

# Aspects of Culture, Religion and Art in the Hill Societies of the North East

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Much before one can speak of the art of the North East and its relation to religion it is imperative to deconstruct the very terms, the 'North-East', 'art' and 'religion'. Above all the category of 'tribe' that leads to a hierarchy of evaluation in the cultural realm needs unpacking.

The disciplines of history, sociology and anthropology in India are predominantly the inheritance of western concepts and categories. The very term North-East is a misnomer: a glossing over the separate states with their varied characters. Each state has its identity and unique set of issues.

The notion of the 'tribe' is equally problematic: it began with the basic distinction of the knower (the colonial state and anthropologists) and the known (the tribal other). The former claimed the exclusive monopoly of power and rational faculty of knowledge to represent the tribal 'other' in an authentic, accurate, and legitimate manner. The most common way of constructing the tribal 'other' was to counter-pose the 'civilized' and 'cultured' to the 'wild', 'savage' and 'barbaric' tribals. Furer-Haimendorf actually titled a book as "Himalayan Barbary". Thus the category of tribe was constructed by the colonial state to subsume societal diversities for administrative and political expediency through the process of enumeration and classification.

Just as the question "Can the Subaltern Speak?" is an ironic comment on those who claimed to speak on behalf of the subalterns, the question of "Can the 'tribal' speak?" is finally being answered by the so-called 'tribals' themselves. Whether the beliefs, arts and artefacts of the 'tribe' are celebrated for their beauty or placed low in the hierarchy as the 'lesser' decorative arts, the human agency of the tribal 'other' is denied. The material objects of the people become part of museums as exotic productions of the 'other' while the prescription of better integration and management by the state from colonial times till today reinforces the view of the 'tribals' as

backward people. The 'law and order' approach pushes artistic pursuits to the margins as Art in life requires ease with one's life-world and a sense of self-esteem.

The Indian state since 1947, despite seeking to appear as concerned with ground realities and empathetic to the people's sentiments has retained much of the colonial politico-administrative edifice and reproduces certain discursive practices. Consequently, it continues to shape and condition the politics of 'tribal' identities.

It has been argued that this was the trend set by Verrier Elwin's studies and his privileging the integration role of the state.<sup>1</sup> Though, it must be said that while Elwin used the term 'tribe' in his academic writing, his relationship with the north-eastern people won him affection and respect. For him the various people living in these parts were Nagas, Manipuris, Khasis or Mishimis and so on, not 'tribes' in the anthropological sense. As he wrote in the introduction to his anthology on the Nagas: "My main interest, as it always has been, was in people. . . ."<sup>2</sup>

Religion is again another problematic term and not at all an apt description for many belief systems that exist in the Indian sub-continent not to speak of the states in this region. The concept of religion has doctrinal implications and scriptures in the western sense of the term that hardly describes the world-views and cosmic conceptions of many practices that abound in the entire country.

The hill societies of the North East had a rich oral tradition of cosmography and creation myths. For instance the *Ahom Buranji* opens with a creation myth that presents a cosmological view of the Tai-Ahom world. The Ahom creator had a pair of golden spiders to erect eight pillars in eight corners of the earth. The spiders connected the Ahom mountains by a rope to a pillar on Mount Meru of Hindu mythology. As the spiders labored on the connective web, the Ahom Buranji reads, "They

went quickly backward and forward, like a woman in her looms".<sup>3</sup> The fabric of the Ahom universe was interwoven by the webs of Tai-Ahom and Hindu myths.

And this is the significant fact about art and culture – it is never static and adapts itself to cultural encounters between various people and societies. Old cosmologies dissolve and new cognitive cultural maps evolve. A telling example of this evolution is demonstrated by a local informant who described the Lushai life-world to a colonial official in the early years of the twentieth century. His was a hybrid depiction of the soul's journey beyond the grave in Lushai cosmography. In pre-Christian Lushai worldview, the passage to afterlife was the monopoly of *Pu Pawla*. After missionary contact, *Isua* – Jesus also found place on the route map to provide security for the newly opened highway to the Christian village. Amidst changes, as Imperial Surveyors opened new routes in the Lushai hills, the dead people's village (*mithikhua*) still remained intact. The dreaded *Pu Pawla* was replaced by *Seitana* or Satan, an equally dreaded figure.<sup>4</sup>

Thus different ways of seeing the world are often fused and a hybrid culture emerges. Art and lifestyles reflect this hybridity (the work of a Naga artist, Temsuyanger Longkumer, bears witness to this cultural process.) For art is not constituted by the objects of material culture though it is expressed in their creation and crafting; it is quintessentially ways of seeing and living that are expressed in the aesthetic pursuits of a people, whether in objects or in festivals and rituals.<sup>5</sup>

An excellent example of how religious conversion is not an obliteration of people's culture but a negotiation and accommodation that spawns new interpretations of reconciliation between earlier belief systems and new doctrines is to be found in the way Ao Christian scholars appropriate their past and how they legitimize their traditional beliefs in the light of Christianity. The Ao beliefs were not constricted by rituals alone but were the very basis of their existence. As O. Alem writes: "The Ao Nagas do not have a proper word for religion . . . To them religion means, living in spontaneous awareness of, an encounter with, acknowledgement of, and obedience to the active reality of the presence of God, 'the wholly other'".<sup>6</sup> Thus, Christian theologians attempt to find ways in which the Christian message with its dependence on written texts is made compatible with the Ao worldview.<sup>7</sup> For example, there is the Ao myth about Lijaba, one of the functional names of God as the word derives from the concept of world maker. There are several Ao myths which identify Lijaba's pivotal place in Ao religion and the concept of God and ecology, the Supreme Being's relationship to human beings and creation are interwoven together. Christian theologians draw important

theological significance from the story of Lijaba in consonance with the Christian idea of incarnation of God in the form of man: "The Lijaba's visit to earth corresponds in some degree with the incarnate Christ and His surpassing act or revelation of truth".<sup>8</sup>

In the interpretation of Ao Christian theologians every Ao symbol, every Ao reference to the divine and supernatural is made compatible with Christianity. Christian meaning is read into all expressions of ancient belief. As Imchen says, "Ceremonies, rites and sacrifices are the carriers of tradition and medium of religious expression. Ceremonies make individuals conscious of themselves as a group affirming their belief in common symbols."<sup>9</sup>

Most importantly, the north-eastern region has a triple heritage of belief systems and practices: the various shades of Buddhist, Hindu and Christian faiths. Besides the Hindus and Buddhists Christianity is a major force with 70% of the Khasis, Jaintias and Garos having accepted the faith while Nagaland, is a Christian majority society at 87.47 % of the people.<sup>10</sup> As a scholar puts it, "The North East represents a sort of ethnological transition zone between India and neighbouring China, Tibet, Burma and Bangladesh."<sup>11</sup> All these facets require critical reflection from the diverse disciplinary and methodological horizons of scholars on the study of the interface of art and culture with religions in its broadest sense.

## "TRIBAL" ART

The colony of India confronted European revulsion to its indigenous art as the western critics saw it as a 'monstrosity' both, because of the differing criteria of beauty and the role of the erotic in ancient 'Indian' art. The term 'ancient Indian' is, of course, an aesthetic of a male high culture that streamlined diversity by ignoring marginal traditions in India just as the classical canon of dominant western art marginalized art in the colonies.

Non-European art – in Asia and Africa generally – and in India particularly, defied all concepts laid down by European artists and art historians. The western canon, which purported itself to be universal was, of course, culturally determined by western history as all literary and artistic productions intrinsically are.<sup>12</sup>

Similarly, the derogatory term of 'savage' was invariably used for 'tribal'<sup>13</sup> art and took no cognizance of the unique traditions with its own cultural rules that the people of various tribes possessed. By the time that Elwin engaged himself with art in the North-East the term 'savage' – the Johnsonian term of contempt for the inhabitants of the South Seas – had been eased out from

the vocabulary of the Western world. And yet, the anthropological term of 'primitive' art was still current for the African and Native American arts. For the arts of the North-East scorn and criticism was according to Elwin, still widely prevalent. He quoted various European anthropologists to show that they spoke of an "utter lack of an artistic sense in the tribes on this frontier" and dismissed their ideas of art as "limited to elementary patterns on the loom and to the rough conventional designs which were generally imitations of imports from Tibet."<sup>14</sup>

Elwin was deeply annoyed at the terminology of referring to 'backward tribes' which were to be 'uplifted', as this was in common currency in India during his time. "Naturally therefore 'psychological demoralization' results from contact with the outside world", said Elwin, and "a sense of inferiority in the face of the commercial products of 'civilization'". Consequently, he continued, "people hide their own products . . . and girls in entrancing dress and ornaments drape themselves completely in white bed-sheets from the shops in order to look modern."<sup>15</sup> He rued the fact that some Mishmi girls covered their own beautifully designed blouses with jackets of black mill cloth and turned their exquisitely woven garments into inner-wear and substituted their gorgeous ornaments with cheap plastic hairclips and earrings.<sup>16</sup>

The sense of inferiority that Elwin spoke of in the North-East was equally true of the whole of India as a matter of fact. All those who had anything to do with producing, consuming, and appreciating art began to disown their own art as 'low' and occidental orientations were at a premium. The impact of westernization on Indian artists has been studied by Partha Mitter.<sup>17</sup> There were critical and hostile commentaries on Asian-so called Oriental- arts and cultures including what was labelled 'tribal' culture and this led to the valorization of the colonized people's 'own' remembered or imagined past. This was one side of the story.

The process of self-denunciation of Indian art and the adoption and internalization of colonial and Christian puritanical concepts of art was the other part of the story. In regard to the arts of the North-East an insensitive and boorish attitude was expressed by most Indians who encountered tribal life, society and religion. It was this that Elwin set out to rectify by sensitizing the country to the unique qualities of the North-East by embedding its artistic tradition in its broad cultural history, and the social and cultural contexts of its religion.

As late as 2001, Mitter remarked upon the curious silence in Indian art history about the rich treasure of tribal art among art historians. He writes: "Their arts, as

part of social rituals, have an ephemeral character and are therefore considered to be merely functional."<sup>18</sup> Thus they are treated as the sole preserve of anthropologists.

The European Renaissance established a hierarchy of the arts in which the applied arts – regarded as the 'minor arts', which Elwin often referred to as "utilitarian", were seen to be inferior to the fine arts such as sculpture and painting. Such an evaluation is also prevalent in Indian society, and it reflects the position of the tribal people which despite all special policies is nowhere near the top of the art ladder. Yet the spectacular range of artistic production in the North-East epitomise a sense of rhythm and structure, animation and stylization that Gombrich has emphasized in the decorative arts.<sup>19</sup>

Dominant Hindu society over millennia was a source of pressure upon the tribes to conform to its classical canon in all spheres including that of art. Yet, until the colonial period most of the tribes were able to preserve their own artistic traditions. From the 19<sup>th</sup> century however, land was increasingly exploited for economic ends and the term 'tribes' came into usage as part of an overall Raj strategy of political control.<sup>20</sup> In the 1940s, Verrier Elwin drew attention to the rich but rapidly disappearing art of tribal India. By 1947-48 Elwin was the leading sociologist-anthropologist and policy maker for the North-East with the full backing of Nehru's government.

Elwin tried to be fair and even-handed in his commentaries on religion's impact on the people's natural genius in the domain of art and living cultures. However, both he and Nehru finally found only Buddhism acceptable to them. Elwin very early in his study of tribal art expressed discomfort and even chagrin with evangelical Christianity. He was equally, if not more, angrily critical of the Hindu attitude towards the tribal culture.

Tribal religion in the North-East as everywhere else in Elwin's view is "associated with a social ethic that unites the people. Religion also lends its sanction to the origin of the arts". Most myths of origin attributed artistic pursuits to women to whom they were said to have been revealed. For example the Sun-Moon God revealed the art of weaving to the women of the Boris tribe of Siang; or the revelation came from Nature as a divine force and the spider weaving its web was the source from which the women learnt how to weave. Men too learnt from the spider's web to span rivers with suspension bridges of cane. Similarly, the Kaman Mishmis believed that the origin of the art of weaving was when their God taught it to a young girl – and she became the first weaver in the tribe.

All the sociological writing on the North-East in which

Elwin described the beliefs and practices, the taboos and traditions of the various people of the region are not to be understood as 'superstitions' – which is another damning term – but can be seen as enmeshed in a world view and a comprehensive belief system that governs life and death and the world beyond this one. To call it 'religion' in the western sense of doctrinal faith would be a misnomer for it is a way of life that seeks its specific way of comprehending life on the earth and its relation to the cosmos. When these beliefs and world view weakens the art weakens too. Elwin was highly critical of the influence of missionaries as he saw it as "highly destructive of folk art that was closely associated with "pagan" ideas. Thus Elwin argued the people's love of colour and beauty, the tasteful objects they crafted and clothes that were woven, the epiphany of song and dance – all were intrinsic to their way of life and were the treasures he sought to encourage and preserve.<sup>21</sup>

Finally, we must also take note of the young who belong to the people here but want to look forward and not get trapped in a time warp of nostalgia. They think that it is 'outsiders' with a romantic view of the special culture of these societies with the self-view of being the last bulwark against full-scale commercialization and loss of traditional values.

As one of them writes, "Anthropologists observed the disappearance of 'authentic traditional culture' with disgust, often pointing their anger towards colonialism and modernity. However, this model is no longer formative in contemporary research objectives. This view promulgated the notion that any revival of culture would inevitably be less 'authentic', due to the 'initial loss'. For example, travellers to Nagaland express that they want to capture the 'real culture' of the Nagas before it gives way to change. It must be stressed that while Naga culture has definitely evolved, is it less real than, say, a hundred years ago?"<sup>22</sup>

The critique of anthropological methods of the 1970s and 80s observe how cultural criticism in the 21<sup>st</sup> century must address the challenge to "cultural homogeneous nation-states; transnational communication and visual media in new modalities, which arguably are effecting transitions as profound in modes of rationality and cognition as those earlier from orality to literacy; and the new technosciences, which provide both novel technologies affecting masses of people as well as new

concepts and metaphors for the way we act in the world."<sup>23</sup>

## NOTES

1. Kham Khan Suan, 'Politics of Identities in the Language of the 'Tribe', Unpublished paper, p.2.
2. Verrier Elwin, ed., *The Nagas in the Nineteenth Century*, OUP, 1969.
3. *Ahom Buranji*, translated into English by Golap Chandra Barua, ed.1930 (reprinted 1985), Guwahati, Assam:Spectrum Publications, p.2.
4. J.Shakespear, *The Lushai-Kuki Clans*, London :Macmillan & Co, 1912, p.62.
5. A good example of the metamorphosis and yet continued symbolism of a culture can be seen in the description of the Hornbill Festival of Nagaland. (Circulated paper, by Arkotong Longkumer, The Hornbill Festival: Cultural Representation and consumption amongst the Nagas of Nagaland.)
6. O. Alem Ao, *Tsungremology*, Ao Naga Christian Theology, CTC, Aolijen, Mokukchung, 1994, p.2.
7. Lanusangla Tzudir, 'Representing Traditional Ao Naga Religion in the Christian Present', Unpublished paper.
8. Panger Imchen, *Ancient Ao Naga Religion and Culture*, New Delhi: Har Anand Publication, 1993, p. 172.
9. Ibid. p.10.
10. A.N.M. Irshad Ali and Indranoshee Das, *Studies of Tribes and Tribals*, 1(2): 141-148
11. Ibid. p.142.
12. Partha Mitter, *Much Maligned Monsters: History of European reactions to Indian Art*, Oxford, 1977.
13. The label of 'tribal' also needs to be problematised as the aesthetic of the art practiced were denigrated as 'tribal' as opposed to 'civilized'.
14. Verrier Elwin, *The Art of the North-East Frontier of India*, (Henceforth ANEF) North-East Frontier Agency, Shillong, 1959, Introduction, p.1.
15. Ibid. p.11.
16. Ibid., p.12.
17. Partha Mitter, *Art and Nationalism in Colonial India 1850-1922: Occidental Orientations*, Oxford, 1994.
18. Partha Mitter, *Indian Art : Oxford History of Art*, OUP, 2001, p. 157.
19. E.H. Gombrich, *A Sense of Order*, London, 1979, p.12.
20. Arjun Appadurai, *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization*, Minneapolis, 1996.
21. Elwin, ANEF, p.12.
22. Arkotong Longkumer, op cit. p.4.
23. Marcus and Fischer, *Anthropology as Cultural Critique: An Experimental Moment in the Human Sciences*, The University of Chicago Press, 1999, p.xvi.