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# Visual Objects in European-Bengali Identity Dynamics: From 18<sup>th</sup> Century Exchanges to Contemporary Afterlives

*Wim De Winter*

*Gerda Henkel Stiftung / Ghent University, Belgium*

**Abstract:** My contribution investigates the history, appropriations and afterlives of visual objects involved in historical intercultural exchanges in 18<sup>th</sup> century Bengal. Visual objects appear in this history on multiple levels, both as gift-objects and as part of 'early visual anthropologies'. As gift-objects, specific visual materials such as Flemish prints or copies of European paintings circulated as gifts from European merchants to influential local power-brokers. These gifts formed a nexus around which identities and meanings were created, adapted and carried into their afterlives – the study of which calls for an interdisciplinary historical-anthropological approach, examining these objects' appearance and use-context today. The historical exchanges of visual objects have also shaped how historical European identities are viewed in Bengal today, in the guise of 'cultural heritage'.

Visual art was also crucial in transmitting and mediating contextual identities within the 18<sup>th</sup> century Bengali environment of exchange, which led to mutual 'early visual anthropologies'. The Antwerpian artist Solvyns (1760-1824) has been considered as one of the 'early visual anthropologists' to depict life and activities of Bengali people in his drawings, while Bengali artists simultaneously depicted the European presence in paintings and temple sculptures, which still carry meanings for local inhabitants today. These 'early visual anthropologies' worked in tandem with the promotion of a 'colonial legacy' in Belgian prints and books, while European gift-objects and paintings were (and still are) being preserved in Bengali palaces, transmitting an image associated with European cultural identity as a historical referent.

A fieldwork investigation on these roles of the visual in Bengal shows what historians stand to gain by an engagement with the 'visual turn': the above visual objects serve as keys to a contemporary reflection on their appropriation and role in the formation of historical identities, in areas where a textual approach does not provide adequate insights.

**Keywords:** ethnohistory, visual culture, Bengal, colonialism, cultural studies

## Introduction: Historicizing the Visual - background & fieldwork encounters

In this reflexive paper, I attempt to historicise a recent fieldwork experience by investigating the roles of visual material culture in historical exchanges and perceptions involving Europeans in Bengal, and connect this to notions of culturality and identity dynamics. By tracing back the manifestations of visual culture, I also claim the need to reassess the historical importance of visual perception in histories of transcultural interaction, here exemplified by the evolving exchange of visual objects and depictions of Europeans in 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century Bengal.

My ongoing research forms a comparative study of 18<sup>th</sup> century Bengal and Canton as environments characterised by intercultural interactions and connected histories, and draws upon methodologies of historical anthropology or ethnohistory. This approach combines written and pictorial materials with the 'present day cultural reality' in reconstructing a diachronic cultural history, for which fieldwork is an essential source<sup>i</sup>. Kremser mentions how "Written documents of the past are not necessarily representative for the culture being described (...) they only constitute a small faction of the historical cultural reality" and by consequence, "the fieldworker (...) has the possibility of collecting information of such a nature as is generally not found in historical documents, but which is still essential in explaining the way in which historical phenomena are linked to each other"<sup>ii</sup>. The context of my research is also informed by a world-historical approach on connected cultural histories<sup>iii</sup>.

During a fieldwork-period in Bengal (Spring 2015), I aimed to find out how 18<sup>th</sup> century exchanges have left traces in contemporary Bengal, and if and how this influences people's perceptions in these historical afterlives. Once there, I was confronted with a peculiar perception and awareness of European identities, of which I will present two instances which will be historicised below, and can be developed further in future research. As part of this fieldwork, I travelled to the Hazarduari Palace in Murshidabad, which was the 18<sup>th</sup> century capital of Bengal and the place where the Nawab<sup>iv</sup> and his courtiers resided. Europeans from trading companies such as the Austrian-Netherlandish Ostend Company (GIC) travelled there to engage in extensive negotiations and exchanges, in order to gain trading permits and a place of residence<sup>v</sup>. Upon my arrival and visit to this palace, and other residences of rajas and wealthy merchants, I noticed a distinctly neo-classicist architecture and very similar use of rooms and decorations. It seemed as if their upper-class inhabitants all emulated each others' style. Some houses or palaces had billiards rooms and contained many decorative items with a distinctly European look. As a visual example, the Cossimbazar palace contains a salon with fauteuils,

vases, small statuettes, and coloured chandeliers which are rumoured to be of Belgian origin.

[cf. IMG 1 – attached at end of paper]

To my great surprise, I also saw many prominently displayed copies of European paintings, such as Van Dyck's depiction of 'The Marquis of Spinola', a 'Landscape in Tuscany' by 'Perugia', the 'Woman of Samaria' by Rafael, a 'French Landscape' by Courbet and even a copy of Da Vinci's 'Mona Lisa'. [cf. IMG 2 - attached at end of paper] Questioning some of the Indian visitors, as well as my Kolkata informants, on the distinct European provenance of these artworks and their themes, they all replied that "This is our heritage, our culture,...why have you come to see this?" Such a response seemed to reveal a more complex situation than I might have expected. James Clifford provides a first step towards understanding the complex nuances embedded in this encounter, in his writings on 'Museums as Contact Zones', where he states how

"visitors, their hosts, and impresarios are not free of colonial legacies of exoticism and neocolonial processes of commodification. Nor are they entirely confined by these repressive structures. It is important to recognize this complexity. For what exceeds the apparatus of coercion and stereotype in contact relations may perhaps be reclaimed for current practice (...) the historical possibilities of contact relations – negative and positive – need to be confronted."<sup>vi</sup>

Whenever people inquired about my Belgian origins, from restaurant waiters to the personnel of the archives to my informants, all mentioned 'Belgian Glass' as their first association. If asked where they got this association from, they replied not to know except that it enjoys a "high quality" reputation. It seemed people shared a common knowledge by which they somehow associated my identity with these types of objects, compelling me to trace back their origins.

In his book on "Belgian Heritage in India", Philippe Falisse also mentions the appropriation of paintings by 'Flemish Masters in Indian Museums', the legacies of Flemish painter Balthazar Solvyns, and the 'Influence of the Belgian Glass'<sup>vii</sup>. He notes the appreciation of European paintings as high-class commodities in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and claims the reason for their accumulation was due to

"the aristocracy and lesser nobility which had made their fortune under the East India Company tended naturally to adopt European habits and be partial to European art and Culture. At the time, Indians believed following European manners and customs was indispensable to acquire both refinement and power."<sup>viii</sup>

To display these commodities, "they lived in colonnaded palaces and built galleries to indulge their taste for European art"<sup>ix</sup>. Although Falisse places this tendency in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, my research indicates the use of visual commodities as gifts– (for paintings as well as glass objects are intrinsically bound to the qualities of visual perception) – can be traced back to at least the 18<sup>th</sup> century. In the following two sections, I will trace back historical practices involving visual objects, and suggest that the explanation for their cultural afterlives, as both common knowledge and as 'cultural heritage', is analytically more profound than mere 'adoption of European manners for refinement'. Instead, these can be considered as products of historical contact relations, and therefore of a historical process enabling such contacts, which led to identification through exoticism as well as mimesis.

## Circulation of Visual Objects: Prints, Paintings and Glass Commodities

The 1726-1727 account books of the Ostend Company in Bengal punctually list all exchanges serving a commercial purpose, but also contain categories on European curiosities destined as gifts, or "Curiositez destinees pour presents". These gifts included swords in highly decorated scabbards, gemstone tobacco boxes, glassware curiosities, and Dutch 'Illuminated stamps' or pictures. The recipients of such gifts were Bengali noblemen such as the Fusdar of Hugli<sup>x</sup>, the Nawab's courtier, Safrasquan<sup>xi</sup>, the banker Fatchand Seth and the Nawab himself.<sup>xii</sup> As to the origins of these objects, the Ostend Company archives contain an order list of 'goods to be sent yearly to Bengal as presents', including organs, finely decorated swords, fine textiles and 'a quantity of small divers and other glass baubles'<sup>xiii</sup>. The account books of merchants sent to China do not contain such gifts<sup>xiv</sup>, which confirms it as a practice specific to Bengal. As 'Illuminations' were not included on this order list, where did merchants get the idea to order them as presents for these Bengali dignitaries? This seems to go back to a practice European travellers were already involved in since the 17<sup>th</sup> century, when English and Dutch envoys to Mughal emperor Jehangir noticed paintings and prints were a good means of gaining influence at court. In addition to religious themes, these prints featured profane depictions of European dignitaries and mythological figures, depictions of battles, comic scenes and nudes. The ambassadors explicitly insisted the material should be high-quality artworks.<sup>xv</sup> However, such European images were not always received favorably, as Thankappan Nair cites:

"The Nawab was extraordinarily well pleased with the great brass guns and desired a couple more, but for the images he is a great enemy to and ordered his Nazar or Chief Eunuch to break them in pieces, which Mallick Haddee endeavoured to prevent by desiring the Nabab to return them"<sup>xvi</sup>.

These visual artworks were not only received as gifts, but also influenced Mughal court painting through their appropriation, of which Jozef Jennes mentions examples such as the depiction of a monkey from Dürer's engraving

'Virgin and Child with a monkey' in the *Jehangir Nama*. This reveals how a transfer and change in meaning occurred, as Mughal artists appropriated certain iconographical designs without necessarily appropriating their original connotations or meanings.<sup>xvii</sup> This would indicate that such objects were primarily important for their visual appeal or prestige, rather than their content. Due to their apparent function and impact, these prints might be considered antecedents to the later European paintings we find in Bengali palaces.

Concerning the glass objects mentioned in GIC-accounts, a precedent can already be found in the *Tuzuk-I-Jahangiri*, which describes how Jehangir received New Year's gifts from his courtiers, among which were "two European boxes, the sides of which were made with slabs of glass, so that whatever was placed inside could be seen from outside in a way that you might say there was nothing between them"<sup>xviii</sup>. This glass box clearly served as a visual curiosity which was important enough to be mentioned in the royal memoirs. Circulating beyond commercial commodity-exchange, these gift objects were clearly meant for display.

In her approach on visual gifts, aimed at the slightly later colonial period, Natasha Eaton argues how gifts "created a forum for transcultural negotiations"<sup>xix</sup>. Her research provides us with a crucial link for tracing back the appearance of European paintings as gifts, to the moment in-between the circulation of 18<sup>th</sup> century 'Illuminated prints' and 19<sup>th</sup> century paintings in the Nawab's palace. She mentions how "the 'image-gift' became central to Anglo-Indian diplomacy (...) a practice initiated by the first [colonial] Governor-General Warren Hastings" of the British East India Company, who "wanted to replace the quintessential Mughal gift (...) with their own form of gift – symbolically potent portraits"<sup>xx</sup>. However, as demonstrated above, there was already an element of visual experience in Mughal gift-practices, as GIC-merchants and other ambassadors had already gifted images. Eaton mentions how Hastings likewise used artefacts such as China, glassware and pistols to mediate social relations with regional rulers, and then crucially changed his strategy to giving portraits featuring his own likeness<sup>xxi</sup>. This transformation would presumably have been followed in the 19<sup>th</sup> century by paintings or 'Belgian glass' becoming more widely available market commodities. As luxury items, these objects would have been placed in the market and reached a wider audience, where they further developed a reputation which they still carry today. Eaton points out such a process of luxury commodification already began near the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, as "by the 1780s, the nature of rarity had changed due to intrusive colonial trade-Western goods which even fifty years previously had been considered rare and exotic were not only found in abundance in transregional markets but now also resonated with an unwanted colonial presence"<sup>xxii</sup>. However, a visit to Murshidabad shows how such goods have seemingly again transformed this 'unwanted colonial presence' to a notion of 'cultural heritage', in which European paintings are associated with Bengali culture.

One therefore wonders whether the collection of such objects was a symptom of visual exoticism in Bengal, and if European manifestations of exoticism are in any way comparable or related to these appropriations. In his recent book 'Inventing Exoticism', Benjamin Schmidt reveals how, by 1730 "a plainly secular and geographically inquisitive Europe (...) accumulates the profuse exotica of an agreeable world"<sup>xxiii</sup>. In this period "Europe gains its identity *through* the exotic world (...) global exotica and their pleasure coalesce around a freshly constituted idea of 'Europe'<sup>xxiv</sup>, creating itself by an ideology preceding modern colonialism, in a "post-Columbian, pre-Saidian moment of geography – strived to generate both difference and sameness"<sup>xxv</sup>. If Europe collected and created both exotic objects, texts and images in a moment of creating its own identity, did collecting exotic objects in Mughal gift-rituals exemplify a similar creation of identity in Bengal? For Europe, the productive moment of shaping European identity by invoking the exotic would later bloom into an Orientalism, which Saïd describes as a "distribution of geopolitical awareness into aesthetic (...) texts which create, maintain and express an "intention to understand, control, manipulate and even incorporate, what is a manifestly different world"<sup>xxvi</sup>. To fully grasp this meaning, we now turn to an example of 'early visual anthropologies' which also show the circulation and importance of the visual in the same historical context, and were complicit in establishing identities. As in Subrahmanyam's description of "the artful embrace of Mughals and Franks", this history will also show how "the received history of images clearly differs from that of texts and their circulation, which is at the heart of debates on Orientalism."<sup>xxvii</sup> In addition, an approach involving mimesis as aspect of cultural dynamics transcends the issue of "incommensurability between historical cultures and their forms of representation, and brings us closer to consideration of identities"<sup>xxviii</sup>.

## Perception and Mimesis in early Visual Anthropologies: Solvyns & Temples

The Antwerpian artist Balthazar Solvyns lived in Calcutta from 1790 until 1803, where he worked as a painter. Contrary to his colleagues, he often wandered in local 'native communities' such as 'Black Town', which he depicted in drawings and engravings. [cf. IMG 3 – attached at end of paper] His aim was to "study the manners and native character of the Indian people"<sup>xxix</sup>, an agenda which was fully complicit with the contextual inventions of exoticism and Europe in its process of self-fashioning as described by Schmidt and Saïd. Solvyns states that "Since the revival of Science and of letters in Europe has awakened in its inhabitants the noble ambition of enlarging the boundaries of human knowledge, and extend their relations and their power over the whole surface of the earth, the country of the Hindoos has been one of the chief objects of their researches"<sup>xxx</sup>. He claims to differ from his contemporaries in seeking to research and visually depict 'the Hindoos', thereby turning them into objects of knowledge:

“its inhabitants have not yet been observed nor represented with that accuracy which is necessary to make them perfectly known [*and to do this it is*] necessary to reside among this people a sufficient time to have opportunities of observing them in all their habits of life”<sup>xxxix</sup>.

Resultingly, he reports that “the drawings from which are engraved the numerous plates by which this work is enriched, were taken by myself upon the spot”<sup>xxxix</sup>. Due to this project, Solvyns can be described as an ‘early visual anthropologist’. He tried to learn as much as possible about local customs and thereby went beyond the predominant textual approach of his contemporaries. Moreover, he succeeded in depicting Indian music and craftsmanship in a unique fashion. To his regret, his work failed to sell in Europe, where it was considered artistically unrefined. It did however influence the later so-called Company School of Bengali artists, who produced paintings of ‘native themes’ for European customers.<sup>xxxix</sup> Nitin Sinha criticizes Solvyns’ colonial view on India, by claiming that the textual depictions accompanying his visual representations contributed to the rhetorics of the local people’s domination<sup>xxxix</sup>. He thereby considers Solvyns’ work as part of a wider context of Orientalist scholarship, which contributed to the political domination of its created ‘objects of knowledge’. Both Solvyns’ textual descriptions and the framing of some images undoubtedly contain certain biases and Orientalist tropes, and yet his images also transcend such tendencies by revealing his personal experience and affection in witnessing certain scenes and topics, such as musical performances. However, his depictions of the cultural and social life of Bengali people, to be shown and sold to an interested audience back in Europe, were not the only ‘early visual anthropologies’ at that time. For example, Sanjay Subrahmanyam & Muzaffar Alam mention how eighteenth-century writer and intellectual Khwaja Abdul Karim described Europeans as a group called ‘Firangi’ (Franks), and divided them according to their countries of origin: Fransis, Angrez, Valandez and Purtugez. He also mentions how they lived ‘separately from the Indians’ and refused to adapt their lifestyles.<sup>xxxv</sup>

An intriguing counterpoint to these exoticist views is the depiction of Europeans on terracotta temples in rural Bengal. One of my informants pointed out that certain temples around the Birbhum area have mostly been studied for their religious iconography, but informed me that they also feature “secular scenes” in which Europeans were depicted. He told me that “if you want to see the Europeans you’re writing about, you should look there”. He insisted on a journey to local villages in order to document this temple iconography, where I noticed some exterior panels featured some figures represented as Europeans. [ cf. IMG 4 and 5 – attached at end of paper]

According to my informant, these Europeans were present in the local life-world at the time the temples were constructed. However, why were they depicted in a local village environment? Can these depictions also be considered as ‘early visual anthropologies’ or exoticism, not for an intellectual audience such as Solvyns was looking for in Europe or Khwaja Abdul Karim in India, but in a rural world?

Satyasikha Chakraborty wrote an article on such temples, which she calls ‘products of the native gaze’, in which contemporary rural life is featured amidst the divine, and where “in the 17<sup>th</sup>, 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century, the presence of Europeans had become an integral part of the visualscape of rural Bengal”<sup>xxxvi</sup>. Chakraborty interprets these depictions as occasions for the zamindar, or landowner who ordered the construction of these temples, to “display their European taste and the power and prestige that was gradually becoming associated with it”<sup>xxxvii</sup>. This seems to coincide with the earlier argument concerning the collection of visual objects in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. However, the search for a possible interpretation of these images begs for a deeper analysis of both its historical meanings and its contemporary significance. This search brings me to Michael Taussig’s notion of mimesis, which provides a compelling entry-point for a deeper understanding of the shaping of identity involved in such depictions. Taussig formulates how the Western traveller is confronted by such depictions in a comparable encounter:

“the Western study of the Third and Fourth World Other gives way to the unsettling confrontation of the West with itself as portrayed in they eyes and handiwork of its Others. Such an encounter disorients the earlier occidental sympathies which kept the magical economy of mimesis and alterity in some sort of imperial balance.”<sup>xxxviii</sup>

His work on mimesis looks at wooden figurines made by Cuna indians from the Darien province (Panama), which are shaped in the likeness of Europeans. He interprets the practice of shaping and collecting these figures as “a certain magic of the signifier and what Walter Benjamin took the mimetic faculty to be -namely, the compulsion to become the Other (...) in imitating, we will find distance from the imitated and hence gain some release”<sup>xxxix</sup>. Taussig associates this mimetic faculty with notions of ‘reification-and-fetishization’ or sympathetic magic. In the case of these anthropomorphic figures, the ‘magic of mimesis’ “rests in that ‘in some way or another’ the making and existence of the artifact that portrays something gives one power over that which is portrayed.”<sup>xl</sup> In the magic of mimesis, the embodiment in images captures the spirit of the thing depicted and adds it to one’s powers, as “the replication, the copy, acquires the power of the represented (...) in reading such examples we are thereby lifted out of ourselves into those images”<sup>xli</sup>. In the case of the Terracotta temple panels, by featuring European spirits amidst a life-world consisting of both secular and mythological themes, from the act of harvesting to a battle involving goddess Durga, the argument of depicting European figures makes mimesis into a plausible hypothesis for further investigation. Moreover, its unique potency lies in its visual and sensuous qualities within the assemblage in which their likeness is depicted. Taussig’s following description of his experience with *yagé*-magic sounds equally applicable to viewing the Terracotta-temple depictions:

“What is faithfully captured is a *power* (...) invested in a montage of abutted likenesses, of *yagé* spirits, angels, and dancing



soldiers – sacred power on the march spreading a mantle of gold and music (...) It seems to me vital to understand that this power can be captured only by means of an image, and better still by entering into the image. The image is more powerful than what is an image of.”<sup>xliii</sup> Or in this case, by entering into the temple.

In her work on gifting European portraits in colonial India, Eaton also draws on Taussig's analysis of mimesis in its 'capacity to Other', by which 'the copy acquires power over the original'<sup>xliii</sup>. She turns to the notion of 'mimetic self-awareness' in "the centrality of 'art' in the colonial encounter – its ability to format novel kinds of agencies, institutions and subjectivities"<sup>xliv</sup>. She rightly recognizes mimesis itself was certainly not a uniquely 'native' property of any origin, as she evokes the mimetic practices of European ambassadors from 18<sup>th</sup> century Britain, who used to bring painted portraits depicting the likeness of their monarchs to the colonies, as these conveyed a certain presence even in the monarch's absence<sup>xlv</sup>. This was equally the case for Ostend Company ambassador Jacques-André Cobbé, among whose possession 4 paintings of 'His Imperial Majesty', Emperor Constantin of Constantinople, Prince Eugenius de Savoye and General de Wrangel were found<sup>xlvi</sup>. This would prove a European notion of visual mimesis also operated in the same period when artistic production of terracotta temples took place, and when prints and gifts would be steadily replaced by paintings.

Instead of a motive of 'displaying European taste', whether in temple depictions or in visual objects, a mimetic interpretation points at a means of dealing with power, as the visual identity of an 'Other' is incorporated in the 'Self'. It seems getting hold of the power of something through its image could even subvert and thereby contrast with the notion of emulation as aspiring to a certain taste. In the case of the temples, the question would become if the sculptures were submitting to taste and following the power of others, in order to please them, or precisely incorporating them in order to overcome them. And how would this have been experienced by the inhabitants of the life-world they shaped?

## From Historicization to contemporary reflection

So far we have seen how the historical lineage of visual objects and perceptions, such as those labelled 'early visual anthropologies', played a specific role in transcultural and colonial histories in Bengal and that meanings were carried throughout these histories into the contemporary world. This shows that historians should pay attention to historical instances of visualisation, and can trace these back from the present. Researchers writing and reflecting from a contemporary point of view should take this lineage into account, for the present perceptions and identities they engender also shape our contemporary context.

It became clear a deeper analytical notion might have underlied the motives for the circulation and depiction of visual objects mentioned here, beyond the mere 'displaying of European tastes' which is the usual argument. Along the same lines, my informants even mentioned how "Rajas were a European creation, far removed from the folk process", and that during the period after Indian independence, "Some rajas adjusted with the times, kept their capital and buildings and did well". Of course one shouldn't take this statement at face value, the notion of rajas as rulers existed long before European contacts took place<sup>xlvii</sup>. However, a gradual colonial dominance and introduction of new policies, including Hastings' change of gift-practices, would have had a decisive influence on their elite life and culture. This takes us back again to the Hazarduari Palace, which is still perceived as the heart of Nawabi culture. Its former chief archaeologist, Biswanath Roy, who describes how the palace itself was constructed for the Nawab to "put to display his poetic taste for art, beauty and to make a vain parade for his wealth, culture and luxury"<sup>xlviii</sup> although East India Company officers "constructed the building so that it would be [eventually] used by them for the residential quarters"<sup>xlix</sup>, by which they constructed a gilded cage for the Nawab. This ultimately points to a form of colonial governance or power-relation, in which there was no room for subversive mimesis but only for commodification. Nonetheless, from the European paintings to the commodities the palace contains, my informants seemed to stress their connotations as Bengali 'culture' and 'heritage'. Precisely these two words are localized in tendencies of globalising capitalist culture by James Clifford, paraphrasing Harvey: "Heritage replaces history, contributing to a hegemonic articulation of national and class interests. (...) The commodification of local pasts is part of a global process of cultural 'de-differentiation'"<sup>i</sup> If so, then globalising capitalist culture, itself the product of a history, would constrain the uses and limits of identities. Clifford considers this as follows:

"In a global context where collective identity is increasingly represented by having a culture (a distinctive way of life, tradition, form of art, or craft), museums make sense. (...) When a community displays itself through spectacular collections and ceremonies, it constitutes an 'inside' and an 'outside'. The message of identity is directed differently to members and to outsiders – the former incited to share in symbolic wealth, the latter maintained as onlookers (...) From their emergence as public institutions in nineteenth-century Europe, museums have been useful for politics gathering and valuing an 'us'"<sup>ii</sup>.

Perhaps it is no coincidence that he places the emergence of museums in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, at precisely the same moment when glass-objects, once serving as Mughal-elite presents, turned into more widely known luxury commodities, and the reputation of 'Belgian glass' got established. Yet, confronted with terracotta temple sculptures which are not musealized nor properly conserved, one critically wonders along with Clifford "What *else* goes on in tribal and other articulations of culture? How unified is the constellation of cultural/economic formations we call the postmodern?"<sup>iii</sup>

## From visual ethnohistories to identity dynamics

Tracing concrete historical visual lineages through a history of pre- and early colonial contacts in Bengal, closely connected to formations of historical identity in confrontation with the exotic, unveiled a nuanced and complex series of histories and adaptations for which a full explanatory argument is at this moment still unclear<sup>liii</sup>. What the beginnings of the argument unmistakably point at, is that historical and contemporary visual dimensions should be taken serious, as they are still dimensions for both historical creation and perceptions of identity up till today.

The 'early visual anthropologies' analysed above also revealed two different ways of shaping and controlling 'the Other', and thereby shaping 'the Self'. In the case of Solvyns by the production of a ground breaking visual oeuvre of Orientalist knowledge, implicitly or explicitly aimed at understanding as a form of domination. In the case of the Terracotta temples by considering the depiction of European figures as a form of mimesis, expressing a different form of dealing with the power of images. Both Solvyns depictions and the temple sculptures, as seemingly opposite tendencies of relating to visual objects in the formation of identities, reveal a more complex relational notion than a mere binary opposition between Self and Other, as these became inscribed in each other. We therefore seem to require a dynamic notion of identities to fully grasp these relations involving visual objects.

According to Saïd, "The construction of identity (...) while obviously a repository of distinct collective experiences, is finally a construction – involves establishing opposites and "others" whose actuality is always subject to the continuous interpretation and re-interpretation of their difference from "us". Each age and society re-creates its 'Others'"<sup>liiv</sup>. Exoticism and mimesis would merely be two ways of doing so.

In an approach developed at Ghent University in 2004, it was sought to develop a useful instrument to approach culture and identity dynamics. Pinxten and Verstraete pointed out how debates on identity are highly ideological as, according to them, "culture increasingly appears to be replacing 'race' within the discourse of the extreme right in Europe. Hence, introducing a notion of culturality in identity discussions is a politically relevant move."<sup>liiv</sup> In their need to move beyond all confusion in definitions on culture and towards a non-essentialist understanding, they sought to claim concepts of identity and culture for serious scientific research, and thereby developed an analytical instrument in which they consider culturality as only one dimension of identity dynamics, next to personality and sociality. They consider culturality as those processes 'producing meaning' in socio-historical and political settings, by applying narratives and labels"<sup>livi</sup>. Visual culture would then be those labels involved in display and perception. Could this be an adequately dynamic notion for reconsidering the historical lineages i've sketched in this paper? Does it respect its long-term socio-historical context?

In Schmidt and Saïd's approaches, narratives and labels create an Other in order to create a Self. The different configurations along which such narratives and labels are produced and acquired have also been revealed to interact, and even to visually incorporate each other (up to the point where it is perceived out of its original origin, as an intrinsic part of its 'host' culturality. This interaction is embodied in the historical identities of visual commodities such as European paintings and 'Belgian glass'. The historical process traced here undoubtedly carries social and political connotations: on power, as exoticist or Orientalist depictions sought to dominate what they portrayed, and through mimesis, leading to cultural creation and transformation. And on perceived identities, as people engaging with historical lineages of certain commodities can be unaware of their trajectories, and the labels of identity these contain.

## Author Bio

Wim De Winter (M.A., Ghent University) is an interdisciplinary cultural historian currently undertaking PhD.-research at Ghent University, on a comparative ethnohistory of cultural interaction and performative exchanges of the Ostend Company in 18<sup>th</sup> century Bengal and Canton. This research forms part of a wider project on 'Seafaring, Trade and Knowledge Transfer' under direction of Prof. Dr. Angela Schottenhammer (Salzburg University), and is supported by an 'Interdisciplinary Research Scholarship' from the *Gerda Henkel Stiftung*. He is an associate of the *Indian Ocean World Centre – Team 3* (McGill), and of the research groups *Communities, Comparisons, Connections* and *Culture in Perspective* at Ghent University. He has previously published on gift-exchange in early-modern Japan, and on the Ostend Company's courtly encounters in 18<sup>th</sup> century Bengal and China.

## Attachments

### I COSSIMBAZAR PALACE SALON



### II 'MONA LISA AT COSSIMBAZAR'



### III 'BLACK TOWN' by BALTHAZAR SOLVYNS

(Solvyns, *Les Hindous*, Vol. II (Paris: Chez l'auteur, 1810))



### IV TERRACOTTA PANEL (Surul Temple 1)



### V TERRACOTTA DETAIL (Surul Temple 2)



*All pictures by the author – from the collection of the author*



- i Manfred Kremser, "Some Reflections on the Relevance of Fieldwork for Ethnohistory," in *Ethnohistory in Vienna*, ed. Karl R. Wernhart (Aachen: Herodot, 1987), 173-174.
- ii Kremser, "Some Reflections," 175.
- iii Similar to the approach of Serge Gruzinski, *Les quatre parties du monde : histoire de la mondialisation* (Paris: Editions de la Martiniere, 2004)
- iv Nawabs or Subadār were the rulers of Bengal during the rule of the Mughal Empire and the beginning colonial rule of the British East-India Company in Bengal, as depicted in R.C. Majumdar, *History of Mediaeval Bengal* (Kolkata: Tulshi Prakashani, 2006), 84-126.
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- vi James Clifford, *Routes: travel and translation in the late twentieth century* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997), 200.
- vii Philippe Falisse, *Belgian heritage in India* (Louvain-la-Neuve: Versant Sud, 2010)
- viii Falisse, *Belgian heritage*, 73.
- ix Falisse, *Belgian heritage*, 78.
- x 'Faujdar', a local governor and customs official in the town of Hughli
- xi Sarfaraz Khan, son of the vice-roy of Bengal who was to become Nawab in 1740, as portrayed in Jadu Nath Sarkar, *Bengal Nawabs* (Kolkata: The Asiatic Society, 2008), 1.
- xii 'Colonie de Banquebazar L. Liasse, Rekeningen, dagboek enz. Van Cassembazar 1727'. Stadsarchief Antwerpen, Antwerpen (SAA), *Archief der Generale Indische Compagnie* (GIC), 5669.
- xiii 'Note des presens pour mr Hume, a envoyer tous les ans'. SAA, GIC, 5573 : *Factorerie de Bengale sous la direction Parraber*
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- xlii Taussig, *Mimesis and Alterity*, 62
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