two positions delineated above—neither rendering folk artists as mute vessels incapable of self-reflexivity or conceptual thought, nor treating them as coterminous with art practitioners in the modern art world whose practices are supposed to be self-consciously agonistic, based on a valorization of subversion so that the artist deliberately sets herself in opposition to dominant societal values. Instead I try to offer a notion of artistic agency that is multiple and synthetic rather than autonomous and subjective, conceptualized through an elaboration of the work process which allow us to think of artists as embodied through their practices rather than their finished artworks.

My argument is framed by Deleuze's ideas about repetition and time. For Deleuze, the embodied individual is constituted as a passive subject—a site on which thoughts circulate, encountering sensations and objects that may be energized to form ideas (Deleuze 2004). However, the body that is the medium in which the materialization of such creative energies takes place first has to be honed into becoming a receptive vehicle. It must become a machine or automaton constituted through repeated work and exercise which allows thought to flow through the individual subject. Thought, for Deleuze, is no longer the result of self-conscious reflection by individuals, but an emergent process that arises from the passive synthesis of time reflected in repetitive and habitual practices. It is only when past activities are brought into the present through habit and memory that 'things' acquire actual shape. I try to show how artisanal forms of learning through repetition enable creative novelty to emerge not in the mode of purposeful self-expression, but by cultivating habits in the form of embodied practices that are responsive to continual variation in the environment. Artistic agency manifests itself in contingent acts—unexpected connections that reveal their potential only retrospectively after the art work is actualized (Wang 2008).

Emergent Events and Painted Narratives

In this section, I illustrate the conceptual framework delineated above with examples of artistic production from the Chitrakar, a community of picture storytellers from West Bengal, gathered in the course of anthropological fieldwork in a village called Naya in West Medinipur district. But first, a brief description of the community itself.

Even though the term 'chitrakar' means picture-maker, the art refers to a form of narrative performance in which the bard narrates a story in song while s/he displays a painted scroll. The subjects of their narratives are largely mythological, but because this is a popular and secular form of rural entertainment, there are many compositions that deal with dramatic secular events, such as natural calamities and scandals. The distinction between secular and mythological is a recent one, however, and originated with the post-independence patronage of the folk arts by state agencies to popularize policies and schemes concerning education and health. The enthusiasm with which folk artists such as the chitrakars have taken up such novel themes has not only led to a vastly expanded range of narrative subjects, but also to a new classification of themes into traditional (*puranic*) and social (*samajik*).

In spite of this division, the overall framing of narratives is still influenced by a kind of mythological organization that views time as cyclical and synchronic. Chitrakars are largely Muslim, but compose and perform narratives based on both Hindu as well as Muslim myths. This does not seem so extraordinary if we remember that at the level of folk religiosity, multi-religious villages like Naya develop syncretic cultures that revolve around faith-based worship at popular shrines of saints, as well as public rituals in which both Hindus and Muslims participate. According to scholars like Richard Eaton (2000), Rafiuddin Ahmed (1981), and Motiyur Rohman (2003), Islam in rural Bengal was spread by holy men or spiritual guides called *pirs,* who used institutions and forms of expression that were local and popular to convey their ideas about Islam. This led to the development of a body of literature that was distinctively Bengali in spirit and appealed to Hindus and Muslims alike (Stewart 2002).[3] One could say that the chitrakars are the contemporary exemplars of this syncretistic literary tradition.[4]

Until about three decades ago, the chitrakars were a caste of itinerant picture storytellers. They acquired a certain visibility among the urban elite when the nationalist scholar Gurusaday Dutt (1882-1941) sought inspiration from their work and life styles to articulate a model of Indian culture that was secular and based on Hindu-Muslim syncreticism. Dutt is an important figure in the nationalist revival of craft traditions in independent India. He was inspired by the arts and crafts movement in Britain while still an official in the British colonial service in Bengal, and set up several craft fairs and institutions while in service. He was inspired by Bengali folk culture—especially that of the chitrakars—and felt that they could contribute significantly to the development of a national culture by providing indigenous models of secularism (Chatterji 2012). According to Dutt, the chitrakars were an exemplary voice in the folk culture of Bengal—they occupied an interstitial position in the caste hierarchy, designating themselves as Muslim, following local (Hindu) customs and displaying scrolls with largely Hindu themes (Bhattacharjee 1980, Dutt 1939, 1990).

The chitrakars are scattered all over Bengal, but very few still practice their traditional occupation. It is only in Medinipur district that the artists have been able to withstand the competition of more popular forms of entertainment, such as films and television, by adapting their art form to the tastes of contemporary urban publics. In the traditional world of chitrakar performance the painted scroll was used as a prop—as an aid to bardic narration serving the same function as pictures in illustrated storybooks for children. Over time the space for bardic performance has shrunk and artists have shifted their attention to the painted scroll, creating increasingly elaborate scrolls that depict stories not only from their traditional repertoire but also event-based stories about newsworthy subjects like the 9/11 strike on the World Trade Centre in New York and the Tsunami (Chatterji 2012, 2015). Such scrolls are composed with an eye to a new regime of patronage—the urban public that frequents state-sponsored craft fairs and, more recently, museums and private galleries.

Interestingly, while the space for the traditional multi-media performance that combined singing with picture display has shrunk because new patrons in Delhi

and abroad cannot understand the songs couched in a form of Bengali that is specific to Medinipur, the artists still compose the songs, especially for new thematic compositions, before painting the scroll. I was told that the song serves to anchor the pictorial story as it guides the painter on how to render the pictorial scenes. I found this to be true, as the only new themes undertaken during my fieldwork that did not have accompanying songs were those that already had ready-made stories taken primarily from films such as *Titanic* and *Godzilla*, of which pirated DVD copies were available for viewing in the village itself.[5] In the traditional performance mode, the lead singer unrolls the scroll frame by frame while s/he sings the song using the index finger to point to figures in the frame whose names appear in the particular stanza being sung. Old mythological compositions had distinctive tunes for different stanzas of the song and usually included a refrain sung by a chorus of two or three supporting singers. This is not done for new compositions. Artists tend to use a common tune based on a synthesis of popular tunes that is somewhat derogatively called 'radio folk' by my respondents. Not only is this easy to sing but is pleasing to the ear, as I have been told, because it does not require prior knowledge of the traditional form of music and is recognizable to urban audiences.

I will now try to illustrate my argument about repetition and creativity with an analysis of a narrative theme from a set of painted scrolls. The narrative is based on a contemporary event—the 9/11 strike on the World Trade Centre in New York. The 9/11 story was composed within a couple of months of the event itself, inspired by a *jatra* (folk theatre) performance on the subject by a travelling theatre troupe from Kolkata (formerly Calcutta) that played in Naya village, West Medinipur, where the 9/11 or *Laden* scroll, as it is popularly designated, was first composed.[6]

The play dealt with the events leading up to the Gulf War and the crash and collapse of the Twin Towers formed the climax of the performance, coming at the end of the play. It was depicted as a cyclorama[7] on a separate stage (Mukhopadhyay 2008). The leader of *Digbijoy Opera*, the troupe that performed this *jatra* in Naya, said in an interview to Bhaskar Mukhopadhyay, that the play wove in several themes including a sub-plot about a middle-class Bengali boy who goes to the U.S. to study, succumbs to the corrupting influence of a decadent Western life style, and dies in the 9/11 crash. The 19th century themes of modern decadence and the corrupting influence of Westernization are still popular in Bengali films and television serials and were probably added for audience appeal.

However, the chitrakar rendering of the event is radically different. I have examined ten versions of the *Laden* scroll and, apart from variation in detail such as the manner in which the Twin Towers and the crash are depicted, they reveal a common episodic structure that articulates the Bush-bin Laden relationship, showing how it transformed from intimate friendship to violent enmity. The pictorial narrative begins with the crash; it then depicts scenes of long distance communication between Bush and bin Laden and meetings that lead up to the war in Afghanistan; then the war, and finally bin Laden's escape to the caves in the Tora Bora mountains (figures 1 to 6). I have heard three versions of the song that accompanies the painted story on the scroll. The

Figure 1: First frame of *Laden* scroll by Tagar Chitrakar. Pigment on paper

songs do not replicate all the scenes portrayed in the scroll. Instead they serve as a general commentary on the event and how it led to a massive hunt for bin Laden and subsequently to war in Afghanistan. The suffering of the victims is usually emphasized in the song, the storyteller's finger pointing to specific figures being sung about as s/he slowly unrolls the scroll, frame by frame. The scrolls are divided into six frames or more, each frame depicting a different scene in the story. As I have said, all the *Laden* scrolls begin with the scene of the crash. The airplane is foregrounded in the first frame—a swollen fish-shaped form with a bearded face that represents Osama bin Laden.

The first scroll on the 9/11 Strike follows the order of events as they appeared on television. Thus, as Manu Chitrakar, the composer of the first *Laden* scroll told me, "We did not know what was happening, who was behind it. Only later when scenes of celebration were being broadcast from bin Laden's camp did the world came to suspect that it might be him." The first frame of Manu's scroll has an ordinary airplane crashing into the twin towers, followed by scenes of destruction, and then revelry in bin Laden's camp (figure 7). It was Swarna Chitrakar, Manu's sister, who first put bin Laden's face on the killer plane (figure 8). But this motif struck a chord and has been absorbed into the painterly vocabulary. She made other innovations, such as anthropomorphic images

Figure 2: Second frame of *Laden* scroll by Tagar Chitrakar. Pigment on paper.

Figure 3: Third frame of *Laden* scroll by Tagar Chitrakar. Pigment on paper.

of the weeping fire engine that did not catch on and are not part of the stable pictorial narrative. Manu's scroll also followed the plot of the *jatra* that I mentioned earlier, though with some modification. A young Bengali boy died in the crash, on the eve of his return to India. Scenes of pathos, which showed the parents receiving the news of their son's death by telephone, were included. This theme has not been retained over time, though the telephone motif still occurs but is transformed to signify the Bush-bin Laden relationship as we see in Tagar's scroll (see figure 2). Manu tried to bring the event closer to his local audience by including an Indian protagonist. Since the primary audience for the picture scroll is non-local these elements were soon dropped even by Manu.

In scrolls with sacred themes the first scene is usually disjunct from the story. It depicts the god or the main protagonist enthroned with a retinue of worshippers and is accompanied by the invocation sung before the actual story is musically rendered. Since the Laden scroll deals with a historical theme, and that too with human tragedy, it cannot begin with an invocation. However, images of the airplane with bin Laden's face and the crash tell us about the subject of the story, as do the invocatory stanzas and the enthroned gods in the traditional Chitrakar performances.

Figure 4: Fourth frame of *Laden* scroll by Tagar Chitrakar. Pigment on paper.

Tagar Chitrakar's scroll emphasizes the Bush-bin Laden relationship. Only one of the towers is depicted on the right-hand side of the frame. Flames erupt from the top of the tower

Figure 5: Fifth frame of *Laden* scroll by Tagar Chitrakar. Pigment on paper.

and, at the bottom of the register in line with the frame, dead bodies lie horizontally with eyes closed (see figure 1). It is important to note at this juncture that all the faces are beardless and therefore in marked contrast with the bearded face on the airplane. (Perhaps viewers who are unfamiliar with the codes of pictorial representation in this genre are likely to see these dead figures as women. Markers of gender are not always highlighted in this tradition. Viewers are expected to fill such details on their own when relevant.) Another point worth noting is the position of the plane vis-à-vis the tower. The plane seems to be flying away from the tower and coming toward the left of the frame with the face pointing toward the viewer. Unlike the tower, the plane appears undamaged (see figure 1). However, the tower form is repeated in several other frames and serves as a motif symbolizing the Bush-bin Laden relationship in the narrative (see figure 2).

In the second frame of Tagar's scroll, the tower form becomes a column separating the figures of Bush and bin Laden, seen here talking to each other by telephone. The figures are symmetrically positioned, each one flanked by guards carrying guns. The point of distinction is the presence or absence of the beard, for Bush and his men look young and beardless and bin Laden and his men look old with full beards (see figures 2 and 3). Bin Laden, a replication of the face on the airplane, is now shown near the right-hand side of the frame. The position of the bearded figure keeps alternating from left to right and again

Figure 6: Sixth frame of *Laden* scroll by Tagar Chitrakar. Pigment on paper.

Figure 7: First frame of *Laden* scroll by Manu Chitrakar. Pigment on paper.

Figure 8: First frame of *Laden* scroll by Swarna Chitrakar. Pigment on paper.

Figure 9: Last frame of *Laden* scroll (2) by Probir Chitrakar. Pigment on paper.

to left in the successive frames. It is only in the last frame that it occupies a position at the centre of the frame (see figures 1 to 6). Perhaps these alternating positions of the bearded and beardless faces tell us something about the way the bin Laden-Bush relationship has been conceptualised in this pictorial imagination. Bush and bin Laden are portrayed as the archetypal rivals—and their followers depicted as replicas of one or the other leader. (This depiction harks back to a traditional way of depicting the theme of rivalry or conflict in Bengali myths. Gods and demons are portrayed as both rivals and kin. As I was told repeatedly while in Naya, Bush and bin Laden were like brothers, just like Habil and Kabil, which is why the enmity between them was so fierce. Habil and Kabil are the two brothers Cain and Able in the Semitic tradition.)

Continuing with the description of the scroll, the tower form becomes a canon spouting flames in Tagar's third register, depicting the battle scene—but it acts as a barrier separating the two armies, its mouth points upward rather than facing the soldiers (see figure 3). The battle scene in Tagar's scroll shows only corpses, some of which are bearded (see figure 4). There are no barriers that separate the soldiers of the two armies, though the bearded figures tend to be concentrated in the upper half of the frame. The last two frames of the *Laden* scroll show bin Laden and his followers on horseback, being chased by Bush's men, and finally disappearing into the caves in

Figure 10: Last frame of *Laden* scroll by Rohim Chitrakar. Pigment on paper.

Figure 11: Last frame of *Laden* scroll (1) by Probir Chitrakar. Pigment on paper.

the Tora Bora mountains (see figures 5 and 6).

The representational strategy that Swarna used—attaching a bearded face to the image of the killer airplane in the first frame of the *Laden* scroll—introduced the pictorial story with an arresting image that created ripples in the narrative universe of the chitrakars. It led to a great deal of experimentation, at least as far as the pictorial story is concerned, as artists started playing with the possibilities offered by the motif of the bearded face. In the scroll described above, the face is used as a repeat motif, one that takes on a variety of meanings as the context in which it occurs changes. It begins as an index signposting the narrative theme and then transmutes into a term in a binary set, with the juxtaposition of two faces in successive frames—one bearded and the other beardless, suggesting an agonistic intimacy between Bush and bin Laden as the two chief protagonists in this story.

Experiments with the story line did not stop here. Other artists started unravelling the multiple strands of meaning condensed in the bin Laden face. Thus the last frame of Probir's scroll replicates Tagar's story but with one crucial difference. It shows bin Laden on his white horse as an inset set distinctly apart from the mountains in the background. The mouth of the cave is reduced to a border that frames the bin Laden figure and separates it from the action scenes above (see figure 9 by Probir and 10 by Rohim for a dramatic variant on the same theme). Slightly earlier variants on this theme by Probir show that he had been thinking about the bin Laden figure for some time. As figure 11 shows, he was exploring single bin Laden figures framed by the mouth of a cave.

Other *Laden* scrolls present further elaborations of this scene. We see the mouth of the cave that could be made into a decorative border for framing the bin Laden image now transformed into a cross section of a saint's tomb underground as worshippers with folded hands stand before it. One particularly dramatic scroll shows a tree growing out of the tomb—spreading its branches backward to cut across previous frames of the scroll that depict scenes of the Gulf War, as if to say that it is only through the transformation of bin Laden's demonic image into one that can be pacified that global peace will be possible (figures 12 and 13 by Chandan). Interestingly none of these developments in the pictorial story find mention in the songs.[8]

Figure 12: Second Last Frame of *Laden* Scroll by Chandan Chitrakar. Pigment on paper.

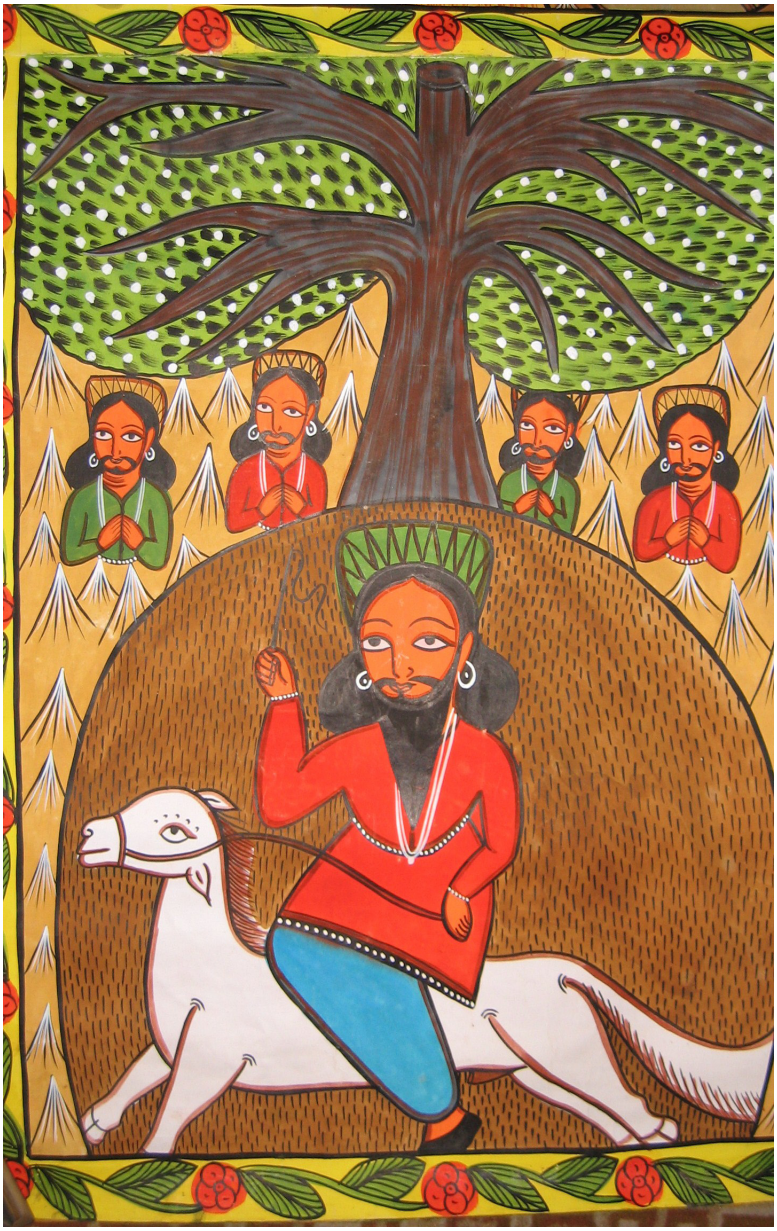

Figure 13: Last frame of *Laden* scroll scroll by Chandan Chitrakar. Pigment on paper.

Figure 14: First frame of *Tsunami* scroll by Mantu Chitrakar. Pigment on paper.

The first and sometimes the last frames of traditional scrolls are disjunct from the other frames that depict the episodes in the story in that they serve to place the story in the mythic universe so that it resonates with other stories about gods and goddesses.

How does the narrative persona of bin Laden emerge? As I have already mentioned, the pictorial story follows a path that is different from the song that accompanies it. The song emphasizes the war and, in some songs, the enormity of the tragedy, dwelling on the suffering of the victims. Yet it is completely silent on the tension between the demonic and the saintly aspects of the bin Laden persona shown so effectively in successive examples of the Laden scroll.[9] It was Swarna's experiments with facialization that gave the initial creative impulse in developing the Laden story—a story that developed pictorially rather than through the song.

In what situation does the bin Laden image emerge? Many compositions about cataclysmic events, such as the Tsunami, use facializing techniques, anthropomorphizing nature's fury to effectively portray pathos and tragedy (see figure 14 by Mantu).[10] It was Swarna's deployment of the face in a new way that gave the image its affective charge. She separated the face from its traditional context where it framed scenes of natural disaster and thereby drained it of its conventional demonic attributes. She then extracted a face from another image from the Chitrakar repertoire—the figure of the *pir* or holy man and placed it in this new narrative. In the process some of the attributes associated with the figure of the *pir* were transferred to the bin Laden narrative.

Swarna had not foreseen the impact that this substitution of faces would have for the larger story. In her first attempt at painting the 9/11 story, she had experimented with different facial types to bring out a range of affects—the terror of the impact enhanced by an impassive bearded face—bin Laden's demonic aspect as well as a more pathetic, tearful face that she attached to a fire engine in the subsequent frame of the scroll. But

no other artists took up this motif and Swarna herself dropped it in later versions of the scroll. It seemed incapable of generating the creative spark. Swarna's addition of the bearded face atop the killer plane was probably an attempt to incorporate a well established Chitrakar technique of anthropomorphizing cataclysmic events to enhance their dramatic effect. Her originality lay in eschewing the standard demonic features of such faces to enhance the magnitude of the calamities being represented. Instead, her face is impassive—a 'reflecting surface' according to Deleuze (1989), that mirrors the affects that flow from the surrounding scene—not just scenes of fury as suggested by the first register of the scroll but also scenes of hope and re-generation as depicted in the last register. Thus her innovation in the story first composed by her brother Manu carries the potential for a new storyline that she did not herself develop. Rather, the theme crystallized as other artists picked it up and started experimenting with the motif of the bearded face, juxtaposing it with other images and placing it in new contexts, thus allowing for contrasting values to emerge through the figure of Osama bin Laden—the demonic with the saintly.

Deleuze (2004) says that repetition has to be understood in terms of habitual activities that change imperceptibly as they adapt themselves to varying contexts. Variability is thus an intrinsic property of repetition. Swarna's adaptation of the traditional demonic face invites us into a new context in which we are no longer faced with an anonymous, authorless event, but one that is authored and therefore singular, which allows the pictorial narrative to develop in ways that are unprecedented. To use a term coined by Deleuze she was able to 'deterritorialize' the face and free its affective potential (Deleuze and Guattari 2004). An example of territorialisation from *The Thousand Plateaus* by Deleuze and Guatari (2004), is that of an animal whose incessant prowling and marking of its parameter creates a notion of territory (see also Williams 2003). Thus, when some part contained within this territory becomes detached and travels elsewhere, it carries traces from its previous locations along with it. The body is one such space marked out as a personal territory by individuals through habitual practice. But the face is one aspect of this personalized territory that is easily detachable. Thus, as Deleuze says, that the face has to be considered as separate from the body in that it has 'sacrificed most of its motoricity in order to become the support for organs of reception…' (1986: 87). It has lost the 'movement of extension' characteristic of the body and has instead acquired the 'movement of expression'. The mask-like properties of the face allow it to become an agent of what Deleuze calls deterritorialization, relocating traits that have become habitual through repetitive practice in new milieus. This is precisely what happens with the Osama face in the *Laden* scrolls.

The mask-face, or the face as a reflecting surface, provokes attention and possible interpretation. It establishes the potential grid that will make signification possible. It enables the fixing of signs and the potential for textualization or reading. Thus picture storytelling in the Chitrakar tradition uses the potential of the mask-face to align the lyrics of the song that is being sung with the images that the performer unfolds. The performer keeps pointing to images in frames that are successively unrolled before

the audience, in tandem with the song that she sings, thus using her finger to draw attention to aspects of the event being narrated in the song. The images anticipate the words that will quicken them and bring them into meaning, as it were. But precisely because the image exceeds the text in its ability to suggest possible acts of interpretation, it also enables new kinds of readings. Thus the Osama mask-face in the *Laden* scroll, detached from its traditional context as the face of a holy man in a religious story, is re-territorialized in the 9/11 story. But the traits that this face carries from its previous contexts influence the milieu in which it now finds itself, allowing for a different reading of the bin Laden story. Paradoxically this reading has never been actualized in the songs composed on the 9/11 theme, leaving the face silent, an enigma waiting to be narrativized.

Let us now return to the relationship between creativity and repetition that was posited at the beginning of this section. Repetition, for Deleuze, is an attentiveness to the singular that does not presuppose multiple occurrences of the same (Chang: 1999). It is by paying close attention to specific details depicted in the song and the pictorial scroll that the narrative grows as it circulates from one artist to another, as we saw. When Swarna received the 9/11 story from her brother, she chose not to experiment with the song but rather focused her attention on the first two frames of the pictorial scroll. By putting a face on the killer plane she not only enhances the dramatic potential of the pictorial story but also gives greater coherence and simplicity to the storyline, allowing the focus of attention to rest on the Bush-bin Laden relationship and the intimate face of enmity, of a friendship gone horribly wrong—an important mythic theme in this narrative universe. Other artists who borrowed Swarna's motif of the bearded face explored other possible connotations by going to other stories where such a face might surface, as I have shown. Thus there is a creative vibration caused by the repeated occurrence of the same motif, both within different frames of the same scroll and across different scrolls.

But why do I focus on Swarna as the innovator rather than Manu who was the original composer of the 9/11 story?[11] It is because only after the subplot in Manu's story, about the Bengali boy who died in the crash, was dropped that the story began to circulate. Swarna's innovation created a spark and can be regarded as the onset of a series of innovations that helped to make the *Laden* story what it is today and establish it as a part of the collective repertoire of stories for the chitrakar community in Bengal. More importantly for this essay, the elaborate discussion of the 9/11 scroll will help throw fresh light on Roman Jakobson's (1966) idea of collective creativity, mentioned in the introduction. As I have tried to show, the impulse of creation inheres in the process of circulation itself, as each artist contributes to the process by dwelling on particular motifs that may not be central to the overall storyline at first sight. Stories emerge in a plural fashion, as assemblages made up of formulaic motifs that often carry traces of past narratives with them. It is by dwelling on such motifs that something novel and exciting may emerge.[12]

Comic Books and Chitrakar Narratives

The pictorial narrative of 9/11 emerged within a particular genre of bardic performance in which each frame of the scroll is arranged to form a tableau. The performer guides the audience through the scene with the help of her index finger, picking out the relevant images mentioned in the song. Since it is the lyrics of the song that provide the meaning of each scene, one finds considerable variation in the interpretation given to the pictorial images. Take for example the telephonic conversation between Bush and bin Laden in the second frame of Tagar's scroll (figure 2). The telephone motif is interpreted by many performers as signalling the intimacy in their relationship, a relationship that suddenly transformed itself into enmity with tragic consequences for the world at large. Rani Chitrakar enacted this narrative for me using Tagar's scroll but her interpretation was radically different (see foot note 2). She glossed over this scene and instead read the telephone motif as signifying the global aspect of the tragic event and the fact that it happened in a distant land. Her song emphasized the anguish of parents who had to hear about their children's death long distance via telephone without even a glimpse of their bodies in death.

Chitrakar narratives are open-ended, revealing a relationship of dissonance between the lyrics of the song and the images on the scroll. It is this variability that has enabled the pictorial narrative on 9/11 to develop along lines that are independent of the musical text. This fact also allowed the story to adapt itself to another narrative medium that also explores the dissonance between words and images, as we shall now see.

In 2008, a group of Chitrakar artists from Naya village were invited to a workshop by Tara Books, an innovative publishing house in Chennai that often collaborates with folk artists from different parts of India to produce illustrated storybooks. Influenced perhaps by the alternative comics culture developing in urban India, the creative team at Tara wanted to explore the possibility of translating the Chitrakar style of pictorial storytelling into the comics medium (Stoll 2012). The participants of the workshop included five Chitrakar artists, three members from the Tara team, and graphic novelist Orijit Sen, whose pioneering work in this medium has helped establish the alternative comics culture in India. As a long-time activist with an interest in folk expressivity, Orijit was best suited to work with the Chitrakar artists, none of whom had any exposure to this medium. I had accompanied the artists to Chennai, and as a facilitator at the workshop I was privy to the interactions between the various participants. The workshop began with a lecture demonstration by Orijit, who explained the structure of the comics' narrative with examples from his own work, and then the artists were asked to depict a story of their own choosing in this new medium. Since this was an exploratory workshop, the artists were told that they did not have to worry about the final outcome of their efforts. Since most folk artists in India are quite worried about the future of their art traditions in a highly mediatised environment, the Chitrakars were quite excited about the potential that this new narrative medium might have for extending the audience base for their storytelling form.

Figure 15: First page of *Laden* story by Mantu Chitrakar. Pencil on paper.

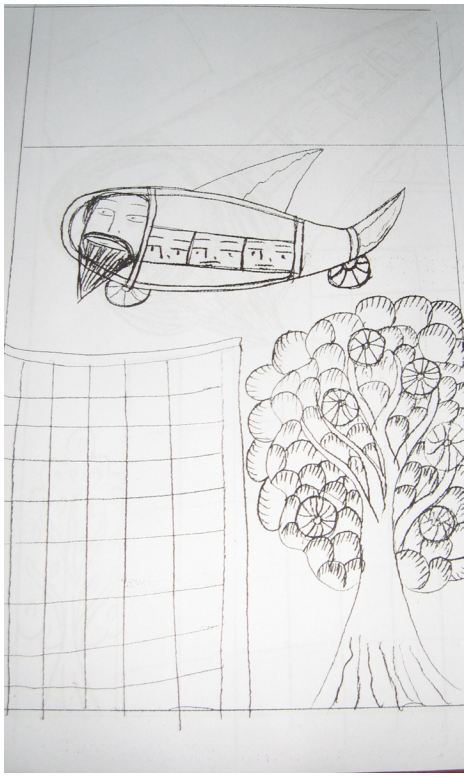

Figure 16: Second page of *Laden* story by Mantu Chitrakar. Pencil on paper.

One of the artists, Mantu Chitrakar, decided to use the 9/11 story for his experiment, thinking that this would be most easily understood to an audience unfamiliar with the Chitrakar repertoire of stories. But certain difficulties based on structural differences between the two mediums soon surfaced. The Chitrakar style of composition is improvisatory and open ended. Composers of both songs and pictures think of the narrative text in terms of episodic blocks that are stitched together with the help of formulaic motifs (Lord 1976). The events that form the basis of these stories are true and often as in the case of 9/11 have reverberations that are felt across time, shaping the structure of everyday life. Traditionally such events were sacralised in Indian storytelling traditions and interpreted within a mythic framework. Stories organized according to such frameworks generally move between two temporal registers—the diachronic register, or time as succession, and the synchronic one in which events are viewed in simultaneity (Lévi-Strauss 1977). This double structure allows the events that make up these stories to open up to other times and places while participating in the weave of our everyday lives.

The narratives themselves are composed by stitching together episodic blocks and themes rather than in terms of plot structures. These themes are well known and

Figure 17: Third page of *Laden* story by Mantu Chitrakar. Pencil on paper.

Figure 18: Fourth page of *Laden* story by Mantu Chitrakar. Pencil on paper.

narrators use formulaic devices to signal the episodes to come. Thus in the case of the 9/11 pictorial story the composers gather together a series of affective images guided by the general framework of the disaster narrative and its pictorial scroll—motifs such as the demonic face that signifies the scale of the tragedy, airplanes and reporters with cameras to signal that these are secular and contemporary stories, and so on. Swarna's departure from this convention led her to substitute the face of a demon with that of a man with a beard. This allowed, on the one hand, the beard to be used as a diacritical mark so that its presence or absence could distinguish the two sets of players in this narrative, but since bearded faces are usually associated with *pir* figures in this tradition, allowed an alternate framing to emerge on the other. This semantic feature has remained a subtext of the narrative—confined to the scroll—and since the song does not detail the physical appearance of Osama bin Laden, or George Bush for that matter, there is no mention of the *pir* motif in its text.

Given the fact that Chitrakar storytellers tend to focus on the emotional effects evoked by the events rather than the events themselves, how did Mantu respond the challenge of composing in a narrative form that is emphatically plot-centric? The execution of comics' stories usually begins by deciding on page length, page layout, the number of panels on a page and so on. Other important structural features, such

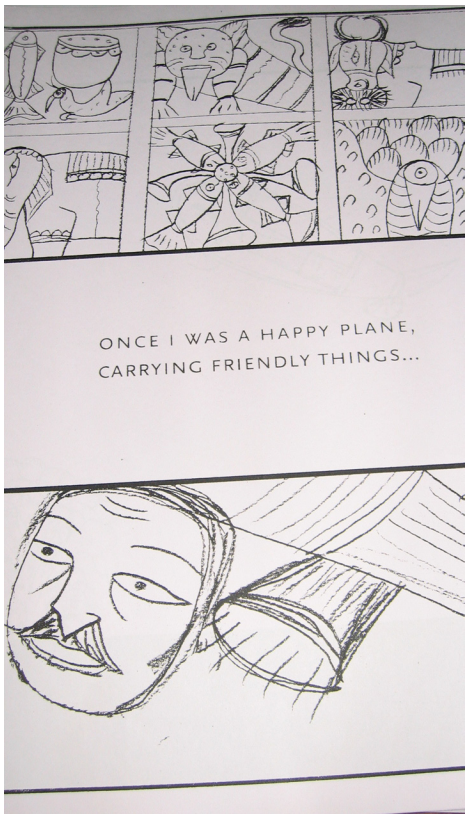

Figure 19: First page of reworked *Laden* story by Mantu Chitrakr. Pencil on paper.

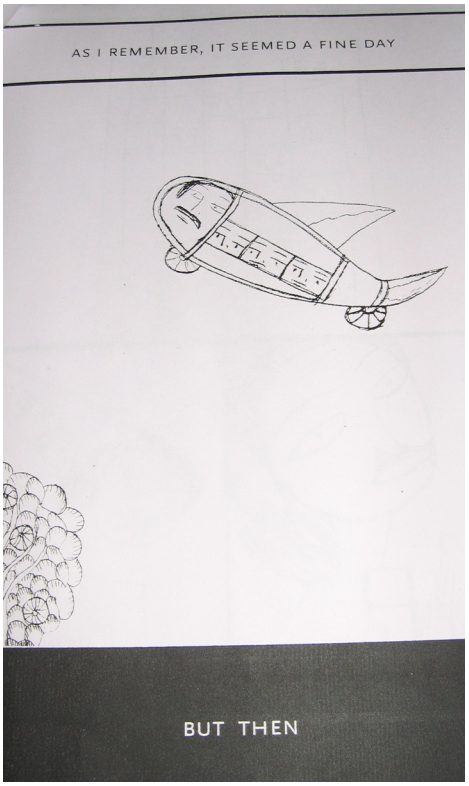

Figure 20: Second page of reworked *Laden* story by Mantu Chitrakar. Pencil on paper.

as the role played by the narrator within the story, and the background and diegetical context in which the events in the story occur, are also absent from the Chitrakar mode, as it is assumed that all stories are known in advance and nothing is ever narrated for the first time. This is a common feature of myths and storytelling traditions inflected by a mythic universe. Thus, as we have seen, even secular events like the 9/11 event become mythicized in the chitrakar rendering of it.[13] Another stylistic feature at odds with the comics mode is the fact that Chitrakar narrations are usually in the third person with sporadic interjections in the first person, especially when it is necessary to emphasize an emotional point in the story.

Mantu was quite excited by a sample story that Orijit showed in his lecture demonstration, in which the chief protagonist is a machine. Mantu felt that the anthropomorphized airplane that figures in the *Laden* scroll could be the narrator as well as main protagonist of his comics' story. The 9/11 story would be told from the airplane's point of view, in the voice of the plane or whatever was left of it after the crash. He then had to find a suitable location in which to place the narrator so that it could tell its story before a suitable audience. After some discussion with the other artists he decided that a museum would be a logical place to house the narrator, as it is

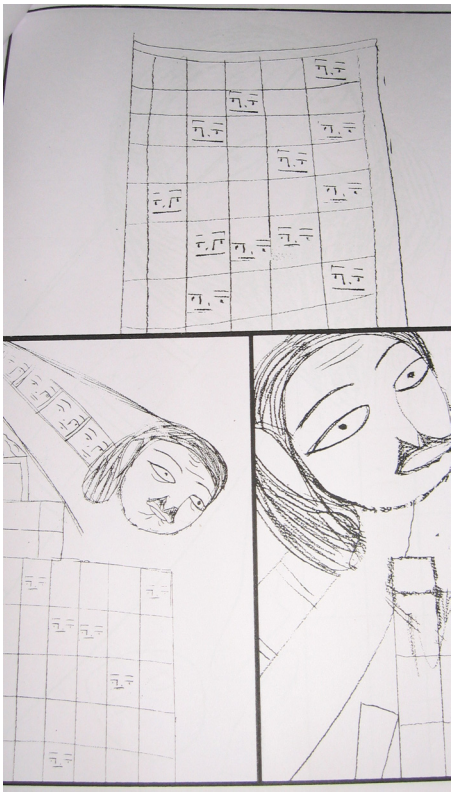

Figure 21: Third page of reworked *Laden* story by Mntu Chitrakar. Pencil on paper.

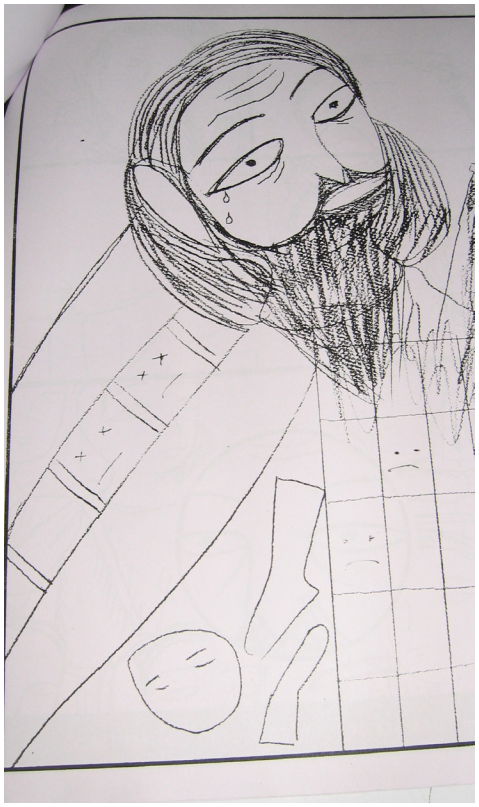

Figure 22: Third page of Mantu's original *Laden* story. Pencil on paper.

likely that fragments of such a famous object would find their final destination in such a place. However, the actual construction of an event-based narrative with a discrete plot structure that had a definite beginning and end was extremely difficult. Chitrakar narrators assume that their audiences already know the stories of the events that they narrate, and as performers their chief role is to evoke a range of emotions (*rasa*). Mantu was able to achieve a break-down of the actual event of the crash into phases that could then be empanelled in the comics' style but the construction of a suitable ending proved to be elusive (see figures 15-23).

He used the idea of flexible panel size to good effect on the first page, arranging a series of small rectangles at the top of the first page, filling them with his favourite images of butterflies, cows, tigers etc. and the iconic killer plane below, unframed—its face directed toward a group of museum visitors positioned just beneath as if to suggest that a storytelling session is underway. The rest of the story was to be shown as a flashback with full page panels showing the airplane coming closer and closer to the tower, cutting to a scene depicting the devastation wrought by the crash. When I remarked on the images of animals and insects on the first page he said that he was

Figure 23: Last page of Mantu's reworked *Laden* story. Pigment on paper.

trying to depict a room in a museum with display cabinets filled with curious and beautiful things.

Mantu's drawings were then worked upon by David, one of the Tara team members who used photoshop to show Mantu how his images could be modified to become characters in a comic book story, showing,in the process, the significant structural contrasts between the two narrative types. Guided by Orijit, the comics' specialist, and Mantu's choice of the damaged plane as narrator, David turned to science fiction to humanize the plane. With a minimum of words and a few judicious adjustments to Mantu's drawings of the airplane, David transformed the story into an exploration of the latter's subjective life. The removal of the beard from the airplane's face in the first frame of the flashback helped to suggest a disjunction between the beginning and the end of the story, giving it a discrete, bounded fairytale-like structure very different from the open-ended mythic-like quality that the Chitrakar stories tend to show. Thus, in David's re-worked version of Mantu's story the first frame of the flashback shows the airplane in a horizontal position, in mid air as it were, not suggesting any specific direction. The text at the bottom conveys the mood, "Once I was a happy plane." From the second frame onward, however, the airplane is oriented toward the Tower as if to suggest that its goal has now changed and is focused on destruction. The absence of the beard from the face of the airplane in the first few panels helps to make visible the transformation in personality (figures 19-23). The bearded plane now signifies an evil personality, mirroring bin Laden's face, reinforced by the text in the last panel, "Something evil was in me that day" that shows a close up of the face against the backdrop of corpses (figure 23). The chain of signification set up by the conflation of beard-bin Laden-monstrous act was avoided, however, by the addition of teardrops to the face of the bearded plane as it approaches the Tower, as if to suggest that the plane was a victim of circumstance and not a willing participant in this terrible event (figure 22).

Mantu had suggested the addition of the teardrops after the subtitles on each page were translated for him. He noted that, "Something evil was in me that day" could just

as well refer to the hijackers inside the plane—it did not have to refer to any kind of agency on the part of the airplane. Mantu's interpretation points to another important difference between the two narrative forms—Chitraker narratives, like traditional folk tales in many parts of the world, show the narrative progressions that befall their protagonists, and the characters' actions, but do not generally explore their inner states. Characters may speak, and even express emotion, but only at a few key moments. Most of the narrative uses the third person mode, as I have said. The paratactic format of Chitrakar compositions, whether in words or paintings, allows different voices and points of view to co-exist.[14] In comics' this is achieved by juxtaposing different types of panels as well as by varying the font size of words that appear next to the images in the panels. David used the gutter—the blank spaces between the panels on a page—to shift between different points of view in the narrative. He also positioned the voice-over texts in the gutter on each page to link the different points of view into a coherent plot. In Mantu's story the self of the chief protagonist has to be shown changing over time. David used subtle clues to suggest this change, not merely by varying the direction and appearance of the plane, but also by using the expressive potential of the plane's shape. Graphic novels often vary the size and shape of the panels on a page to suggest shifts in time, mood, and point of view. The last page of David's re-working of Mantu's narrative is especially striking: a circle, with a close up of the plane's demonic face, is positioned as an inset within a larger rectangular panel that depicts the scene of destruction (figure 23).

I feel that it was the added text that served to change the way in which we might read the story—shifting it from a grand to a more reduced human scale. This shift in interpretation has something to do with the nature of the storytelling enabled by the workshop. Discussions of image and text in the graphic novel genre seem to suggest that the overall conceptualisation and script precedes the actual drawing of images in the organization of the production process. There is a strict hierarchy of functions, so that a storyboard with text in the supporting speech balloons, background story, and detailed instructions about the image on each panel is given to the artists who illustrate the stories (McLain 2009). Even though the workshop, being exploratory in nature, did not organize the artists' work in this fashion we see that comics' production works with a strictly hierarchical mode in which each facet of story production, from plot to character development to page layout, are synchronized according to an overarching plan. Mantu's difficulty in proceeding with his story was because Chitrakar narratives work by adding scenes, often widely divergent from each other, with the aid of conjunctive motifs (Lord 1976, see also foot note 10).

Comics belong to primarily writing cultures, i.e. cultures that have interiorized writing, and Chitrakar narratives to an oral one. The linear, continuous, and progressive structure of comics' stories emerges from the thing-like properties of the written word or words that have left a residue on paper (Ong 2002). In contrast, spoken words are evanescent—when we hear them they are on the verge of disappearing. Oral habits of expression and composition therefore tend to rely on formulaic elements and other repetitive devices to remember and consolidate what has been said. Chitrakar narratives

in both verbal as well as painterly aspects are shaped by an oral/aural sensibility in which language is a mode of action, embedded in an interactive context. This is why the stories do not need to dwell on the context in which events and actions unfold. Much of this is already known in advance or suggested by the formulaic devices used by the narrator to stitch different episodes together—"storyable" episodes that circulate in a mnemonic store-house with the potential for becoming narrativizable if the narrator sees fit. Comics' stories that are embedded in a culture of writing are based on the prior de-contextualization of the word and therefore have to build context within the narrative itself, as we saw in Orijit's insistence that Mantu's protagonist, who was also the narrator of his story, had to be placed within a physical space in which the event of narration could unfold.

The *Laden* narrative crystallized while the hunt for Osama bin Laden was still on. Mantu tried his hand at composing a new *Laden* scroll after news of bin Laden's dramatic death reached him in Naya village. He removed the last frame of the scroll that showed bin Laden enshrined in a cave and replaced it with his bloody corpse watched over by rifle wielding soldiers. But this addition to bin Laden's story did not draw much attention either from the community of painters or potential buyers of the scroll. Bin Laden's mysterious disappearance had given an affective charge to the Chitrakar story, leading to a lot of experimentation by painters—especially with beginnings and endings. When reality took over and the sequence of events became clear the narrative lost its subjunctive potential.

By Way of Conclusion

The essay seems to have ventured far afield from the questions about craft techniques, collective creation, and individuation with which I began this essay. Craft techniques require habitual practice by which the body is made to function like an automaton, producing rhythmic movements that do not require conscious thought. Scholars like Ananda Coomaraswamy (1990) have said that it is only under such conditions that craft techniques that require embodiment tend to be embedded in interactive contexts very different from the kind of self-conscious detachment required by modern art practices. Coomaraswamy views traditional artworks as coherent wholes reflecting a form of social organization that is hierarchical and not receptive to change. In contrast to this view, we see Chitrakar compositions conceived as assemblages of heterogeneous parts without an overarching binding organization. Motifs become detached from their original context and can produce new kinds of affects leading to new compositions, as we have seen. Much of this happens by serendipity rather than conscious plan. The process of de-familiarization brought about by substituting a *pir's* face for the more traditional demonic one associated with disaster narrative produces other changes in the pictorial narrative as connotative images associated with the *pir* motif rise to the surface of memory and are incorporated willy-nilly into the scroll. But even if we accept that Swarna's innovation in the *Laden* scroll does not emerge as a deliberate act of self-authorization or as an attempt at arrogating a unique artistic voice and signature for herself, what about Mantu's experiment with the comics' form? Surely

his foray into an unfamiliar medium negates the idea of unselfconscious composition? It is precisely because Mantu had not been able to internalize the formal code of the comics' narrative even though he could understand it cognitively that he found it so difficult to formulate a plot. However David, who had far greater familiarity with the comics' form, was able re-constitute Mantu's images in a story that could fit its narrative format. What we see is the emergence of something entirely novel through a process of adaptation by which traditional elements come to be re-configured in new milieus.

Craft is conceived as a form of embodied practice in which innovations occur through ways of doing rather than appearing as consciously thought out in advance by the artist who then stamps it with his or her authorial signature. Does this make the folk artist a passive vehicle, transmitting traditions whose import s/he may not be fully aware of or be able to explain and comment upon? My intention in juxtaposing two contrasting modes of narrativizing the 9/11 crash is to show how folk artists may be quite aware of the formal requirements of their art practices and be able to play with them, absorbing influences from an ever-changing narrative environment. Thus stylistic features such as fragmentation—the deliberate detachment of an element from its familiar milieu to enhance emotional affects in comics--have been taken up enthusiastically by artists such as Mantu Chitrakar. Thus the motif of the bearded face detached from its conventional setting atop a mounted human body—a familiar figure in *pir* stories—now acquires a new value when it is used to facify a non-human subject who emerges as a narrator of his own story in Mantu's experiment with the comics' form.

It was the semiotician Charles Peirce (1960) who said that signs are meaningful only to the extent that they can be translated into other signs. Their efficacy as living signs lies in their ability to circulate—to be used in different contexts, sometimes in unanticipated ways. In the course of circulation they also carry traces of these different usages thereby enabling a future for the systems of which they form a part. If we substitute images for the signs, then Peirce's statement aptly sums up the argument that I have tried to make in this essay.

Notes

1 I am grateful to Anthony Bak Buccitelli and the anonymous referees for the shape that this paper has taken.

2 I tend to prefer the feminine pronouns 'she' and 'her' over the masculine variants to indicate the fact that there are numerous women artists in the folk tradition that I am discussing here. I also use a combined form s/he wherever possible.

3 "Pir" is derived from the Persion and used to designate "a Muslim spiritual guide renowned for his ability to translate spiritual achievement into practical achievement to aid supplicants" (Stewart 2002:22).

4 Scholars like Tony Stewart are critical of the way in which the term syncreticism is used as it suggests a set of confused and temporary beliefs and religious practices that emerge when

two or more religions are co-present. Shrines dedicated to celebrated *pirs* have existed for centuries and attract devotees of all faiths. Such faith cannot be called confused by any stretch of the imagination. I still use the term however because it is used to celebrate the pluralistic worldview and culture characteristic of artisanal communities in India.

5 Khandu Chitrakar – private conversation in Naya in 2006.

6 My selection of the 9/11 story was determined by two factors:- 1) The fact that I could trace the initial moments of composition and following the changes that were taking place as it crystallized – a situation that is quite rare in fieldwork. 2) I assume that a discussion of a global theme will be easier for audiences who have no familiarity with Indian mythology to follow. At first site it may seem that there is no innovation possible where traditional themes are concerned. On the contrary, as the focus of artistic attention is increasingly concentrated on the scroll innovations in the pictorial images of gods and goddesses are also taking place (Chatterji 2015). New compositions based on new renditions of traditional epics are also taking place.

7 A cyclorama is a stage set shaped like a circular diorama to convey an impression of distance.

8 I have translated two of the *Laden* songs from Bangla—this is the first by Khandu Chitrakar:

O the event in Amerika
Tis a wonderous event
The plane crash in Amerika
What a wonderous event
That hundred storied house broke
O what a wonderous event
Bush says Laden
Was this your real intention
O what a wonderous event
Bush says O Laden
Was it your intention to deceive
O what a wonderous event
Teams [of soldiers] went to war
And look Bush's people died
And look at Laden laugh
O the plane crash in Amerika
What a wonderous event
They went to war
In teams they went [from Laden's side]
But they could not fight against Bush
Bush's soldiers went after Laden
But look Laden hid in a cave
Look they could not catch him
O the plane crash in Amerika
O what a wonderous event

9 As we see Rani Chitrakar's song given below is very different from the one composed by Khandu:

In Amerika, in Washinton
There was destruction
Because of the plane crash there was decimation
O God, O Merciful One
What kind of recompense is this
In 2001, 11 September
In New York in Washington
The house broke into four pieces
In New York in Washington
There was destruction
Laden and George Bush were friends
When did this enmity occur
Why did hundreds and hundreds of people have to lose their lives
I do not know
In Amerika, in Washington
There was decimation

10 This is a different artist from Manu, the one who first composed the bin Laden story.

11 Manu is the first time composer of many new stories based on political themes such as the Gulf War etc. but they have achieved the same kind of popularity as the 9/11 story.

12 The inspiration for this part of my argument is Albert Lord's (1976) seminal work on oral narration where he shows how bards stitch together episodic blocks of narrative using formulaic motifs. These motifs have more than a mere decorative purpose as they help the narrator and the audience to anticipate the direction in which the narrative may move. Even though Lord's work was confined to oral epics I think that his argument can be extended to other modes of composition and narration.

13 I use the term 'myth' to refer to a narrative form that assumes knowledge of a narrative universe in which all stories are related in a synchronic fashion. Stories, therefore, do not need to have discrete beginnings and endings. It is assumed that listeners are born into the narrative universe and one is never told a myth for the first time—one already knows the story in advance and each new telling reveals a different facet of a character or event. Thus a myth is never framed in the way a fairy tale may be, 'Once upon a time…'. One myth refers to another and characters in one myth may have different lives or participate in different storylines in others (Lévi-Strauss 1975).

14 Deleuze and Guattari call this kind of structure a rhizome whose fabric is made up of conjunctions like and… and… and (1988: 25).

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