and concrete action to eradicate the main causes of the devadasi system: poverty, gender and caste discrimination.

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At the recent congress of the International Union of Anthropological and Ethnological Sciences (IUAES), held in Manchester in August 2013, I met the Iranian filmmaker, Alireza Qasemkhan. He kindly presented me with a DVD copy of the film under review, The Songs of the Persian Gulf. However, at the time the film was not yet available in an English version, so the first time I watched this film was actually on my laptop in a hotel room in Manchester, incapable of understanding what people were saying or, indeed, singing. Over the years I had frequently and experimentally shown films, when teaching visual anthropology and ethnographic film, that I knew the students would not understand the verbal expositions of due to language. One point has been to raise the issue of contextualization in film, arguing that films, or at least some films, are capable of contextualizing without using verbal forms, whether actual interviews or running dialogue. The reason for this anecdotal entry point to a review of a film should be evident. I was absolutely fascinated by the ability of the film to convey to me an understanding of what the film was all about without getting a word of what was being said, and was struck by the aesthetic beauty of the way in which it was shot, by Sadegh Souri, and edited, by Meisam Shahbabai, as well as the film’s magnificent use of sound (the sound recordist is Abbas Vadi and the sound editor/mixer Hosein Ghourcian). It reminded me of a book I had contributed to on sound in ethnographic film, my contribution (Crawford, 2010) focusing on the anthropology of the senses and the role of sound in contextualization and the production of inferred knowledge. This film reminds us that film is an audio-visual medium.

The title indicates what the film is about and although we do not get to know exactly where the film is shot, one feels that it could be anywhere in the Persian Gulf. In fact, it could almost be anywhere in the world, given the universality of sailors’ and fishermen’s songs, or for that matter songs produced in the context of any kind of hard labour. In this sense the film more generally contributes to an understanding of songs as intangible cultural heritage. The main focus of the film, or even the plot, if you like, is how these songs are threatened and the tradition dying out if nothing is done. What the film more than anything else reveals, at times using impressionistic or even haptic styles, is exactly how directly the songs and the singing grow out of the labour and lives of the fishermen and sailors. This is clearly demonstrated in the numerous shots in which we follow a fishing boat to sea, the whole crew singing along under the leadership of an old gentleman, unnamed, who is obviously the
expert on not only the songs but also the marine culture from which they stem. His counterpart, so to speak, or the second protagonist of the film, is another old man, also possessing knowledge about songs and culture. Although this is not a film following a standard narrative structure, the structure is provided through these two men, one representing the traditional marine culture with wooden boats, the other modern ship technology, but both keen to preserve the songs and able to sing them. Throughout the film there is thus this juxtaposition between a traditional sailing culture with wooden sailing boats, where everything on the boat is locally produced, and even navigation is done in the traditional way by reading the weather, the topography of the waves and the stars, and a modern technology with boats built from glass fibre and steel, equipped with engines, and employing satellite navigation systems, echo sounders and whatnot.

Referring again to the significance of sound in the film, the way in which the songs, and their patterns and rhythms, are intrinsically linked to the marine culture emerges very strongly in what I find the most fascinating, filmically and otherwise, scene, namely when we see, and hear, a group of men repairing a wooden boat, the hammering sounds of the caulking almost synchronously matching the singing. We find such audio-relationships and movements in other scenes as well, classically, for example, in fishermen hauling their nets, but in this scene it is so powerful that one realizes why we do not need verbal exposition to ‘explain’ it. To go back to my starting point, this raises the question of what my second viewing, this time of the English version used for the review, added to my understanding of the phenomena and culture portrayed. Here one must briefly describe the style of the film, or rather the mix of various styles, both when it comes to shooting and editing. Parts of the film are relatively ‘simple’ observational shots, normally either following work processes, such as the fishing or the caulking, or interviews and conversations with the two old men. But in between these scenes, which are of course full of verbal content, we have series of very short shots, either close-ups or extreme wide-angle shots of the environment – the boats, the harbour, the city and its architecture, seagulls, fish, fishing nets, the sea, and men and faces of men – rapidly intercut with one another. The only other shots are from a drum performance, evidently staged, which at first confused me, but then, perhaps overdoing it, forcing me to focus on the significance of rhythm and pace.

So, what did the verbal content add? To be quite frank, virtually nothing, or, rather, something that I could already gauge from carefully watching and listening to the film, or something that I could deduct from an informed guess, based on what such songs around the world are usually about. As well as, of course, the juxtaposition of tradition and modernity personified by the two old men. The songs are all about something directly related to the lives of those who sing them, be they about the hard toil with the fishing nets, or with the sails in rough weather, inducing hope and motivation into the crew, or about the dear ones, awaiting them at home.
The only other shots, which are confusing if not contextualized, are from the city, after one of the old men has explained that the fishermen and sailors spend almost all their time at or by the sea, with the notable exception of holidays and religious feasts, when they immediately return home and to the mosque. The only song we thus hear that is not related directly to marine life is a song paying homage to Imam Hosein.

The reason I enjoy this film so much is the way it simply allows you to see and hear, at times paced to correspond with the activities going on, and the songs, at other times rapidly cutting evocative imagery together as a collage-like accompaniment to the songs, a sort of mixing of observational style with mythopoetics. Some academics, perhaps ethnomusicologists or folklorists, may find there is a lack of contextualization. Where exactly is the film shot? Do they sing the same songs in the whole region? What are the musical instruments at times used to accompany the songs? What is the content of the lyrics? Valid questions, as most of the songs are apparently sung in a local dialect and not translated. Similarly, marine historians may be looking for more detail about boats and equipment. It is not that I cannot see these potentially apposite critical points. However, as an anthropologist and filmmaker, I would prefer such additional information to be made available in other forms, so that it does not ‘disturb’ the film as it is, becoming very weary when people start criticizing films for what they are not, rather than for what they are. The Songs of the Persian Gulf, to me, offers a fascinating audio-visual insight into a regional phenomenon and deserves to be seen by anyone interested in songs related to labour, in marine culture, or in the Persian Gulf region. The film’s story is universal, how to safeguard intangible cultural heritage. I would certainly contemplate using it in teaching, adding a new film to my list of films used experimentally, to show students that we do not necessarily need to understand many words to get a sensuous understanding of (other) culture.

References

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