

COMPLEMENTARITY BETWEEN ART AND ANTHROPOLOGY

EXPERIENCES AMONG KOLAM MAKERS IN SOUTH INDIA

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As their first daily task, women in South India draw geometrical images, *kolams*, in front of their homes to greet the deities. These images engender and reinforce moods in the community, they construct feminine gender and they define the landscape as social. The paper describes how the employment of an artistic practice—photography—can affect the understanding of the *kolam*, an artistic practice in itself. Photography has a key role in that it has been used as a tool during field work, as well as in the presentation of research in the form of photographic essays. The expressive aspects in particular of this media are considered as means to address visual and sensory experience and as complementary to analytical texts. It is suggested that the use of artistic practice, in dialogue with texts, productively engages the tension between the sensory and the discursive, between intimacy and distance. The aim is to contribute to anthropological understandings of, and approaches to, images, aesthetics and artistic practice. The aesthetic aspect of the *kolam* is presented as local social aesthetics; an appreciation founded in local morality, and continuously reproduced as well as contested in a social environment.

Keywords: *kolam*, South India, visual anthropology, photography, art, aesthetics, gender

*Introduction*¹

During ethnographic fieldwork, knowledge is often produced through intimate aesthetic encounters. The encounters might be vague and confusing as they involve habits and environments that are different. Experiences can be complex to express with words, for the fieldworker as well as his or her interlocutors. Through the process of translating knowledge into an academic text however, the perceived ambiguity is transformed into a stable structure mainly focused on verbal narratives and theories. In this essay, I will discuss how an employment of open-ended visual artistic practices may complement anthropological texts, both during fieldwork and as means of presenting research. The main issue in exploring these methods is their possibilities to extend anthropological knowledge.

The use of artistic practices in methods and presentations developed into a central aspect of my research on the *kolam*, a South Indian practice where women daily draw geometrical images of dots and lines in front of their homes to invite the deities.² Through the *kolam*, women engage in social and religious processes. They generate an auspicious

atmosphere and become constructed as feminine beings. Temporal and spatial rhythms are defined and reproduced, and the house is made into a home. At the same time, the practice provides a space for exploration where *kolam* makers can experiment with changing habits and values (Laine 2009). I have investigated the *kolam* both as a performative process and as a material result, and explored how it interacts with continuities as well as changes in the surrounding community.

Direct participation in *kolam* making has been vital to my understanding of the practice. Combined with an extensive use of photography as a means to interact with people, these methods are to a large extent concerned with knowledge production through sensory experience. I experiment with potential alternatives for conveying the sensoriality and ambiguity of field experience to readers/viewers, through an extension of the presentation of ethnographic data and theoretical analysis as text with photographic essays. Is this combination a relevant methodology in the production of anthropological knowledge, or just a means to popularize the work of academic scholars?

The following paper will reflect on the place of the visual and sensorial within anthropology. The sensorial refers to aesthetic experience, where aesthetics are understood as social and local, not as detached contemplation of sublime beauty.³ The paper will firstly describe the *kolam*, and how its efficacy makes a difference in people's lives; secondly it will discuss whether photography understood as art practice can be a useful tool in anthropology; and thirdly examine possible forms of collaboration between anthropologists and artists. In conclusion, it is held that such collaboration can be productive in engendering knowledge that concerns the tension between intimacy and distance, and between the sensory and the discursive.

The kolam as image and artistic practice

Before sunrise and sunset, *kolam* images are drawn on the street in front of entrances to the majority of homes in Tamilnadu. It is usually the first household task that girls learn to perform, and after marriage it is part of women's daily duties. Through the *kolam* practice, and the divine blessings the invited gods and goddesses bring, women attend to their responsibility to enhance the well-being of their families. The *kolam* is considered to complete the image of the house, both in the sense of a beautiful material image at the entrance, and a notion of a prosperous home where things are in order. The performance, which includes a thorough cleaning of the space where the image will be drawn, makes the house into a home. During auspicious occasions, such as marriages and temple festivals, the *kolams* are large and elaborated. The increased time and space given at these events allow for much individual creativity. During inauspicious occasions, such as the monthly commemoration of deceased family members, or when a death has occurred, the area in front of the house is left empty. The size or absence of the *kolam* causes changes in the street pattern which communicate the occurrence of events beyond the ordinary. The experiences of the variations induce or reinforce the emotional state of the people passing by, and sometimes bring on memories of previous events.

Several of the *kolam* makers with whom I have engaged hold that *kolam* is art. On the institutionalised art scene in Chennai however, this is not acknowledged. Curators and



gallery owners regard the *kolam* as too much of a duty to be an art form. During the Victorian era in Britain, the asymmetrical relationship between women's art—practised for love in the private sphere—and men's art—practised for money in the public sphere—was constructed (Parker 1984). European scholars who studied Indian art during the colonial period were directed towards temple architecture and sculptures (Asher and Metcalf [eds] 1994), and the hierarchy that privileged the male-dominated public sphere helps to explain why practices such as the *kolam* have, to a large extent, been ignored in academic works. The *kolam* has been categorized as part of India's village traditions, and presented as an authentic symbol of a romanticised village community (Archana 1989; Jayakar 1980; Kramrisch 1994 [1968]) though the interest in preservation and protection from degenerating changes that is part of this perspective has since been criticised. Joytindra Jain, director of the Crafts Museum in Delhi, rejects the idea that craft makers and tribal

artists need to be saved from modern materialistic culture, and tries to make space for “contemporary folk and tribal artists in India who neither see themselves as belonging to an imaginary ‘traditional’ society nor as waiting outside the precincts of the world of ‘modern’ art to be absorbed and recognised on the latter’s terms at the first available opportunity” (Jain 1998: 14; c.f. Chatterjee 2008).

The ways of making *kolams* change with new building materials as well as changing values. The ideal drawing material is rice flour, which is considered as a gift of food for small animals, and an offering to the deities with hope of an abundant return. For the last three decades, white stone powder has replaced the rice in the daily performance. Strongly hued coloured powders are increasingly popular and they communicate visually with, for instance, printed images of the deities, films and advertisements. It materialises a certain economic status to be able to rebuild the house in concrete and make *kolams* in acrylic paint which fits the concrete surface better than rice flour. Ambiguities towards the changes engender combinations of more permanent materials with daily drawings in white powder. But in general, new materials and designs, including mass produced *kolams* in plastic adhesive, are considered to have a similar capacity to invite the deities as the rice flour.

The organisers of an annual competition in Chennai, who are Brahmins and/or upper class, promote the *kolam* as part of a timeless Tamil heritage. They argue that there is a traditional authentic type which constitutes a ‘real’ *kolam*. These are non-figurative designs in white powder based on a grid of dots encircled by lines. The idea of the authentic type is constructed, as the history of the *kolam* and the developments of various designs have not been documented. At a competition judged by more progressive rules, a figurative *kolam* with colour fillings can incorporate messages like ‘Save Nature’ or ‘Donate an Eye’. In contrast to the organisers in Chennai, the majority of the people I have engaged with are quite open-minded about what a *kolam* can look like and be made of. The aesthetic evaluation sometimes concerns clearly visible differences which can vary according to status or locality, but many express the qualities of a good *kolam* in terms of whether it feels good. It is my contention that the *kolam* practice will continue to reinvent itself and be vital in the latter more open space.

The aesthetics of the *kolam* are founded in local ideas and practices concerning beauty. The practice embodies continuities which at the same time are changing through the appropriation of new materials and values such as global issues of a vulnerable environment and cultural heritage. The norms regarding how a *kolam* ought to be perceived are socially and culturally constituted, and their negotiation takes place in a social setting of everyday life. The *kolam* is thus evaluated through a local social aesthetic. The possibilities to negotiate make the practice into a platform from which to investigate and experiment with surrounding changes. It can be understood as a space for exploration. For instance, a woman might earn social status by including something new in the way she enacts the drawing, but the level of experimentation must be well considered so that her behaviour does not violate the prestige of her family. The creative agency embodied in the performance interacts with, not against, social norms and changes (Laine 2009).

Photography as a fieldwork method

Before my academic studies, I worked with images for many years, oscillating between art practice and commercial assignments; it is a background that has influenced my research in several ways. It has made me attentive to relationships between the seen and the unseen, as well as to political and ethical issues concerning how subjects are represented. It has made it self-evident to use the camera during fieldwork, and to complement text with photographs when ethnographic data is presented. This is what most anthropologists do, but they sometimes show unawareness of not only how much the photographing subject influences his or her pictures, but also of the capacity of images to reveal the unseen and engender reflection.

During the late nineteenth century, the early years of anthropology, photography was not considered to be an art form. The medium was embraced as being objective, and used in anthropology as a means to provide 'illustrative evidence' and strengthen the discipline's status as a science (Ravetz 2007). A few decades later, anthropology turned its interest towards social structure and inner depths. These aspects of cultural life were at the time understood as disconnected from appearance, and a general turn away from the visible and the material followed. Photography as well as art became associated with colonialism, the former as a device for technological control, and the latter defined by the bourgeois elite as refined objects separated from social life. The dismissal of photography was based in this connection on the evolutionary discourse that legitimized the colonial powers and their need to teach the 'primitive' to become 'civilized', and also through its relationship with vulgar popular culture.⁴ Photography has remained in anthropology much as the illustrative evidence, not as a medium worth exploring for knowledge production. On the international art scene however, the general status of photographic images has been criticised for a longer period. The ideas of objectivity, staging, and authorship have been questioned, and the ambiguous character of photographs embraced and used. It has been recognized that our perception of images varies according to history and context, and no more than other phenomena around us do images embody a stable meaning. The artist and anthropologist Amanda Ravetz has brought these different approaches to the fore, and she contends that:

While some artists were enthusiastically embracing the image's propensity to suggest untruths and then celebrate its ability to lie, this same possibility had produced anxiety in anthropological circles, forcing photography in anthropological fieldwork into retreat. (Ravetz 2007: 256)

Rather than suppress the ambiguity of images, Ravetz works with this issue in practice and teaches students in visual anthropology to pose similar questions as artists do, and to explore to what extent this can be productive for anthropological knowledge (Ravetz 2007). Similarly, Susan Edwards draws her argument on photography's usefulness in anthropology from contemporary photographic criticism where the image as document is questioned. If we as anthropologists make the viewer conscious of the ambiguity of the image, rather than presenting it as 'this-is-how-it-was', the viewer is more able to reflect on, for instance, metaphorical connections, and how the signifier is related to the signified (Edwards 1999: 59). We need to recognize that art and document are interrelated phenomena, and through photography's potential to tell in a different voice we can further explore the relationship between intellect and intuition.



In the same way as when we speak to people and want to ask questions, the making of photographs requires consent and respect, and it is just as important to create an atmosphere where you—as an intruder—give space to the other in the encounter. There are many ways to go about with your camera. When I worked as a press photographer, about twenty years ago, I was taught to talk about ‘shooting’ pictures, and a sense of hunting was further articulated in the hierarchical crowding in front of a particularly important subject. Awkward situations such as the editor’s demand for a dramatic photo of a traffic accident with people squeezed into a car made the camera into a shield to hide behind rather than something to reach out to people with. It is central that we reflect on how we want to employ the camera, and what kind of pictures we want to present. Much criticism has been voiced about the possibilities of manipulating photographs, from reassembling parts of negatives to making use of Photoshop. But we need to think about a number of decisions taken both before and during the concrete act of photographing.

We need to make ourselves familiar with whichever tool we use. If you, for instance, feel awkward when you use the camera, the subject is likely to feel the same. I deliberately use the verb to ‘make’ photographs rather than to ‘take’ them, as a means to emphasize the way I use my camera in interaction with the subjects. I try to make the encounter into collaboration where decisions and authority can be investigated, negotiated, and played around with. I have recently started to use a digital camera, and as you can show the result directly to the subject, I find this technique to be an excellent way of extending the collaboration.

Making a photograph is often perceived as something done on occasions that are valuable and worth remembering. In the areas of my fieldwork, people do not keep photographic albums with images of everyday life, but of the celebration of auspicious occasions such as

their daughters' first period and their marriage. Participants in the events are dressed in their finest clothes and jewellery, and there are certain rites such as the giving of gifts which are always photographed in established poses. People were content to have their *kolam* making photographed, but in the beginning they found it utterly strange that I was interested in making photos of them when they were engaged in ordinary activities such as washing up. This became a means for me to convey that the aim of my study was to engage in their everyday lives, and that I found all kinds of activities and statements interesting. Thus, the making of photographs interacted with other ways of showing and telling people about the perspective of my research.

Visual methods can also provide knowledge. Through the use of my camera, I have learned more about how people perceive the *kolam* practice. Initially, I was more interested in the act of drawing than the material result. But if I made a photograph of a woman drawing, without making one of the finished result, she always got disappointed. If I made a photograph of an image that had faded off through the day, this was not appreciated either. The completed image was important to memorize. This is part of what redirected my research towards incorporating the *kolam* both as an image and as practice. My interest in the *kolam* and in photography often led people to bring forth other pictures in their homes, such as embroidered images of the deities, posters with film stars and photographic albums. This has increased my awareness of how much we interact with material objects, and that photographs belong to this category. Further, to let people stage photographs, as well as to talk about the result, is to learn about how people perceive images of themselves, both mental and physical.

Direct participation in the *kolam* practice was part of my learning process in the field. It made me realise more directly the necessity of finding one's own rhythm of drawing, the need for concentration, and the importance of coordination between mind and body to get the design right. The movements have to be disciplined, and my engagement in the practice increased my ability to grasp and mimic how controlled a woman's everyday life movements ought to be. It was not about mere looking and copying.

When we discuss vision and looking, I find it important to recognise how the visual sense interacts with all others. Multi-sensoriality has been brought forth by several anthropological scholars, and a re-appropriation of the concept of aesthetics and a questioning of the need for a rehabilitation of the concept of visual are included in this perspective. Further, there is an increasing interest in experimentations with non-verbal research methods and representations (Classen 1998; Grimshaw and Ravetz [eds] 2005; MacDougall 2006; Pink 2006; Schneider and Wright [eds] 2006; Schneider 2008; Taussig 1993). Apart from synaesthetic processes—that is, how an experience through one sense generates experiences in other senses—the discussions of aesthetics include social and relational aspects of the term, and a social agency of objects. This interest shows a convergence between anthropology and art, with both theoretical and practical implications (Grimshaw and Ravetz [eds] 2005; Schneider and Wright [eds] 2006; Westermann 2005).

In the photographing situation, we perceive a subject in a context, with all our senses. As a photographer, you engage with the subject and try to make sense of who this person is. If you only look, and then raise a camera in between, you are likely to end up with a detached picture where the person shows no sign of presence. When MacDougall (2006: 7) writes on the relationship between the photographer or filmmaker and his or her subjects

he holds that: "Paying attention is not a matter of projecting oneself onto things-in-themselves but of freeing one's consciousness to perceive them"; he adds that it takes "an affection of the senses" to accomplish this. Similarly, we perceive a picture in a context. If I show my photographs at my home, as part of my family album, they will probably affect people differently than if I hang them in a gallery. People who perceive them in the future may relate to them differently. Or I can present them with captions to deliberately direct the viewer's response in a certain way. The latter form of representation is what we usually see in connection with academic texts.

Photography as presentation

When photographs are presented together with academic texts, they are sometimes conceived of as entertaining, for instance as a means to 'lighten up' a theoretical argument, rather than having the capacity to reinforce or even contradict the argument.

In my research on the *kolam*, I have examined ways of consciously combining text and image in order to deepen the understanding of the practice. In the final presentation, the photographs (organised into thematic essays that relate to the textual content in the following chapters) are positioned in an analogical relationship with the *kolam* image. As the *kolam* has the capacity to invite the deities to people's homes, the photographs want to invite readers into the text, and into a sense of presence in the places where the fieldwork was conducted. Rather than having a text that directs the readers' responses to the photos, I want to invite the readers to make their own reflections. The photographs want to establish a close relationship with the reader, and mediate some of the intimacy and ambiguity of everyday life in which knowledge during my fieldwork was produced. Pictures have no definite meaning but are open to various interpretations, and hereby the ambiguities of being are embodied in them. Through the interconnectedness between the visual and other senses, photographs have the capacity to mediate a sensorial experience of being present. The photographs are neither meant to illustrate, nor to document events in a positivist sense, but to complement the analytical text. As the *kolam* makes the image of the house complete, so do the photographs offer this study a larger sense of completeness in presenting how it came about. The text is inhabited by traces of the *kolam*, and the stories of places and people. The photographs cannot make them present, but they invite the reader into a closer relationship with them. Images have the capacity to engender a sense of difference as well as familiarity, and if we focus on the latter capacity photographs can represent culture as unbounded. MacDougall emphasizes that film and photography have this capacity, and thus an ability to engender a transcultural sense of being human (MacDougall 1998). If we recognize ourselves in the photograph of the other, this other becomes familiar as a form of general humanity. The photographs can thus be a bridge between the otherness of the places and people described in the text, and those who read it. Their open-endedness adds other aspects of the research beyond the formal text. They continue conversations initiated in the field, without giving a precise interpretation of how to understand them.

The presentation of my photographs is an attempt to experiment with the dynamic between the picture and how it is perceived, as well as that between the text and the pictures. The 'Writing Culture' critique by Clifford, Marcus and Fischer during the eighties



opened the way for new experiments with ethnographic representation, but works in visual media have mainly continued to be analysed and presented as texts, for example as a film with a linear narrative or a photographic document that may illustrate the text (Schneider 2008). Christopher Wright and Arnd Schneider suggest collaborations with artists to explore and develop new anthropological strategies of representation. There is a site of overlap among contemporary practitioners where critical engagement may be productive for both disciplines (Schneider and Wright [eds] 2006). Community art practice, workshops, performances and installations are thus considered as possible methods and presentations.

Collaborative art works

Anthropologists and artists are increasingly interested in each other. The two disciplines share concerns in ethnographic fieldwork and social engagement. Within both disciplines, practitioners explore politics of identity and representation, and political economy in the contemporary world. Contemporary art is an activity which does not necessarily include the making of objects. The artist's intentions are considered as more important, and the art work may be an interaction with a community which produces sociability rather than a tangible result. Workshops between artists and anthropologists have been conducted for instance at the Tate Modern, London in 2003, at Manchester Metropolitan University in 2007, and at the Museum of Cultural History, Oslo, in 2007. Anthropological scholars have begun to use art practice as method, particularly in investigations of emplacement, the relationships between people, things and places (Grimshaw and Ravetz [eds] 2005).

Parallel to the work with textual analysis and description, I investigate different forms of art practice to develop and present my research. Individually, I have been working with photographic montages, where I for instance try to materialise the idea that the *kolam* makers become embodied in the images they draw. In stitched objects I have combined *kolam* designs as an outer form with materials such as lace and embroidery that have been part of Scandinavian women's household work. Through this project I have reflected on similarities and differences between South Indian and European notions of feminine practices. It is a means to investigate how the reiteration of a particular practice can constitute gender in the performer, and whether it is possible to reach an understanding cross-culturally through this kind of work that is relevant for anthropology. The material result of my reflection might just be a self-narrative presenting personal experiences. But presented in connection with other descriptions of the *kolam*, it may engender reflections and produce knowledge in the audience.

There is a consensus that the background of the anthropologist ought to be described when research is presented, as this background is considered to influence our work. But what constitutes this influence in addition to a theoretical approach? Jean Cohen Bull (1997) has studied different forms of dance and their respective priorities of perception. Ballet gives precedence to sight, improvisational dance to touch and Ghanaian dance to hearing. Cohen Bull suggests that the engagement in each practice influences the nature of the participants' perception, and that generally, our sensual and intelligible understandings are influenced by the practices we engage in. Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger hold that "learning is not one practice among others, but an inseparable part of all social practice" (2003 [1991]: 34). In their theory of learning, they argue that learning takes place where participants are actively engaged in a social practice (communities of practice). Reflection and involvement, or cerebral and embodied learning, interact in the process. That experience of learning a practice affects our perception and understanding of the world is further discussed in relation to the visual sense by Cristina Grasseni (2007). She describes how vision becomes skilled as we learn how to focus on different issues according to the occupation or practice we involve with. We learn how things ought to look according to moral and aesthetic values. According to Grasseni, the gaze cannot be neutral and detached; it is connected to ideologies and beliefs of a community.

Can it be that anthropologists engaged in the senses give larger attention to sensuous aspects of a community and are more able to mediate knowledge about such aspects? Can an anthropologist trained in art practice, or an artist with anthropological interests, add something different to anthropological knowledge? Anthropological discourse has to a large extent held that images cannot represent analytical concepts, but contemporary artists do work with these issues, and anthropologists are increasingly interested in art practice as method and presentation. Art practice engaged in intersubjectivity, such as workshops and other forms of community works, may be a possible method for ethnographic fieldwork. If we do not just look at the visual but all artistic practices including the use of experimental texts, anthropologists can explore how stable works with a defined beginning and end can be combined with the performative and the unstable, how representations that engender emotions can supplement analytical explanations. Such interdisciplinary methods may result in larger understanding and increased knowledge about whether there are phenomena which discourse cannot contain, and would thus enrich anthropology. An increased

collaboration in the overlapping space between anthropology and art practice can make the tension between intimacy and distance, and between the sensory and the discursive, into a productive overlap which engenders new aspects of anthropological knowledge.

Post script: The exhibition was shown in Open Palm Court Gallery, IHC, Delhi, in March 2009.

NOTES

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- ¹ This paper is based on a presentation at the Architecture Faculty, NTNU, Trondheim.
- ² I conducted fieldwork in Tamilnadu during 2005–2006, both in the main city Chennai and in a rural area west of this city. Although there are different versions of the *kolam* practice in other parts of India, it is mainly in the Tamil region that the *kolam* is a daily practice.
- ³ The relevance of the concept of aesthetics in cross-cultural studies has been debated within anthropology for a longer period (Coote and Shelton 1994; Ingold 2001). The criticisms have referred to “a disinterested, Kantian, theoretically universal appreciation of beauty warranted by deeply ingrained Western standards” (Westermann 2005: xii). When Gottlieb Baumgarten gave birth to the concept in the eighteenth century, it signalled the European decontextualisation of art from social life. Immanuel Kant’s development has been questioned as an elitist concept intertwined with rationalist Enlightenment and a modernist notion of bourgeois art involved with judgement and discrimination (Ingold ed 2001: 260). Implied in these discussions is the Western hierarchy of the senses, where the visual followed by the aural have been the highest. To feel something for an image has been regarded as an activity of the lower popular classes, women and ‘primitive’ people (Freedberg 1989).
- ⁴ The colonial power and the development of modernity was further criticised by modernist artists, but they voiced a romantic view of the ‘primitive’ and could not bridge the separation between art and anthropology. Since the postmodern critique, the international art scene has expanded and the temporary boundary between art and social life has been transcended (Marcus and Myers 1995). The disconnection between art and anthropology is reworked; there are artists who work with ethnographic methods, and anthropologists who study and make use of artistic practice. But the issue of whether material objects can be appreciated as art without a consideration of its social context continues to be debated.

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