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The Performative Power of Indian Tribal Art

Introduction

Marine Carrin and Lidia Guzy

In terms of the history of European studies of non-Western as “primitive” art, Franz Boas is often hailed as the first scholar treating “the arts of the world on an egalitarian basis” in the wake of Johann Gottfried Herder’s ideas. The essential point to be made here is that Boas’ perspective on indigenous arts was very much shaped by his own exposure to the highly specialized tradition of Northwest Coast painting and carving (Boas 1955). This existed alongside much less specialized forms of visual expression and by his museum work, which favored the analysis of a body of collected forms over observational field data about what later would become known as the “social life of things”— the interaction between humans and things that supplied changing meanings and values to visual forms (Feest 2004: 6). In India, Verrier Elwin was certainly the first to write about Adivasi art, which testifies to the importance of Adivasi creativity and imagination. The appreciation and revaluation of Adivasi cultural heritage, creativity and dignity in contemporary India demonstrates an acknowledgement of Adivasi art as an expression of indigenous knowledge.

This collection of articles does not concern various forms of Adivasi art but is organized around two thematic approaches. The first one tries to analyze the discovery of tribal art and literature by two important figures, Verrier Elwin and William George Archer, who collaborated and shared an interest in art and literature. The second theme aims at suggesting « *The Performative Power of Adivasi Art* ». In the philosophy of language and speech acts theory, *performative* utterances are sentences which not only describe a given reality, but also change the social reality they are describing. It means that Adivasi art has the capacity to express Adivasi myths, songs and culture in order to re-enchant the real world even if the latter is full of problems. Several articles of the present issue argue that Adivasi art and literature have a performative power since they allow Adivasis to express their identity not only in the terms of their own culture but also in a way that influence their position in the public sphere.

Among Adivasis, indigenous knowledge revolves around two dimensions: the emergence of a historical consciousness and a shared identity related to language and art. Further, the acknowledgement of Adivasi literature and art may contribute to their empowerment. In this perspective, Adivasi intellectuals and artists become the new shamans since they convey their artistic journey into the modern world.

The discovery of tribal art and literature

Verrier Elwin's books on tribal art constituted a true illustration of tribal creativity, of the specificities of these groups within a recently independent India (1947). He feels that a perceived "decay of tribal art" is due to the depreciative attitude of the high castes towards the tribals, Elwin "emphasizes the "functional" nature of tribal art, which often has a religious or magical purpose (Rousseleau, this volume). In other words, the definition of art offered by Elwin proved to have consequences which remain important today. In contrast Archer, as Marine Carrin shows, looks at a continuity in various art forms. For Archer, the magistrate, the most important task was to secure justice for the Santals. Archer was also a connoisseur of classical Indian painting and his admiration for different schools of painting reflect his aesthetic views rather than his anthropological preoccupations. Archer, however, developed intuitions about the contribution of tribal art to Indian art, and to its engagement with Modern Art. When he wrote his book on India and Modern Art, he was no longer interested in tribal art as such, it was more important for him to identify a common dimension capable of integrating the various expressions of Indian art and assess their contribution to modern art.

Tribal literature

Elwin's first book on Adivasi literature, *Songs of the Forest* (1935), co-written with Shamrao Hivale is a collection of 1500 Gond songs (mostly accompanying *Karma* dance) translated and condensed into poems, which he presents as the literature of the Gond composed *by and for* themselves, their "real culture" (Elwin & Hivale 1935: 33, 44). In the introduction, he sums up some myths and stories of gods and heroes, collected from the Pardhans, the bards of Gond society. Thereafter, Elwin never ceased to publish compilations of myths, from the mountains of central India to the Northeast. Archer and Elwin discussed tribal literature and they both included tribal literature, such as Baiga poetry in the articles they published in the journal *Man in India* which they edited together during the forties. The chief collections of Santal poetry that Archer published include *Hor Seren* and *Don Seren* published jointly with Gopal Gamaliel Soren in 1943. Other publications offering vernacular texts concern Oraon marriage songs and related issues and have contributed to popularize tribal literature.

Revaluating artistic practices

Lidia Guzy's article exemplifies contemporary cultural revaluation processes of Adivasi cultures in India through the integration of tribal Adivasi art into higher education in India. She takes as an example the Indira Gandhi National Tribal University (IGNTU) in Amarkantak, Madhya Pradesh, India's first tribal university established by an Act of the Parliament of India in 2007 and operational since 2008. She argues that tribal communities are respected at IGNTU as "*the custodians of Indian culture in real sense.*" The IGNTU educational project has overall social and cultural empowerment as its goal, emancipation and improvement for the socially and culturally marginalized Indian tribal students. Pradhan Gond tribal artists from the Amarkantak/Madhya Pradesh region were invited to model the University's public space in form of its open air Adivasi Art galleries and to beautify the university buildings through Adivasi tribal

paintings. The inclusion of the tribal ritual art tradition into modern architecture and design is an innovative way to include and transform tribal art, and to place it prominently in higher education. As tribal students are surrounded by their common symbolic and aesthetic imaginary, they perceive their cultural imagination and sensitivity as central for knowledge transmission. This learning experience has a powerful and empowering impact of indigenous knowledge for higher education in India.

Verrier Elwin's legacy

The publication of Elwin's 1951 book *The Tribal Art of Middle India*, created a trend in India to focus on indigenous expressions of material and immaterial culture as artistic forms which has lasted till now (Rousseleau, this volume). Elwin's work fostered an Indian wide understanding that artefacts and material culture were forms of art, leading to the emergence of 'Tribal Art' as a concept, taken up later by institutions such as the IGNTU and various Museums. The work of Archer on India and modern art show that while Picasso, Gauguin and Miro were probably influenced by the arts of Oceania, other artists, who had been exposed to Indian philosophy, showed "Indian qualities" (Carrin, this volume). But for Archer the real problem was to define an Indian Modern Art. In this perspective, he felt that Jamini Roy, who was inspired by the lines of the Kalighat painting and the style of Bengali terracotta temples had successfully infused his own work with the spirit of Bengal. In 1938, Jamini Roy's were the first Indian paintings displayed in a gallery in the British quarters of Calcutta. In the following years, his works were exhibited at prestigious galleries in London and New York City.

Shamanic artistic imaginary of eco-cosmological knowledge systems

The tribal paintings in IGNTU illustrate a playful cosmic interaction between the human, the non-human, and the other-than-human sphere such as trees, animals, rivers, mountains and spirits trees, birds, humans and trans-humans with wings. The motif of birds in the trees is a common indigenous motif related to shamanic knowledge and eco-cosmology. As Lidia Guzy shows, an important element in eco-cosmologies is the absence of a dualistic separation between humans and the surrounding landscape, such as earth, mountains, rivers or trees. "Identity" in such a vision is not centered on ego, body or gender, it is not isolated or essentialised but is ingrained in and connected with the surrounding non-human world. Trees and birds, for example, may represent deceased family members and ancestors.

Stefano Beggiora's article demonstrates the element of shamanic initiation as grounding the theme of 'kidnapping' in myth, folklore and traditional storytelling of various Adivasi communities in the Himalayas. Legends about mysterious kidnappings manifest a complex semiotic relationship of humans with imaginary creatures displaying the epistemological key of therianthropy, the mythical capacity to metamorphose man into surrounding nature, and vice versa. The creative process of imitation and transformation includes artistic and aesthetic expressions which are mainly developed by the shaman in their states of possession.

Can we conclude that Adivasi artists are the new shamans of the contemporary world? It might follow from Beggiora's discussion of possession, and of the states of ritual transition and transformation, among Himalayan shamans.

The emphasis given to poetry, oral transmission and myths should not make us forget that indigenous knowledge implies rationality, when Santals for example, make technical innovations and find that their failures are due not to a lack of rationality but rather to a context deprived of equity. Did not Elwin argue that the depreciative attitude of the high castes to tribal art was a destructive influence?

Alternatives to assimilative education

Several influent educationists have criticized the assimilative nature of Indian education (Sarangapani 2003, Xaxa 2016). From elementary school onwards Adivasi children are made to feel that ancestor's knowledge (*hapram ko vidya*) is denied at school and they find it difficult to absorb government knowledge (*sarkar vidya*) (Carrin 2015). This assimilative policy has been a threat to Adivasi culture which needs to have a certain autonomy. How are we to reconcile these two forms of knowledge? Tara Douglas' article shows how the medium of animated film may be used to induce youth from tribal communities to engage with the disappearing traditional knowledge of their grandparents. Collaboration in making such films might be used as a method to decolonize indigenous knowledge and reconnect to foundational values. Douglas asks how the interest in culturally founded local knowledge can be sustained in a situation where the younger generation must absorb new priorities and values?

Indigenous knowledge as narrative

The narratives, transmitted from generation to generation, were a tool that reaffirmed responsibility towards the protection of environment and community. At the same time, these stories were infinitely creative. From the 19th century onwards, one way to preserve these narratives was to record and translate them as both Elwin and Archer did, publishing several volumes of folk-tales and songs. Today, the animation movie seems an appropriate tool to make the young generations conscious of their indigenous heritage. In other parts of the world too, similar trends can be observed as indigenous people re-appropriate indigenous knowledge (De la Cadena and Storn 2007). When art is sustained by narrative and interiorized as such it becomes easier to resist the intense commercialization which often undermines the value of tribal art.

Tribal Art and the integration of sanitation

Currently, there is increasing interest in tribal art as a way to integrate and to forge acceptance of new governmental sanitation programs such as the Swacch Bharat mission. Radhika Borde and Josef Novotný show in their article how the aesthetisation of toilets with tribal art motifs is used to foster local acceptance of modern toilets among villagers. Borde and Novotný argue that the campaign to encourage tribal art on toilets in Jharkhand links cultural identities with modern forms of sanitation and hygiene. Both also point out that various tribal artists and intellectuals feel that this official use of tribal art alters its true meaning. Perhaps tribal societies are not ready to accept the instrumentalisation of their art for new purposes, even if sanitation as such is thought commendable. The real problem seems that the use of tribal art has not been discussed with the Adivasi themselves. As Radhika Borde and Josef Novotný write: "The assumption behind such interventions is that by linking ideas of quality, aesthetics, and social status, with toilet improvement, toilet usage would be encouraged". This raises an

important question: is it possible to use indigenous knowledge to plan sanitation or other strategies? These strategies are predicated on colonial and neo-colonial ethnic stereotypes: at times ‘the indigenous’ denotes a reluctant subject of the nation-state, a primitive mindlessly opposing the ‘modernising’ corporate projects; at the same time, it represents a pristine innocence, an antithesis to the ‘corrupting’ urban life. Adivasis from various indigenous communities in India, have been a victim of such reductionism. Indigenous knowledge, today, stands as a cosmic vision, inspired by art and literacy, to oppose dispossession and loss. But this knowledge, reinvented and promoted by the Adivasi elite, cannot in itself prevent national and international capital from appropriating the lands of the tribal peasants. Indigenous knowledge to express its creativity needs a context of equity.

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