

Keynote by Ekaterina Dimitrowa at the workshop: Researchers on the Move - Intercultural Dimensions in Science and Humanities

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MY EAST-WEST RESEARCH ODYSSEY

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Since the inauguration address included the definition of culture, I would like to make a brief contribution to this point. Linguistically, the word culture is a compound derived from two roots, which can be traced both in Sanskrit and Greek: "cult" – admiration, and "ur" - light". So, strictly speaking culture is a celebration and worship of the light, which is relevant to the earliest human believes in the Sun-God and its paramount role for the life on the plant. By now it has acquired a deep structure of meaning, where abstract, analogical, and symbolic operational aspects coexist.

However, they all encapsulate its main dimension – that light/culture is limitless.

In this context our subject about culture across borders, carried by Researchers on the Move acquires an unusual, yet natural quality, which we should bare in mind when embarking on discussing its dimensions.

Intercultural communications always include not simply scientific issues, but practical human aspirations as well. The two modes form some kind of personal researcher's file and the ways these issues are treated may say a lot about us as humanity.

This presentation is going to outline some of the issues that marked my personal file covering different subjects – languages and art; as well as different backgrounds - stretching from the University of Delhi to some leading European cultural institutions.

It will point at scientific aspects – such as how a researcher translates local issues in a global voice,

or simply humanistic aspects - such as building bridges of trust.

The classical maxim "Man is the measure of all things" will emerge as the real aim of our achievements.

The presentation of each issue is structured as a module and includes the following aspects:

1. the case
2. the issue
3. the solution
4. the conclusion

Module 1 – Rules and exceptions

1. the case

As a linguist-lecturer at the University of Delhi, under a cultural exchange program with the University of Sofia, I was fascinated by the tradition of teaching Sanskrit language. Being the oldest surviving Indo-European language, it constitutes the core of any paleo-linguistic research. My immediate reaction was a desire to study the language and experience this unique intellectual reality alongside my original work of teaching Bulgarian language and culture.

2. the issue

But there was a simple, yet very strong principle of teaching Sanskrit. It was done only through medium Hindi. The reason being to keep the exposure of this sacred language (Sanskrit meaning sacred creation) to the minimum, although the time of the strict Brahmanistic age was long gone. Nevertheless that was a barrier, which to get over, would have required at least two years, during which time my contract would have expired.

3. the solution

There was a need of special decision, but I had no idea what that could be. It came from the head of the Department of Sanskrit. After a few discussions, he proposed to me, that he would make a special case of teaching Sanskrit via English, if I managed to organize a group of at least 6 students, the minimum required when forming a practical academic unit. With some campaigning among my colleagues from the Department of Modern European Languages, I managed to gather the interest of 5 other lecturers, and the next year we begun that unique learning journey.

More to that was the astonishing reaction of our professor of Sanskrit literature, who asked habitually how I got to be interested in the subject. I begun by saying: "Well, I was passing by chance by the Dept. of Sanskrit and as a linguist I was fascinated to the point of wonder". He said to me simply, "by chance?" Such things in life do not happen by chance, or by accident. If you desire to be a real Sanskrit student this is rule N1 to remember."

4. the conclusion

The thing I want to emphasize on and make my first point: is: if you are doing something which takes the whole of your personality, and not simply your brain,

don't allow yourself to be disappointed by any problem - do follow your idea with urge – and when there is a will there is going to be a way! Furthermore, a good idea has many friends – it just takes a bit of time for the positive energy to manifest itself. This example from India I consider as a primark for intercultural humanism.

2a.the issue extended

But there was a problem just waiting at the other side of the door. The time was 1986 and Bulgaria was a Communist country. I was summoned by the Bulgarian authorities and interrogated of my Sanskrit course. I was told that I am not allowed to engage with any religious studies, and if I did otherwise, I would be sent back home immediately and punished severely, as was the case with intellectuals, who refused to obey the socialist code.

3a. the solution extended

I managed to avoid a clear answer to save myself a karmic injunction, though a full course religious study was included in the program. But the impossible was becoming probable, as history was on the move – the winds of change were already blowing strong and the collapse of the communist regime was imminent. As a result, the religious suppression was taken off the Bulgarian governing agenda and I continued my course undisturbed. .

Module 2.**Rules without exceptions**

1. the case

Later, in order to complete my Sanskrit course, I arrived in London and was offered a place at the University of London. Now, with all the intellectual freedom available, I thought my Sanskrit future was ensured.

2. the issue

But now, it was the financial barrier that I faced in front of me. And sadly, that one I could not overcome.

3. the conclusion

Here the point is self-evident: while a University of a developing country would charge a symbolic sum to study in an original background a unique, yet interculturally significant subject, a University of a developed country would require thousands for the same opportunity. I think it is time for culture to be disassociated from the political terminologies – developing and developed, as it is simply not the case. India has maintained Sanskrit studies alive for 3000 years which makes it far developed by any standards, yet it does not make it inaccessible modern exotics, on the contrary – just because of that it probably survived. So we should think twice

when putting a price on culture – it disassociates it from our natural selves, instead of making it an organic part of our mentality. For culture, indeed, is priceless.

Module 3. **Local concepts in global voice**

1. the case

While moving in the English intercultural environment, I was invited by the British Library scholars to present a paper on a celebrated Bulgarian Mediaeval Manuscript, now part of the collection of the British Library. They allowed me to view the manuscript, which went into my research file as another wonder.

Eventually, after the requested book-project was approved, I began a research on that Manuscript, which would have been the first research in English, after being there for more than a century. Furthermore, this was a research on one of the only three surviving medieval manuscripts of the grandest illuminated scheme ever produced in Byzantine art with 367 miniatures, related to The New Testament.

2. the issue

The issue here was not of technical nature, I was always given access to the manuscript, but of cultural nature. The BL colleague were positive about my discoveries revealing the complex nature of the Orthodox art of the Gospel. The new cultural samples demonstrated and illuminated not only specific Bulgarian cultural issues, but the principle Byzantine code as well. But this became an issue for an external critic, who maintained a stereotypical view, that this manuscript was an inferior copy of a Greek original, although this original was an uncertain, imaginary object. The specific local nature of the art was put under the inferiority scrutiny, and this stamped a veto to my concepts becoming doctoral theses.

3.the solution

The British Library looked into the novel concepts with open mind and published my research giving a global voice to the local aspirations of the talented medieval Bulgarian artists, who developed and preserved the grandest illuminating scheme in Byzantine art for posterity.

Now my book is listed under N9 in the world's 16 best books on manuscripts, selected by Questia electronic library, www.questia.com/library/art/illuminated-manuscripts.

Furthermore, the same critic has upgraded his opinion about the manuscript stating in a recent catalogue, that "this manuscript is a tour de force of the grand

illuminated book". Nevertheless, he "has charged" for this credit the titular inscription over the portrait of the owner of the Manuscript by defining it as "Byzantine emulation", yet omitting the Greek link from the original text:. He has chosen to quote it as "Ivan Alexander in Christ God faithful tsar and autocrat of all Bulgarians", thus manipulating the original, which is "Ivan Alexander in Christ God faithful tsar and autocrat of all Bulgarians and Greeks". When I wrote to the organizers to point at the error, I was told that this is a political argument and is beyond their cultural concerns. Surely, fiddling with original text, in order to diminish certain standard, goes beyond any scientific reasons.

4. the conclusion

My point here is – be positive. If your local cultural point is not appreciated or understood at first,

it may not be because of resentment or negative attitude - the academe community tends to be conservative to other realia and innovations, until they are being radically proven. So, be persistent in uncovering the global human aspiration in your local mode. Simply remember that we are living in a global village. At the same time - be careful to distinguish between politics and culture: they are individual birds, although from the same flock. Finally, take refuge in researcher's ultimate goal – "scientific and philosophical contemplation", as Aristotle advises us, for sooner or later the truth derived in contemplation will take its place and does its due service.

Module 4. **Man is the measure of all things**

1. the case

The fascinating aspect of my research Odyssey is that it presented some of the most exciting examples of individual, rather than institutional commitments to intercultural cooperation.

The first happened, when I approached a monk of the principal church of Thessalonica, Greece – St. Dimitrius, to ask for its 14-th c. Chapel to be open for me to see its unique frescoes. I knew they were in a very fragile condition, so the prospects were shallow. The monk listened to my plea in silence and I begun to lose heart. At some point, without saying a word, he opened the drawer of his desk, took out a bunch of keys and gave it into my hands. He spoke a single instruction – "Lock yourself in, if you don't want to be destructed by visitors". No time restriction, no rules and regulations reading, no conventional instructions. Instead – total trust. When I returned the keys after some hours, he was in the same unique state of spirit.

The other example is from Italy. I had arranged to see a related manuscript in the Medici library in Florence, and booked my tickets, which were subject of a complicated coordination and price.

Here I arrive for the first time in the city of Michelangelo full of expectations. Not only for my research but in general as well.

2. the issue

But work first - I go to the Library, absolutely excited, just to find out that it was under general reconstruction and access was not possible. Some unexpected reason had prompted an urgent re-scheduling of the entire work of the library, but the information for the change had not reached me.

3. the solution

And then – an extraordinary personal example took place, The librarian arranged for me to see the head of the library, who was not in, but made the effort to come. I was met with apology and asked when I would be able to come again. My return ticket was just a fortnight later, but this again was weeks before the repair work of the library was due to finish.

Yet it was arranged on the spot for this date for me to have a special access to the library. Indeed, I shall remember forever, that beautiful September Saturday, when I was the only visitor to the Medici library with a precious old manuscript in hands. The bells of the Medici Chapel ringing for the customary matinee service made a sublime touch to the story.

4. the conclusion

My final point here is – build human bridges, bridges of trust. Build partnership and collaboration, work for relations, not only for science. Because at the end of every scientific project is the man!

MAN IS THE MEASURE OF ALL THINGS!

I happened to experience this life in the city which restored that classical saying of Protagoras and revived it for all of us.

It will be the highest honor to humanity if everyone contributes to this principle, when opportunity presents itself.

But it strikes the mind – what kind of man did Protagoras have in mind? I can only give a clue, which I believe is relevant and which I found in Plato's Phaedrus: Here is what the ideal man has dedicated his prayer for:

“Beloved Pan and all ye other gods who haunt this place, give me beauty in the inward soul and may the outward and the inward man be at one.”

For if science is ahead of ethics, where is the point for the humanity! Achievements alone mean nothing, it is the ethics that fuses the big and broad chunks of man's numerous achievements into an organically consistent unity that makes this world a better place.

