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AIPS Short Term Lecturing and Research Fellowship

Period: 3 months (January 15 to April 15, 2011)

Site: Islamabad

Project Title: Making Sense of the Past in the Present: Storying Diasporic Identities of African Pakistanis

This research project focuses on documenting three ways of representing identities of African-Pakistani Sheedis—through (1) legends, narratives, songs, and other performances in which Sheedis express their own identities, (2) administrative and NGO-development discourses aimed at poverty alleviation and state-level incorporation (e.g., through vocational education and participation in athletics), and (3) scientific discoveries and their dissemination in the form of contemporary research on migratory histories of human populations. I was able to begin work on aspects of the first two categories of research, and I proposed to embark on the study of the third category of data through readings and consultations at a later date.

This AIPS Short Term Lecturing and Research Fellowship gave me the long-awaited opportunity to conduct exploratory research on African-Pakistani constructions of identity. I began work on January 15, 2011 and was affiliated with Lok Virsa, the National Institute of Folk and Traditional Heritage in Islamabad, and with Quaid-i-Azam University's Faculty of Social Sciences in Islamabad. In order to undertake my research, I brought U.S. standard video equipment (1080i/60; 30 frames per second) and a professional quality wireless microphone system, which were not readily available locally.

In Islamabad, I was fortunate to be able to work through the national and regional NGO network of Strengthening Participatory Organizations (SPO) to identify key consultants. Naseer Memon, SPO's CEO, was particularly helpful in suggesting early contacts and offering support throughout my study. The data collected under AIPS's auspices include more than 35 consultations and long and short interviews with scholars, performers, athletes, and social, spiritual, and community leaders; books, articles, and press clippings; publicly available video files; our own video data with sound produced in collaboration with Lok Virsa's Media Center, and still photographs.

In a focused part of the research, Lok Virsa's excellent links to the Pakistan National Council of the Arts, Karachi, and especially to master dancer Ustad Ghulam Abbass Baloch, enabled recording of a variety of African-Pakistani performance traditions in a very high quality uninterrupted session. Earlier contact with the General Secretary of the Combined Sheedi Community also enabled us to access and record legends and Sufi lore. Research and on-site shooting were directed by me in Islamabad and undertaken by my collaborators, Sajid Munir, Deputy Director of Lok Virsa's Media Center and video/photography expert at Fatima Jinnah Women's University, and Quaid-i-Azam University postgraduate student assistant S. I. Malik.

Coverage of African-Pakistani performances centered on what I call “key sites of Sheedi identity construction” related to narrative, song, dance, ritual, and sport, as well as to community development. Hence, foci were on activities in a dance academy and a community center courtyard bordering on a boxing gym: applications of make-up and costumes, demonstrations of percussion instruments, songs (e.g., raggaeton singer Younis Jani’s rendition and explanation of “sheedi badshah”), and dances (e.g., the lewa, including “jungli” dancing and fire dancing). Also covered were site visits to the shrine of Manghopir and other “Sheedi places” (street scenes, the threshold of a small shrine associated with Baba Gor, and a school).

As data emerged, a short-term goal became producing two textually supported 30-minute documentaries with Lok Virsa’s Media Center. These will be on African Pakistanis’: performance traditions thought to contain African elements, as originally planned, and (2) history and heterogeneity, contemporary lifeways, and future prospects. Completion of these documentaries will realize a priority of several years in Lok Virsa’s documentation of Pakistan’s cultural heritage. Also, further work on the project will enhance Lok Virsa’s capacity with resources that enrich and extend studies of relatively undocumented lifeways in African-heritage communities of the Indian Ocean world.

Long-term goals also clarified as we began to process research materials. Specifically, Sajid Munir and I would like to complete a full-length one-hour documentary and monograph, as originally proposed. Toward this end, we envisage further collaboration to research and record a wider repertoire of performance traditions in Hyderabad, Sindh. Eventually, we also hope to employ local student interviewers and videographers, especially women, to document: (1) facets of community organization and lifeways that reveal complexly multilayered and situated urban identities, and (2) African-Pakistani lifeways in other areas of Pakistan—in Hyderabad and eastern Sindh, in particular.

During the study, I also learned about and obtained copies of African-Pakistani social commentary literature published before the flowering of the U.S. civil rights movement in the 1960s. NGO-based consultants in Hyderabad mentioned that they thought that the authors not only were aware of but writing in part in dialogue with African-American intellectual and social currents of their time. If this suggestion turns out to be true, translations of these works could prove to be very significant contributions to Africana studies in the USA and elsewhere.

The lecturing component of my award reflects sponsors’ requests. I offered a lecture series on pragmatic approaches to language analysis in connection with the inauguration of Quaid-i-Azam’s Linguistics Department. Topics included “An Introduction to Pragmatic Approaches”, “Speech Act Theory”, “Interactional Sociolinguistics”, “The Ethnography of Communication”, “Gricean Pragmatics”, “Conversation Analysis”, and “Critical Discourse Analysis”. The experience enabled me to interact constructively with postgraduate students, and to renew ties with Dean and anthropologist Naveed-i-Rahat, who has worked with U.S. scholars for 25 years.

Other invited lectures addressed facets of this project (Forman Christian College, and Lok Virsa, Quaid-i-Azam University, and the AIPS Overseas Resource Center; in progress, as data are in processing), as well as an initiative launched in collaboration with the Akhter Hameed Khan Resource Center that uses real time video conferencing to build bridges of understanding between learners at leading universities in the USA and social development experts in Pakistan (Council of Social Sciences, Pakistan, the AIPS Overseas Resource Center, and Shaheed Zulfikar Ali Bhutto Institute of Science and Technology).

Overall, this fellowship offered me a research and lecturing experience that was personally and professionally gratifying. I greatly look forward to the next phase of my research, and to further opportunities to collaborate with colleagues at Lok Virsa and Quaid-i-Azam University. Finally, I express my gratitude to individuals and institutions that made my work both possible and successful: Nadeem Akbar, Ghulam Rasool, and Asma Haider at AIPS in Islamabad, Mark Kenoyer, Laura Hammond, and Salima Currimbhoy at AIPS at the University of Wisconsin, and the Public Affairs Section of the U.S. Embassy in Islamabad.