

## **William Archer: Aesthete, Ethnographer and Administrator**

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### **Abstract**

While it is crucial to recover Archer from the margins of present day anthropology and study his work on the Santals, it is also important to understand his shift from being an administrative officer to become a historian of art and a curator of Victoria and Albert Museum. Certainly, this shift was a way to survive when he quit the colonial service. The books and unpublished papers written by Archer concern various fields of “tribal” or “folk art” from the sculptures of the Ahir, to the discovery of Madhubani and Kalighat paintings. I analyze his unpublished papers now at the British Library, written in the late thirties and the forties, as well as the testimony of his wife Mildred who shared his adventures and became a curator at the Indian Office Library. I point out the different shades of opinion reflected in his works as he strove to define his image of the Santals and to assert the status of tribal art. But Archer was also a socialist who tried to improve the colonial system of justice where the Adivasi were often victims.

**Key words:** William and Mildred Archer, Santals, tribal art, Indian paintings Adivasi literature, Santal justice

William Archer was an aesthete who developed a passion for Indian art while serving in India as an officer in the Indian Civil Service. He spent his spare time doing anthropological fieldwork and he learned the Santali language. Archer’s developed a knowledge of various schools of Indian painting and contributed greatly to the discovery of Indian folk art. Rural India proved vital as a stimulus to his interests. When on tour as an officer, Archer found himself excited by the indigenous images of Birr Kuar, the tiger god of the Ahirs. These sculptures set up in the remote Indian countryside reminded him of African art and of modern European works. Later the symbolic imagery of Oraon folk-songs (*The Blue Grove*, 1940) seemed to offer a remarkable parallel to Western modern poetry. While in India, Archer developed a love and knowledge of Indian

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culture, including poetry, and art. He also developed a deep knowledge of the Santals (*The Hill of Flutes*, 1974). Like his friend Verrier Elwin, Archer had a humanistic approach to the tribal world which helped him to acknowledge the beauty and creativity of tribal art. He was certainly a precursor in linking Indian tribal art with modern art. But Archer was also deeply engaged in ameliorating the life of the tribals and, like Verrier Elwin, he thought that anthropology should further human welfare. This is why as a magistrate he tried to have tribal laws acknowledged by the colonial courts.

William George Archer was born on February 1907 and studied history at Emmanuel College at Cambridge, then Indian history and law at the School of Oriental Studies in London. He served in the Indian Civil Service in Bihar from 1931 to 1947, when India gained Independence. His roles included the charge of District Magistrate and Superintendent of the Census. He was also additional Commissioner in the Naga Hills from 1946 to 1948. In the summer of 1934, while returning home from India on sick leave, he married the sister of one of his friends, Mildred Agnès Bell, who returned to India with him. The couple had two children while in India, shared socialist ideas and a belief that India must become independent.

After the family's return to England, they lived on Provost road, Primrose hill in North London. Archer served as Keeper of the Indian section of the *Victoria and Albert Museum* from 1949 to 1959. In the 1950s and 60s, Archer presented arts programs on BBC television, as part of the series *Monitor*. He published extensively on Indian paintings. His wife Mildred shared his passion for Indian painting and became a curator of drawings at the Indian Office Library in London.

Archer received the Order of the British Empire in 1948 and he was awarded honorary doctorates by Punjab University and Guru Nanak University for his work on Sikh painting. He received the *Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain and Ireland's* Burton Memorial Medal. He died in March 1979. His wife Mildred also published extensively on Indian art.

The Archer were an outstanding couple, free of the prejudices of their time, influenced by socialist ideas and in favor of India's independence. For these reasons, the work of William Archer deserves special attention. I propose to analyze some of Archer's unpublished papers at the India Office Library (now at the British Library) in London, written in the late thirties and forties, and to point out the different shades of opinion reflected in his works, as he strove to define his image of the Santals and that of the "tribal".

Archer, who was a great friend of Verrier Elwin, sympathized deeply with the Santals and with the "Indian approach" of anthropologists such as Sarat Chandra Roy, who published a series of monographs on adivasi populations between 1915 and 1937. I will examine some aspects of the correspondence between Archer and Elwin which concerns the publication of the Indian journal *Man in India* to show how Archer gradually became an ethnographer. In a larger context, I will also show how Archer was deeply moved by the Santal aesthetic and hedonistic way of life, until he felt the urge to dissociate himself from the colonial enterprise. While it is crucial to recover Archer from the margins of present day anthropology and study his work on the Santals, it is also important to understand his shift from being a British administrative officer to become a historian of art and a curator at *Victoria and Albert Museum*. Certainly, this shift was a way to survive when he could no longer represent colonial authority in India.

I argue that Archer's personality, as reflected in his unpublished material, forms an important background for understanding the paradoxes of an author who shared his passions between his aesthetic approach to Santal beauty and at the same time was perfectly aware of his role as a mediator between the Santals and the colonial authorities. In a larger context, I argue that Archer's ideas need to be located within a historical context, since his representations of the Santal reflect his changing experience of different worlds: his camps in the Santal Parganas, his posting in Patna where he had to suppress an uprising, and finally his career as curator of the *Victoria and Albert Museum*. Still, if Archer thought, in the beginning of his career, that ethnography could be useful in colonial administration, he gradually became aware of the importance of anthropology as a resource to promote human welfare. This understanding made him feel the necessity of developing a humanistic approach, which could contribute to the elaboration of a qualitative anthropology, as opposed to the quantitative collection of ethnographic data, which characterized Census operations.

Unlike many of his contemporaries, Archer engaged his own sensitivity in his ethnographic quest, and his unpublished papers reflect both the contradictions of the time and his own dilemma, when trapped in his role as an administrator and, when, later, he escaped to the world of art. I will describe how he seems to have been influenced, during his youth, by the Bloomsbury group<sup>2</sup> which formed around Virginia Woolf, and which contributed to diffuse *avant garde* ideas in art and literature.

### **The influence of the Bloomsbury group**

Drawn together in part by the hugely influential philosophy of G.E. Moore, the 'Bloomsberries' embraced a culture of sexual equality and freedom, and of lively intellectual debate, largely at odds with their strict Victorian upbringing. The heady atmosphere of openness, experiment and intellect produced some of the most significant statements in English modernism: from Strachey's<sup>3</sup> *Eminent Victorians* and Keynes's *Economic Consequences of the Peace*, to Virginia Woolf's *Mrs Dalloway* and Vanessa Bell<sup>4</sup> and Duncan Grant's<sup>5</sup> paintings. Influential in everything from art and literature to politics, the group became the focus of intense dislike in the post-war period, when it came to be seen as elitist and self-conscious. While all members of the Bloomsbury group were in one way or another based in London, they met regularly at their various homes in the South Downs. As their attachment to the Sussex landscape attests, the group was profoundly invested in the English countryside. As a student of law and history in Cambridge, Archer had contacts with members of the Bloomsbury group, who generally rejected the socially exclusive upper middle-class world to which their parents had belonged.

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<sup>2</sup> The Bloomsbury group was a circle of artists, writers and intellectuals including Virginia Woolf, her sister Vanessa Bell, their brother Toby Stephen, Clive Bell, Leonard Woolf, Lytton Strachey, and Saxon Sydney-Turner. E.M. Forster, John Maynard Keynes, Duncan Grant and Roger Fry also became prominent members of the group from around 1910.

<sup>3</sup> Lytton Strachey (1880-1932) was one of the most eminent Edwardians and a writer of wit and charm.

<sup>4</sup> Vanessa Bell (1879-1921) - the elder sister of Virginia Woolf-was a post impressionist painter.

<sup>5</sup> Duncan Grant (1885\_1978) was a British painter and art designer.

### **A couple of socialist convictions**

Having passed the Indian Civil Service Examination, Archer - Bill to his family and friends - spent a year as probationer at the School of Oriental Studies, London. Before departing for India in 1931, he was engaged to Mildred Bell, the sister of one of his best friends at Cambridge. Mildred, who was the daughter of a teacher, had studied history in Oxford and became an active member of the University Labour club, the most flourishing of the student societies during the depression years. Sharing Bill's socialist convictions, she was among the students who turned out at Gloucester Green to feed the passing Jarrow marchers<sup>6</sup>.

After a first trip to India, William Archer was back in England in 1934, invalid from a head stroke. This allowed him to marry Mildred in July, and later they sailed for India. Archer's first posting in Bihar was in Southern Ranchi District: later he was moved to Purnea in the North of Bihar. As a magistrate who had internalized some of the precepts of British governance, Archer wanted to be an enlightened officer, and he did not spare his time and efforts to understand Santal "laws and customs". Archer also brought his passion for poetry and interest in art to his administrative career in Bihar, which lasted sixteen years - from 1931 to 1946.

I shall briefly describe the different periods of the Archers' life in India before exploring some aspects of Bill's personality and passions as they emerged from his intellectual encounters and fieldwork experience. I argue that Archer's personality, as reflected in his unpublished material, forms an important background for understanding the paradoxes of an author who shares his passions between his aesthetic approach to Santal beauty as shown in his book *The Hill of Flutes* (1974) ) and his acute awareness of his role as a mediator between the Santals and the colonial authorities. We may appreciate the way he functioned in this role from his book *Santal Justice* (1984) which relates many court cases, which he presided during his posting in Santal Parganas. Before following Archer's travels in Bihar, I will describe briefly how his unpublished papers are organized.

### **The Archer papers at the British Library**

The Archer papers in the British Library are classified broadly, but not completely, according to chronology. I shall first describe how the material from 1932 to 1946 is organized, and reflect on Archer's intellectual activity during this period, before I engage with developments which express his ideas on "tribal art and aesthetic". The first papers relating to Archer stem from the time when he was a district officer in Bihar, from 1932 to 1939, and include notes and reports on agrarian unrest in Bihar. There are notes on the Thana Bhagat movement, which was spreading among the Oraon<sup>7</sup> at the time, and a Kharia manifesto, which offers us one version of the Kharia myth of origin, as well as notes on various castes and a very interesting report on agrarian trouble in Purnea.

The second section of the Archer archives include various papers from 1939 onwards, dealing with tribal dance, as well as notes on the Ahirs, which Archer would use later for his book *The Vertical Man* (1947). The first group relates to the various dances

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<sup>6</sup> The Jarrow March of 5-31 October, also known as the Jarrow Crusade was an organized protest against the unemployment and poverty suffered in the Tyneside town of Jarrow during the 1930s.

<sup>7</sup>The Tana Bhagat Movement (1914-1919) was a tribal uprising of a section of the Tana Bhagats and Oraons under the leadership of Jatra Oraon, see Sangeeta Dasgupta (1999).

performed by the Oraons, the Hos and the Santals, and include photographs and drawings to catch the various steps and movements. These visual documents were to guide Archer towards his aesthetic approach to the “tribal body”, a body in movement – ideas which were quite probably influenced by the aesthetic of the sculptor Henry Moore. The drawings certainly contributed to sharpen Archer’s curiosity, which led him to discover Ahir sculpture as well as Madhubani and Kalighat painting. We should note that Archer later took an interest in Punjab and Sikh painting and wrote, with Robert Melville, an Essay for the catalogue of the exhibition “40000 years of Modern Art, a comparison of Primitive and Modern’ held in London in 1948.

Some papers dated 1940 concern general notes from anthropological texts for the preparation of the 1941 Census, which was never published, as well as correspondence between Archer and a certain number of administrators about forest conservation and the welfare of tribal people (1940/11). We also find here earlier notes and reports on agrarian unrest in Bihar, and on Millenarian Movements (1935/1). The documents relating to Archer’s tenure as Deputy Commissioner in Dumka (1942-1945) mostly concern Santal law and justice, and these have been published in his book *Santal Law and Justice* (1984) – but not his correspondence with the officers of the Government of Bihar, when he attempted to make the Government acknowledge Santal law. I will not deal here with the diary and papers Archer wrote from the Naga Hills, where he was Additional Deputy Commissioner at Mokokchung (1946-48). These papers concern Archer’s official activities in the Naga Hills, and of self-determination of the Nagas after Indian Independence<sup>8</sup>.

The sources for Archer’s biography are his own autobiographical account, later compiled by Mildred Archer and published under the title, *India Served and Observed* (1994), and a limited series of biographies of various men who served in India<sup>9</sup>.

The Archers were generally happier in the company of Indians, whether tribal villagers or urban intellectuals, than when socialising in the British clubs. They especially enjoyed the cold weather tours, where they walked through the district from camp to camp, meeting the villagers and hearing their grievances.

### **How Archer become an ethnographer**

Archer was first exposed to the tribal world when he encountered the Oraon in 1931. He had a village base in Ormanji, usually camping there for ten days in a month, while the rest of the time he moved around in the countryside. “The fields were being mapped for revenue purpose, their owner’s names recorded, and I had to ride across the uplands to check the survey work and to settle disputes” (Archer and Archer 1994: 16). “It was after dark that I knew the countryside was Oraon. The drums would start. At first, it was a single drum, slowly and firmly beating like a thin command, and then I could see girls and boys gathering to sing and dance”. At night, then, Archer was no longer the district officer, but became an ethnographer, noting down the Oraon songs he published later in his book *The Blue Grove* (1940), where he focuses on the marriage songs. Unlike many of his contemporaries, Archer engaged his own sensitivity in his ethnographic quest, and

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<sup>8</sup> The same collection includes interesting notes on Naga culture and art which deserve another study.

<sup>9</sup> I also met Mildred Archer at the British Library in the late seventies and she showed me some of the paintings of the Archer’s collection.

his unpublished papers reflect both the contradictions of the time and his own dilemma, trapped in his role as administrator from which he later escaped to the world of art.

### **The Wooden sculptures and ballads of the Ahir**

Archer's first posting, in the rural district of Arrah—now Sahabad—awakened his interest in the cult of Birnath, the god worshipped by the pastoral Ahir. He continued to investigate the cult until 1939, when he visited the entire Ahir belt lying across the Ganga as well as the Chotanagpur and Sahabad forests, accompanied by capable assistants. He studied the various regional styles of Ahir sculpture and collected information about the Birnath cult, which he published in his book *The Vertical Man* (1947).

This deity worshipped by the Ahirs is a shepherd hero, Bir Kuar, who according to different versions of the myth is tragically killed by witches, led by his own sister, since he has surprised them naked in the Jungle, and stolen their clothes. Fearing a scandal, they decide to kill him. He quarrels with his sister, who curses him: He will be eaten by a tiger.

Bir Kuar becomes the protector of the buffalos, and his cult guarantees the prosperity of the caste members, who are herdsmen. In some versions, Bir Kuar neglects his wife since he is in love with his pet buffalo, Parae. In the epic, Birnath plays amorously with Parae, who finally carries him home when he is dying. We understand that Birnath becomes the god of the buffalos because he is obsessed with them.

Each village has its own version of the ballad, and its own sculptures, which are generally made by local artisans. The wife of Bir Kuar, who committed *sati* by mounting the funeral pyre of her husband, receives a *sati* stone. Despite the diversity of ballads and images, notes Archer, "the production of images in wood and stones does not result in sculptural anarchy, the sense of what is traditional determines both the word and stone carving." The carpenter (*barhi*) carves the wood while the mason (*gonr*) extracts a stone in the hills and carves it. Both artisans, says Archer, make a new image each time, "not by any reference to existing images but by his sense of family formula". The shape is quite simple with a rectangle for the torso, with an iron T, square eyes and mouth, and a smiling expression. The sense of what is traditional determines both the wood and the stone carving, but what fascinates Archer is that "their art is an expression of a private sensibility". Still, he adds, "they do not consciously explore their minds" and "unconsciousness of art makes it natural". Archer finally shows that the carpenter or mason who carves the image, merges with Birnath through prayer (Archer 1947).

Archer argues that Birnath is above all a god of fertility, and he goes on to show that Bir Kuar's identity merges with Krishna: they share the same country, and the Bir Kuar's sister is sometimes called Dewaki, the name of Krishna's mother.

The discovery of the Bir Kuar sculptures certainly inspired Archer's ideas on "primitive art" which, he holds, is dominated by an unconscious inspiration, and by the identification of the artist with a divine figure. He follows the same line of thinking, regarding devotional poetry, when writing *The loves of Krishna* in 1957.

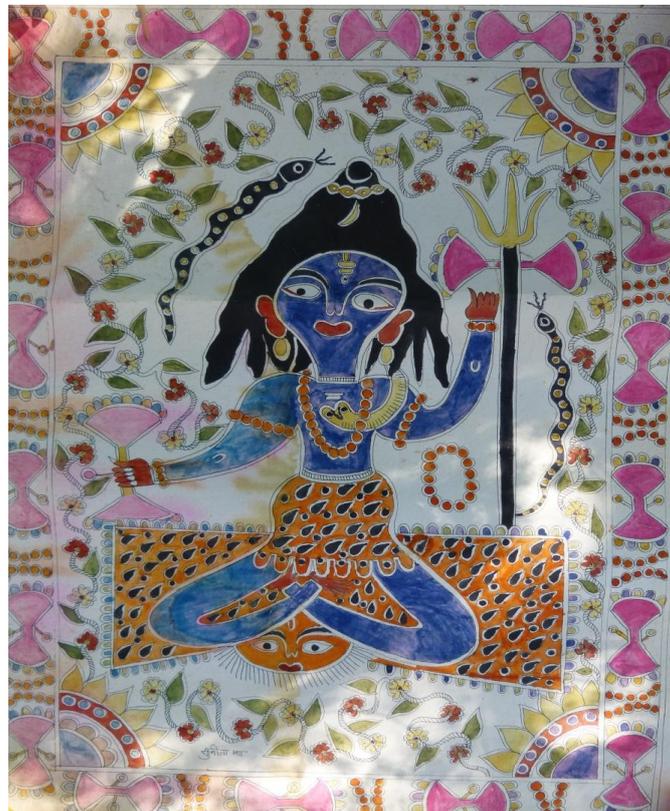
### **Archer as sub divisional officer in Madhubani**

At the end of 1933, Archer was posted across the Ganges to Madhubani, a subdivision of Darbhanga District in North Bihar known in medieval times as Mithila.

He was responsible for law and order, heard complaints, dealt with petitions, and inspected roads, schools, and hospitals. He was helped by an Assistant Superintendent of Police who commanded the inspectors and who saw to it that all major crime was investigated.

Archer also had to supervise the revenue work. Every two weeks he had to send the District Officer “A Fortnightly Confidential Report” which briefly stated the state of the crops and mentioned any political development. Once a month, he met with the District Officer, and so returned to the wider world where bridge and polo were played, and where English people were discussing news from England.

Archer spoke Hindi and says about his first year “I settled down, an Indian among Indians”. Since Maithili Brahmins and Kayasthas were clever people, adept at law and litigation, Archer had to deal with a lot of individual cases, trying always to find an amicable settlement. It is typical of Archer to admit that “I did not see myself as a magistrate or a judge. I loathed the laborious business of writing out in my own hand the evidence. I loathed still more the time-wasting business of writing out a well-argued judgment” (Archer and Archer 1994: 20).



A Madhubani painting showing the god Shiva (Collection Marine Carrin)

Archer tells us how he discovered the art of Madhubani, “I had ridden out one evening to a village close to Madhubani itself and chanced upon a small white temple. (..) The *mahant* (priest) invited me to see the image (...) It was a black stone dressed in doll-like clothes”. Later, after the earthquake of January 1934, Archer went to Benipatti village to assess the damage: “the houses had been severely damaged yet not so damaged that none were standing. I could see beyond the courtyards into some of the inner rooms; what I saw took my breath away: I saw that the walls were covered with brilliantly painted murals. What I was seeing was a marriage chamber, a *kobhar*. It was

here that the bride and bridegroom would be espoused and everything painted was designed to bring them prosperity, good fortune and fertility” (Archer and Archer 1994: 21).

Hélène Fleury writes, from a recent study of Mithila painting: “Among the Kayastha community whose women also paint, the term *kobbar*, alludes to the central motive of this painting, the *puren*, a stylistic representation of a lotus leaf accompanied by a bamboo stalk” (2003). The *kobbar* paintings are supposed to enhance the couple’s fertility. Comparing the Brahmin and the Kayastha murals, Archer remarks: “The style of their murals was quite distinct. It presupposed the same liberties, the same repudiation of truth to natural appearances, the same determination to project a forceful idea of a subject rather than a factual record. But in contrast to Brahmins, Kayastha women were vehement - they portrayed their main subject with shrill boldness, with savage forcefulness”. In one house, he adds, ‘I was astonished to see a figure of a bride, her veil a robust triangle, her face a single huge eye. If Maithil Brahmin murals resembled Miro or Klee, here was Picasso naked and unshamed” (Archer and Archer 1994:21).

Archer began to collect Mithila paintings long before they were to become commercialized, and published an article on these paintings later, in *Marg* (1949), where he underlined the formal distortions found in these paintings, which reminded him of Miro and Picasso. These rapprochements were precursor and show how Archer already had contemporary art in mind when he looked at tribal art.

### **Archer as Census Superintendent in Hazaribagh (1939-1941)**

In 1939, Archer was moved to Hazaribagh, where he was to direct the Bihar Census. To be a Census Superintendent was a post that Archer had always coveted, since he knew it would allow him to tour the whole province and gain considerable knowledge of the great variety of castes and cultures in Bihar. But it proved a difficult task: the Santals had boycotted previous Census operations. Their resistance had led to the Kherwar movement from 1871 onwards in Hazaribagh, where the Saph Hor, a Hinduized Santal movement led by Bhagrit and Dubia Gossain, led to serious agitation. Before 1900, the Kherwar feared that the Census was meant to prepare the deportation of the local populations to Afghanistan and to Assam. A similar agitation arose in the late thirties (Carrin and Tambs-Lyche 2008).

During this period, however, Archer started to collect anthropological material, especially Oraon, Ho, and Kharia poetry, which was published in vernacular languages<sup>10</sup>. During his tours, he was also able to return to Mithila, to continue his work on the paintings and build a collection, which was sent to the *India Office Library*. The Census brought Bill in touch with other scholars, such as the ICS officer George Grigson who was working on the Marias of Bastar in the Central Provinces, and Christoph von Fürer-Haimendorf who had been researching intensively on the Nagas, as well as Philip Mills<sup>11</sup> and James Henry Hutton.<sup>12</sup> Who had both been Deputy Commissioners in the Naga Hills, and had written about the people and their culture.

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<sup>10</sup> See “Santal Studies”.

<sup>11</sup> James Philip Mills joined the Indian Civil Service in 1913 and was posted to Assam Province. During the First World War he was assigned to the Naga Hill district, where he was appointed subdivisional officer to the Mokochung subdivision. He published *The Lhota Nagas* in 1922.

<sup>12</sup> James Henry Hutton joined the Indian Civil Service in 1909 and served as the District Commissioner based at Kohima in Nagaland until 1935. Later appointed to the William Wyse Chair of Social

Regarding the Census, Archer was disappointed when, as an economy measure in wartime, it was decided not to publish a full Census Report but only the population statistics. When Bill heard, in 1940, that with the abrogation of the Census he was to be posted in Patna, he had unhappy memories of his arrival in India in 1931. Patna reminded him of E.M Forster's description of it, in a *Passage to India*, as a symbol of British aloofness.

### **Patna as an intellectual and artistic milieu**

But the posting in Patna was to prove a significant stage in the Archers' life, introducing them to sophisticated Indian art through meeting several Indian collectors, who became their friends. Raj Krishna Dasara of Benares came to deliver a lecture on Indian painting; he became a great friend and later, after Independence, the Archers stayed with him in Benares, meeting his friends from the nearby University who would gather in Raj Krishna's house discussing Indian art every evening. Another art connoisseur was Gobi Krishna Kanuri who owned one of the greatest collections of Indian miniatures. He introduced the Archers to Sanskrit and Hindi poetry, which he would recite and translate while showing the paintings. They were spending much time in Gobi's house in Benares, on the bank of the river, looking at miniatures. Later, Gobi came regularly to England for medical treatment, and stayed with the Archers.

Another great attraction in Patna was the Museum, which had an interesting collection of art: classical Indian sculpture, and terracotta figures. There was also the Kuda Bash Library which owned a collection of Arabic and Persian manuscripts.

In Patna, Archer met intellectuals who contributed to sharpen his knowledge of Indian art and literature. Fazlur Rahman, a brilliant young professor of English at Patna University, would discuss English poetry with Bill. They also met Congress politicians such as Rajendra Prasad (who later became the first president of India) and Dr. Mahmud, who had been a friend of E.M. Forster. The latter told Archer that he owed Mahmud a lot for the planning of his novel, for all that Mahmud had told him about life in Bihar in the old days.

But above all, the posting in Patna led the Archers to meet P.C. Manuk, the leading barrister in Patna, who possessed one of the finest collections of Indian miniatures. Manuk employed an old painter, Ishwari Prasad (born c.1870), who had come to Patna from Murshidabad. He became a friend of the Archers. Ishwari also related his family's memories of Sir Charles d'Oyly, a company servant (1781-1845) who was the opium agent at Patna from 1821 to 1831<sup>13</sup>. When Bill retired in 1947, he purchased Ishwari's collection of paintings, which was donated to the Victoria and Albert Museum and to the India Office Library. Mildred later wrote a book on Ishwari's paintings. Jalan, an "orthodox" businessman also had a collection and spent evenings discussing the art of miniatures with the Archer. These encounters helped the Archers start their collection of Indian miniatures, along with their collections of folk and tribal paintings.

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Anthropology at the University of Cambridge. He published *The Angami Nagas* with some notes on neighbouring tribes in 1921.

<sup>13</sup> Opium exports were important in financing the cost of imperialism, but British policies were designed to minimize domestic consumption of opium in India. The East India Company's Regulation 13 of 1816 was designed to produce "maximum revenue with minimum consumption" (Sarah Deming 2011).

### Archer and Elwin

Archer's best friend was certainly Verrier Elwin. Archer had heard a lot about Elwin and had probably read some of Elwin's pamphlets. A major part of Archer and Elwin's correspondence at the India Office Collections concerns the publication of the Indian anthropological journal, *Man in India*. In 1935, the anthropologist Sarat Chandra Roy, then editor of *Man in India*, whom they had met in Ranchi, had just passed away. Archer and Elwin were invited by Roy's family to undertake the joint editorship of the journal, a job which they continued until 1946.

This was the beginning of an exhilarating partnership. Bill<sup>14</sup> was a great admirer of Elwin's work and now they had a chance to meet and to work together regularly, a collaboration which enriched the writing of them both. Archer had been attracted by Elwin's "unconventional approach to life" though he was somewhat more moderate than Elwin in criticizing the establishment. Elwin had done brilliantly at Oxford, he was a don at Merton College, took holy orders and then went to India to work for the Christa Seva Sangh (An Anglican High Church Missionary Society). After a spell in Bombay, he joined Mahatma Gandhi at his *ashram*. He then worked among the tribal people but instead of converting them, he was "converted by them" and shed his Holy Orders; "gradually, he moved into the field of anthropology" (Guha 1999: 89).

The friendship was reciprocal and Elwin found great solace on many occasions in the company of the Archers. They welcomed his marriage with Kosi, a Gond woman in 1941, a marriage which shocked Elwin's mother and family. Later, when Elwin felt that the marriage was not working any more, he again made Archer his confidant when he felt he should divorce Kosi in 1949. Intellectual exchanges between Elwin and Archer included English poetry, tribal art, and literature. If Archer and Elwin had opposing views regarding tribal art, they shared the same engagement with tribal people, as is evident from their collaboration on *Man in India*.

### The venture of Man in India

In 1932, Verrier Elwin and the Archers went to meet Sarat Chandra Roy who was certainly the most prominent anthropologist working in Bihar by the time. The three of them went on a tour of Chotanagpur and Elwin was inspired to study the Agraria, a tribe of iron smelters of the Central Provinces. They reminded him of the Asurs of Hazaribagh who shared the same occupation. Elwin's book on the Agraria was completed in 1940. The book tells us how the Agraria, who had to pay heavy taxes on their furnaces, were forced to migrate to regions where taxes were lower, in order to be able to survive from their craft.

The correspondence regarding *Man in India* includes notes on the preparation of future issues<sup>15</sup> of the journal, as well as the question of advertising the Journal to ensure its success and make it better known. Some of the themes chosen for special issues (such as the one on aboriginal crime<sup>16</sup>) were clearly aimed at attracting readers. They discussed

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<sup>14</sup> Archer was called Bill by his family and friends.

<sup>15</sup> The notes concerning future issues of *Man in India* include: 1943 1.2. Marriage and sex, 3. Aboriginal Crime, IV Riddles, Proverbs and Omens. 1944 1. Dances. 2. General subjects- 3. Village art in India. IV The aboriginal child.

<sup>16</sup> It was the time when Verrier Elwin wrote *Maria Murder and Suicide*

the idea of an issue on the Juang, and the idea of a “Crime issue”. “I don’t think there will be a lack of material on crime”, Elwin writes, in March 1943. Then, on 17 December 1943, regarding “The criminal aboriginal”: “what I want is statistic of every kind of crime committed by aborigines in the last ten or twenty years arranged, if possible, according to tribes. Secondly, I want copies of all judgments available”. Elwin was influenced by Sullivan’s recent book *Crime and Insanity* which he had reviewed in JRAS. He finally discovered that one cause for Maria crime was witchcraft, “the tribals believing it right and proper to kill a witch or a sorcerer who disturbed the social order through magic and spells” (Ramachandra Guha 1999: 145).<sup>17</sup>

The correspondence also shows us how Elwin struggled to get his books published or reviewed: for example, on 23 February 1942, Elwin wants a review of his book on the Agraria, and alludes to the way Roy has advertised his books. On 11 February 1943, Elwin writes that he is missing his son Kumar and his wife Koisii, but we understand that he is busy preparing the *ghotul* manuscript, which concerns the Muria and their youth dormitory. That year, Elwin became co-President of the *Anthropological Section of the Asiatic Society* in Calcutta with Fürer-Haimendorf, who had already done extensive field-work among the Nagas, the Gond, the Chenchus and other tribes, In 1943, Archer notes that Haimendorf has promised a contribution on Konyak marriage, and that he plans to write a review on of Layard Stone’s ‘Men of Malekula’ and a review of Ruth Benedict’s book on “Race”.

### The poetry project

Elwin mentions the project of an anthology of marriage ‘sermons’ and dialogues for *Man in India*, which was published jointly by Archer and Elwin in 1943. Elwin also writes of ‘his folk-songs and folk-tales book’, *The Folk-tales of Mahakoshal* (1944) which presents 150 folk-tales collected from the Central Provinces by Elwin and by his friend and assistant Shamro Hivale. The tales offer numerous stories of love and adventure where the search for the beloved is conducted in the underworld as well as on earth, while other narratives describe the dangers of polygamy.

In April 1943, Verrier thanks Archer for having written on Baiga poetry and comments: “It will be a landmark in the study of Indian Folk poetry... It will be a revelation for many people”. The editors’ concern for Indian poetry also includes previous work done on Indian folk epics. For example, Elwin writes about Hislop’s recording of Lingo legends, translated by R. Temple in 1866<sup>18</sup>. Similarly, Elwin criticizes Forsyth for putting the story of Lingo in verse. Both friends feel it is urgent to record oral literature from wandering minstrels such as the Ojhas, Davar, Bhima, and Badi. In Chhattisgarh, they remark, there is Dewar, the beautiful ballad of Rasalu Kuar. The friends collaborate in publishing several short articles on the Santal Rebellion songs (1945).

It is interesting to note how they both feel that poetry is particularly important during wartime: “Do you not see that freedom is won by men who live, who are stirred to victory by the pure joy of songs, that poetry is itself freedom and triumph?” They search

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<sup>17</sup> Later on, Archer questioned the recrudescence of witchcraft affairs and related them to land-tenure problems since wealthy widows having some land were often accused of being witches by their family members.

<sup>18</sup> Hislop

for good Indian writers: Elwin mentions to Archer several books on Santal, Ho, and Kharia poetry, all published in the vernacular. Here, the songs and poems that Archer published in 'the Hill of Flutes' form an exception.

A letter from Elwin, dated 31 May 1943, mentions that the Hindi version of his book *Mahakoshal Hills* is coming out and that he wants the betrothal dialogue of Archer for the marriage issue. This interest in poetry and folk literature marks Archer's contributions to *Man in India*, which include *An Anthology of Indian Marriage sermons* (1943), *Bethrothal Dialogues* (1943), *An Indian Riddle book* and *More Santal songs* (1944), *Folk-Tales in Tribal India* (1944) and songs *Santal Rebellion songs*.

### **Marriage, love and sexuality**

Another important theme is marriage, love and sexuality, since both Archer and Elwin were excited by what they call "the Freudian stuff". Both editors had collected dreams during their field-work, and both were interested in "Freudian themes" such as the Vagina Dentata, on which Elwin was preparing an article.

The idea was to be "modern" or "Freudian" and perhaps to shock some of their collaborators. Blatantly sexual jokes punctuate a correspondence where scientific concerns alternate with struggles to cover the cost of publishing. Behind these jokes, we can feel that Elwin and Archer tried to forget the stuffy atmosphere of colonial India, where Victorian prudery prevailed. Their interest for Freud also explains why they see tribal love as free from Judeo-Christian prejudices. But we do not know if they read Freud's works in relation to their anthropological writing.

The correspondence about *Man in India* reflects the agenda of the editors who are anxious to get the right connections. On 10 July 1943, Elwin writes: "Thanks, Bill, for an excellent review of the Agraria". Elwin proposes to go to Hyderabad to see Grigson and Haimendorf in the first week of October, and that he should come to Dumka and stay for a short while in a Santal village. He asks Archer to spend a few days in Bombay in September to contact Oxford University Press, and to give a talk on Folk Poetry. "You could also get in touch with the Times of India people" - postscript: "you must widen your article".

It is clear that the publication of *Man in India* stimulates the enthusiasm of both Archer and Elwin and offer them the opportunity to correspond with anthropologists, archaeologists and other learned figures of their time in India and abroad.

During the forties, Elwin is busy preparing his manuscript on *Art of Tribal India*. He writes: "I am very keen on masks, carved doors and pillars and wall painting", and asks Archer to send him some documentation. We do not have Archer's answer but we know that he did not really share Elwin's enthusiasm for the art of tribal India. Archer does not distinguish tribal art per se and rather considers various artistic productions such as Madhubani or Santal paintings as folk art. Elwin conceived his book *The Tribal Art of Middle India* (1950) as an illustration of tribal creativity though he was aware of the decay of the tribal art of Central India that he attributed to the depreciative attitude of the high castes towards the tribals (Rousseleau, this volume). Archer, on the other hand, was more interested in comparing tribal with modern Art, and in his book *India and Modern Art* (1959) he discusses how India contributed to inspire Modern Art.

### Supporting *Man in India*

To support the journal, they appeal for subscriptions from potential readers, such as ICS officers, learned people, missionaries, or the Hindu bourgeoisie. But during wartime it was hard even for the contributions to reach them, since the mail and other communications were frequently troubled.

To avoid isolation they try to find correspondents in Britain, and among the members of the American Oriental Society in America. We understand that Archer and Elwin work on different fronts for their Journal, trying to promote their favorite themes on poetry combined with Freudian ideas, along with other classical anthropological themes such as marriage or sacrifice.

From time to time, Elwin and Archer underline, in their correspondence, the difficulty of keeping a certain academic standard. *Man in India* has a bad reputation, so people don't send their 'stuff'. One may suspect that the more conservative readers were somewhat shocked by the unconventional stance of the editors.

We should not forget that Elwin was constantly engaged in fieldwork, while Archer was moving on his inspection tours.

### Meeting Tagore

In October 1933, Archer took a break and went to Calcutta during the *puja* holidays, where his old friend Humayun (that he had met in Cambridge) proposed he should go to Shanti Nikitan, meet Tagore and see his paintings. It was a morning after the rains, "the poet sitting outside in an easy chair, his drawing board and ink besides him and to my amazement, a copy of the second volume of a series of essays by different English writers among which D.H.Lawrence's<sup>19</sup> 'Lady Chatterley's Lover'. He adds "I suspected that Humayun must have told Rabindranath that I wrote poetry, for almost immediately we found ourselves discussing problems of obscurity, ambiguity and symbolism in modern poetry". Tagore showed Archer his pictures, and told him that he wanted to create "the form of things unknown".

Tagore started to draw and to paint when he was already sixty, under the influence of his nephew, the painter Abanindranath Tagore. When Rabindranath was writing he used to embellish some of the words of his manuscripts, creating calligraphic motives. As he began to paint, he came under the influence of the art of the Malanggan people of northern New Ireland, as well as the charm of Haida carvings from the West coast of Canada<sup>20</sup>.

Archer saw all Tagore's paintings and talked with Nandalal Bose, the principal of the local art school. Bose told him how Tagore had begun, since 1928, "to make lines" as he put it, inventing shapes without knowing what they were. Writing about Tagore's painting, later, Archer notes: "two methods were in question: the first was spontaneous and unconscious; the shapes were tall and often phallic. They possess an angular ferocity to express a kind of virile defiance. The other method was imitative..."

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<sup>19</sup> David Herbert Lawrence (1885-1930) was one of the most influential British writer of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

<sup>20</sup> When Tagore started painting he soon became very prolific and his work was exposed with success in Europe, especially in Paris and in the South of France.

### **Kalighat painting**

During the puja holiday of 1933, Humayun Kabi, who was teaching English and Philosophy at Calcutta University, and Mukul Dey, the Principal of Calcutta Art School, took their friend Archer to meet the last of the old Kalighat painters, Nibaran Chandra Ghosh. The old man had ceased to paint but he sold sixteen of his paintings to Archer, and these are now at the British Library. As Archer wrote: “With their bounding line, and brilliant color, bold linear rhythm and free water color technique, they are a sharp contrast to the delicate art of conventional Indian miniature painting. These painting represent gods and goddesses, dancing girls, courtesans, snakes, fishes, jackals, and illustrations of daily life in Bengal” (Archer and Archer 1994: 30).

“Years later in 1955, when I was writing my book *India and Modern Art*, I began to see Rabindranath’s true significance”, writes Archer. He goes on to say that Rabindranath’s paintings unconsciously bore essential Indian elements, though he had broken with the neo Bengali school of art. “It was his freedom from previous styles (...) his bold originality, which made him the first Indian artist” (Archer and Archer 1994:31). Archer bought two paintings from Tagore himself, one of them is called ‘the Bird’ and is a color ink on paper, while the second is a ‘Death Scene’, gouache and color ink and paper.

The Kalighat painting included typical scenes of the time, like the illustration of the Tarakeshwar case, a scandal which had excited the Calcutta public in 1873, when a Bengali murdered his wife after she had an affair with the Mahant (priest) of the Tarakeshwar oracular temple<sup>21</sup>. Archer (1994:28) comments these illustrations:” The drawing “expressed the disgust that orthodox Hindus felt for the corrupt temporary trends”. But when he writes *India and Modern Art*, Archer admits that he was disappointed by Kalighat painting: “there was no modern art as I understood it”; “I looked for something with the vital strength of the village art, which I had come across at Arrah and Madhubani” (Archer and Archer: 33). But Mukul Dey introduced Archer to Jamini Roy who was already painting in a modern style inspired by Kalighat line drawings<sup>22</sup>. Jamini Roy (1887-1972) was one of the most famous students of Abanindranath Tagore. Roy’s artistic originality and contribution to the emergence of modern art in India remains unquestionable, though it seems that Archer preferred Tagore’s painting since they expressed the unconscious.

### **Santal painting**

During their stay in Purnea and in Hazaribagh, the Archer collected many scrolls painted by *jadu patuas*<sup>23</sup>, a caste of artisans who come to Santal houses where a death has occurred. These artisans paint the progress of the soul of the deceased in the other world and chant his story. The *jadu patuas* offer their services to the Santals which give them some retribution. These paintings also describe mythological subjects such as “the

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<sup>21</sup> The Tarakeshwar temple, located some fifty km from Kolkata, is an oracular temple where devotees ask the god for a dream. See Morinis (1984).

<sup>22</sup> It was in fact Mukul Dey who had first drawn Jamini Roy’s attention to Kalighat painting, urging him to abandon his former academic manner.

<sup>23</sup> The term *jadu* means “magic” and *patua* “a painting” the *jadu patua* opens the eyes of the characters he paints on his scroll. The scroll is made of several pieces of paper which are sown together and immersed with the bones of the deceased. See Hadders (2001).

loves of Krishna” or “the Creation myth of the Santals”. These scrolls, painted with natural pigments can be read from bottom to top. The Archers have mentioned these scrolls as “Santal paintings” in some of their publications, especially when these scrolls have been exhibited<sup>24</sup>. Today, *patua* painting has become very popular in Shanti Nikitan and Kolkata, and they often describe rural life or even historical events, like the Santal Rebellion. Unfortunately, the commercial success of these painting has provoked the decline of their ritual usage, when the *patua* artist used to sing a story commenting the various episodes of the scroll.



A detail from a scroll made by a *Jadu patua* showing the Santal deities of the Creation myth: Maran Buru and his wife Jaher Era. (Collection Marine Carrin)



Another image of the same scroll showing Santal ancestors (*Hapram ko*) (Collection Marine Carrin)

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<sup>24</sup> See for example *Indian Miniatures and Folk-paintings from the collection of Mildred and William Archer* (exhibition catalogue) Arts Council, London 1967.

### **Other important encounters**

Other encounters with outstanding personalities contributed to forge Archer's determination to engage with tribal art and literature without neglecting his duty as a magistrate. One important encounter was missed, however. When Nehru came to Patna, Archer was not aware of the visit, but he received a protest from a messenger who gave him a slip of paper: "To the sub divisional Magistrate I wish to protest at your insulting behavior in having me followed by a police officer when I have come on purely humanitarian business" – Nehru was there for the start of the Congress Party's Relief Fund. He had already left for Muzaffarpur, leaving Archer angry and shocked... "For me he was one of the greatest Indians, (...) I even possessed his tiny pamphlet "Whither India?" He wanted India to be free but what was wrong with that? I also wanted India to be free" (p.48). First, Archer wanted to run after Nehru but then he came down, understanding that for Nehru he was just another British District officer.

Three weeks later, Gandhi announced he would come to Madhubani to address a meeting and to hold discussions in the evening.

### **In search of truth, meeting Gandhi**

Archer told one congressman that he wanted to meet Gandhi, and he was told that this would be arranged. Archer attended Gandhi's speech in Patna in January 1934. He writes that Gandhi spoke for only five minutes, and that "his gentle voice said something very slowly, very softly, very firmly", before he moved on towards the Congress office. The villagers were flocking to see Gandhi – "not only men but also women in *purdah*" and Archer felt "it was like a pilgrimage to a holy place".

Archer met Gandhi, who was spinning, and Gandhi said he had heard that Archer had done very good work. Then they discussed the earthquake and the relief work. Gandhi assured Archer that he would "ask the relief Committee to take his advice". But Archer resumes the meeting telling us: "It was not his comments that impressed me... it were rather the way he made them that touched me. He was very, very ugly. Of that there could be no doubt but he radiated love" (W. Archer and M. Archer 1994:51).

### **War and the troubles**

In 1942, the Archers experienced their most difficult time. Bill, who was in charge at the state capital of Patna, had to maintain order at a time of civil unrest: he now had to arrest Congressmen that he knew and respected. A happier time followed when Bill was transferred to the Santal Parganas, where they spent idyllic years among the Santals. But dominating the peaceful life in the Hills in 1942 were news of political trouble and war. The All India Congress Working Committee in a meeting in Allahabad in April 1942 had discussed Gandhi's draft resolution leading to the Quit India campaign. In July, however, Congress agreed to the temporary stationing of Allied troops in India, to repulse the Japanese attacks. In May, the Governor of Burma had flown to India and in June some refugees from Burma arrived in Patna.

At the beginning of August, Archer was ordered to arrest his friend, the Congress leader Rajendra Prasad (later to become the first President of India). So Archer went personally to his house and Rajendra, who was suffering from malaria, came out leaning on his arm (Archer and Archer 1994:102). As Archer had to struggle against his

Congress friends, he felt the urge wanted to dissociate himself from the colonial enterprise.

### **Santal studies**

We have seen how the Archers shared a great passion for Indian daily life, spending time in villages and meeting art connoisseurs and politicians. Archer, as an administrator, heard complaints, and he was particularly active mediating the conflicts which opposed the Santals to the landlords in the forties. Archer was Deputy Commissioner in Santal Parganas (1942-1945), and then officer of the Judicial Department to record the Santal laws (1945-1946). This brought him into close contact with the Santals.

Archer sympathized deeply with the Santals, and with the “Indian approach” of anthropologists such as S.C. Roy, who had published a series of monographs on various Adivasi populations between 1915 and 1937. Archer organized the collecting of Santal poetry (*Hor Soren, Don Soren and Hor Kudum*). His stay among the Santals provided the material for the *Hill of the Flutes: Life, Love, and Poetry in Tribal India, A Portrait of the Santals* (1974).

The book is not a traditional anthropological monograph. It does not describe the range of cultural contacts with Hindus and other peoples that the Santals have known. It does not even deal with the Santal rebellion though Archer had published an article on rebellion songs in 1945 in *Man in India*. *The Hill of flutes* tries to catch Santal sensitivity as it is expressed through poetry and songs at different stages of the life cycle. The book does not deal with material problems, such as the mode of production, the division of labor or the land-tenure; instead it focuses on such aspects of Santal life as life-cycle festivals, sex and love. It starts with a description of the ideal village, and then exposes the clan system and the world of spirits (*bongas*). The chapters on Santal love and sex remind us of Verrier Elwin’s work, though Archer is more concerned by love poetry than by actual romances.

### **Archer’s ideas on language, semantic, and translation**

The chief collections of Santal poetry include *Hor Seren* and *Don Seren* published jointly by Gopal Gamaliel Soren and Archer in 1943. *Hor seren* comprises 1676 songs which are sung at festivals and dances. *Don Seren* (love songs) include 1824 songs which are sung at weddings, as well as 129 cultivation songs.

The majority of these songs are ancestral, but it is part of the vitality of Santal poetry that new songs may be made up on the moment. There is not a special class of poet, singer or bard, and everyone takes part in composing songs. Stephen Murmu has published another volume of well-known songs which are sung at Karam and Caco chatiar (first tonsure rituals) (*Karam ar Caco Chatiar*, 1945). Archer mentions, in the *Hill of Flutes*, that he has collected *Bir Seren* songs which are sung “in the privacy of the forest (1974:344), and which the missionaries considered as obscene. These songs, sometimes called forest songs, may be divided in in two categories: those which are seductive and charming and are called lovers’ songs, and those which are coarse and considered as erotic entertainments during the hunt, when youngsters learn sexual jokes from older men.

Archer explains that the structure of Santal songs is not determined by rhyme or the number of lines but by the structure of the melody, what the Santal call a tune. He stresses that Santal poetry is very close to that of the Oraon and explains that some metaphors are quite standardized: for example: girls are called peacocks, children “parrots”, mothers “milk trees” boys “flutes”, and so on<sup>25</sup>.

When working on poetry Archer modeled himself on Arthur Waley, the well-known translator of Chinese poetry, who was teaching Chinese in London, and who later was to write the foreword to Archer’s collection of Oraon poetry, *The Blue Grove*. “In translating from the Chinese Arthur Waley was faced with problems similar with those found of Indian languages”. Archer also tells us that he was inspired by Elwin’s *Songs of the Forest*, a collection published by Elwin and Shamro Hivale in 1935. On translations, Archer writes: “The most evident is that the translation should itself be a poem, but it should also correspond to the original to have some scientific value” (1974: 345). He also discusses the best way to present the songs and he decides to employ two methods, and to alternate between them. If a song seems to illustrate vividly a particular aspect of Santal life, he will use it as evidence of thought or feeling, and he will remove it from its social context. For example, he has presented forest songs in the context of premarital love while other songs such as marriage songs, which are an essential part of a ceremony, have been presented in their ritual context. I shall give an example of love songs:

This is a song which describe how the boy and the girl try to meet by pre-arranged signals:

You by the big rock  
I at the end of the village  
How shall I know if you are there?  
With the little finger of your left hand  
Give me a loud whistle  
And I shall know that you are there  
(1974: 126).

Regarding love poems, Archer writes “Symbolism which is the second nature of the Santals, comes into its own and the “right true end of love” is described in terms of natural phenomena - birds, animals, trees, flowers, fruits, rivers, clouds, storm and rain. There can be little doubt that by this instinctive recourse to parallels drawn from nature and to symbolic imagery of this kind, Santals are able to communicate intimacies of feeling that might otherwise defy sensitive expression” (Archer 1974:233). Archer wrote *The Hill of Flutes* on the assumption that Santal life is poetry, and he offers us a kind of emotional progression which follow from a child’s early years, adolescence, the discovery of love, and up to marriage. Conflicts with parents, illegitimate children, breaking up a relationship, and divorce are also presented - as well as festival songs and those describing the relationships with the deities - *bongas*.

But women, who have the power to inflame passion, may be also seen as a source of danger, conceptualized as witchcraft. According to Archer, the girl power (of witchcraft) starts at puberty, when an elder witch tempts the girl to hear witches’ songs. The next stage is to be married to a *bonga* and to learn from him how to kill.

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<sup>25</sup> On Santal metaphors see Carrin 2015 and 2019..

Archer tells us of many cases of witchcraft which were narrated to him, but as a magistrate he did not interfere, since these rumours were common. He explains that when a witch has been identified, the action taken depends on whether the victim is alive, or already dead. If the victim gets better, nothing will happen, but if the sickness continues, the witch is made to confess her “crime” and people will take the necessary measures, which may imply the banishment of the witch. It is striking that in *The Hill of Flutes* Archer does not really question the value of the ordeal or the justice of banishment, since he accepts that the ever-singing Santals sometimes become violent. But we shall see that as a magistrate he sometimes felt differently.

### **Archer and the defense of tribal justice**

Archer’s book on tribal justice shows his engagement with the Adivasi populations. The Santal still adhered to their customary laws<sup>26</sup>, and Archer had first-hand opportunity to decide cases involving the Santal, and the problems which arouse from the confrontation of their sense of justice with the Indian Penal code, and with Civil and Criminal procedure. Archer regarded the Santal agrarian system with its common ownership of some lands as socialist. He thought that a tribal “takes a more human view of human failings” (Archer 1984: XVI).

He was also concerned with the measure of equality that Santal servants or illegitimate children might enjoy in Santal families. But he also stressed that the patrilineal system was undergoing a crisis, and that widows were increasingly asserting their rights to property. This is a trend which, these last decades, has provoked many conflicts among the Santals. Archer describes how Santal law is applied in different kind of conflicts, and gives a great number of real cases that he had to resolve.

I will return, here, to the example of witchcraft, since Archer himself wonders what should be the magisterial approach to witchcraft: “We have seen that in the decade 1931-1940 only 16 witches were murdered and it is obvious that witchcraft is no longer the serious administrative problem which it was a century ago”. Deploring that beating the witch is often considered as the remedy by the Santals, Archer wonders if education could be a way to eradicate violence related to witch-hunting. But he arrives at a pessimistic conclusion, which reminds us of Elwin’s views about crime in Bastar. How is the Maria or the Santal to receive this kind of education?<sup>27</sup>

Archer himself, as Deputy Commissioner of the Santal Parganas, in December 1945 supported the recommendation made by the Inquiry Committee to end the special status of the Santal Parganas in the matter of civil and criminal justice, and to transfer his functions to the jurisdiction of the High Court. But later, he thought that the Santal tribal councils should be associated with the Santal civil court to advise the latter in matters concerning the Santals. In June 1946, he submitted his report, suggesting that the tribal

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<sup>26</sup> In the mid 1930s, administrators and anthropologists had commented upon the dichotomy of the tribal and the colonial legal system. Archer describes the mode of inquiry into Santal laws from June 1945 to June 1946. These enquiries were made by 14 officers, and attested by the Santal all over the district. The material that emerged is organized in three volumes: the first volume deals with the “unique features” of Santal civil laws.

<sup>27</sup> This problem is still present, and I should mention the efforts of Innocent Soren, a Santal teacher and author who wrote a drama called *Puruchasan* “Purification through love” in which he describes a real case of witchcraft which happened in Gumla a few years ago. The drama has been staged with success in many villages and has contributed to fight witchcraft accusations.

law should be recognized as the “aboriginal school of law” - a proposition akin to those of Verrier Elwin. But the Government did not welcome this recommendation. In his preface to Archer’s book on Santal justice, K.S.Singh comments on the refusal of the Bihar Government to follow Archer’s advice, He explains that the Adivasi Mahasabha was becoming militant by then, and that Archer’s views might be misunderstood in a context where tribal elites wanted to promote education and “modernity” for the aboriginals.

Then Archer went on four months leave. On his return from England, he was posted as additional Deputy Commissioner of Mokochung in Nagaland. In 1947, Mildred published her work on Patna Painting, when she brought their two children to their school in England. Later, she joined Bill in his final posting among the Naga tribes of Assam. Archer’s diary from Assam concerns his discovery of Angami sculptures, especially the wooden posts dedicated to the ancestors. The last years the Archer spent in the Naga Hills he described as a “thrilling finale to our years in India” (Archer and Archer 1994:117). In August 1947, Indian Independence was announced, and Bill’s career in the Indian Civil Service came to an end. They left India with sadness in 1948, not knowing what kind of career would be possible for Bill, who was only forty years old.

When they returned to England, it was difficult for them to reconcile themselves to life in Oxford, where they had bought a house in 1948. Bill Archer was wondering what he could do. His first instinct was to consider full time writing. For a year, he writes: “I moped in Oxford striving to complete a book on the Santals whose poetry I had collected”. Later, they moved to London.

### **The exhibition**

Then, in 1948, Archer collaborated with Roland Pémrose and Robert Melville to launch the first great exhibition at the Institute of Contemporary Arts, *40000 years of Modern Art*. Archer enjoyed this experience, which strengthened his interest in painting and sculpture, and “enormously widened” his comprehension of Modern Art. Still, he felt it was a strenuous task, and he writes: “when at last it was finished I returned to my Santals” (Archer and Archer 1994: 125).

The catalogue of the exhibition, written jointly by Melville and Archer, compares primitive art and modern art. Examples of primitive art are taken from Africa and the authors discuss, for example, the use of Negro art by Picasso in *Les Femmes d’Alger*. They write: “Picasso was not only interested in the Negro way of organizing forms, but was prepared to use an angular Negro idiom as a weapon against middle-class values”. Analyzing several paintings from Picasso the authors show that the face and figure of various characters “are distorted in an African manner but instead of Negro serenity there is a strong feeling of agitation” (Archer and Melville 1948: 24). Other examples concern De Chirico<sup>28</sup> who, according to the authors, “brought the Melanesian concept of a compound image into a disturbing relationship with commonplace European objects” in his painting. Discussing the use of the open framework of New Ireland figures, Melville and Archer show that this technique is used by various modern painters, such as Gauguin, and by Max Ernst in his collages - or even Henry Moore in

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<sup>28</sup> Archer and Melville (1948) show how Giorgio de Chirico in his early visionary period was influenced by the art of Oceania.

some of his drawings, such as his metal helmet which shelters a figurine, to bring “a kind of super normal presence”. More generally, Archer and Melville underline the absorption by modern art of the distortions they discover in the primitive arts from Africa, America and Oceania. Later, in his book on *India and Modern Art* (1959) Archer does not really hold that there is an Indian school of modern art, except perhaps for the artists inspired by Jamini Roy. What Archer does, however, is to attribute Indian qualities to Western artists. These Indian qualities seem to express what Archer sees as a cosmic dimension with some of the modern painters, such as Gauguin and Picasso. In the first three chapters of the book, in which he deals with the condition of contemporary art in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries rather than with individual artists, Archer opines that at least by the end of the nineteenth century, there is no longer an Indian art *per se*. Art in India as elsewhere, had become an individual rather than a national matter influenced throughout by international trends and cross currents. In short, Archer is no longer interested in tribal art: for him it is more important to identify a common dimension capable of integrating the various expressions of Indian art and assess their contribution to modern art. Certainly, Archer misses the important dimension of tribal art which expresses indigenous knowledge, an aspect which is flourishing these days.

### **Enlarging the discussion**

Indian tribal art is not present in the catalogue of Archer and Melville. But in his book *The Indian Discourse of Primitivism*, Mitter explores the use of primitivism in modern Indian art, primarily during the 1930s and 1940s. Here primitivism is characterized broadly, not simply in its "formal or stylistic aspects" (2007: 34) but as a deeper modality that informs the work of abstract painters such as Piet Mondrian, Kazimir Malevich, and Kandinsky - via their exposure to Indian philosophies and Theosophy, among other sources. The Indian turn to primitivist modernism comes from a recognition of its critical potential in fashioning an alternative to the "teleological certainty of modernity", says Mitter (2007: 35). The celebration of the freedom and spontaneity of folk and tribal Indian art must be counterpoised to the striking absence of the urban in Indian art during this period.

By this shift of emphasis, primitivism provided an oblique critique of the British colonial project. One may wonder if it would not be useful to understand primitivism in the terms of Mahatma Gandhi's valorization of rural and peasant India. Mitter realizes that primitivism was "replete with ambiguities and contradictions" (2007: 33), but it was precisely this which allowed Indian painters and sculptors to recode it, during the 1920s and 1930s, as a trope of freedom. Nevertheless, the turn to primitivism did not produce a unified expression; instead, it needs to be understood as a flexible conception characterizing Indian art of the period.

### **Archer's subsequent career**

Finally, Archer was appointed Keeper of Indian Art at the Victoria and Albert Museum. He obtained the job through K. de B. Codrington, who was a specialist on Indian art and archeology. Archer writes: “To Codrington I must seem a keen, if inexperienced, art investigator as odd in my own way as he was in his. But I had one redeeming feature, a similar attitude to India. It was this, I think which enabled him to view me as an ally and supporter. He gave me his warm approval and his forceful backing was shortly to ease my problem’ (Archer and Archer 1994:126).

Archer subsequently became a leading scholar of Indian court painting, of the Mughlai and Punjabi styles, and also on the Company style. I shall not deal with this work here, since it does not concern tribal art.

Mildred Archer's curatorial career began in 1954 with the cataloguing of the East India Company's collection of paintings in the India Office Library, a work which took twenty-six years. In short, the couple must be counted among the main authorities on classical Indian painting.

### Conclusion

Archer was an aesthete and a poet, but he always remained faithful to his engagement towards the Santals and other Adivasis. Archer was deeply disappointed that his recommendations regarding Santal law had not been accepted. Clearly, the last years of his career in India obliged him to face many contradictions, as when he was obliged to arrest his Congress friends. This is an important point in considering his shift from being a British administrative officer to become a curator at the Victoria and Albert Museum, and an art historian. Certainly, this shift was a way to survive when he could no longer represent colonial authority in India.

Archer's personality, as reflected in the material I have presented, helps us understand the paradoxes of a man who shared his passions between his aesthetic approach to Santal beauty with an acute awareness of his role as a mediator between the Santals and the colonial authorities. I have concentrated here on his work among the Santal, but Archer also intervened to solve problems concerning the Ho, the Oraon or the Kharia when these groups wanted his help. We have seen that his posting in Patna offered him the opportunity to get acquainted not only with "tribal art" but also with Mithila murals. I have related how he discovered these different forms of pictorial art which were themselves embedded in poetry, ballads, narratives or ritual. Here, Archer combined the knowledge of an art connoisseur with the perspicacity of an anthropologist, and he never lost sight of the social context which could offer him clues about the meaning of an art form. Meanwhile he did not spare his efforts as an ICS officer to mediate between the people and the colonial authorities, at the same time promoting his own ideas.

Some of Archer's ideas may seem romantic, and there is no doubt that he was aestheticizing the Santal way of life, ignoring migrations and other factors which had already contributed to destabilize Santal society. Nevertheless, it seems to me that Archer, like Elwin, were perceiving that "tribal societies" in India were threatened, and so they felt the urge to underline and sometimes overestimate the "pristine beauty" of tribal life in order to re-enchant a world severely affected by the second world war. As shown in their correspondence about *Man in India*, Archer and Elwin wanted to exalt tribal poetry as the victory of life over death.

The Archer as art collectors have succeeded in exploring many dimensions of Indian art that I have not mentioned in this article, such as the different schools of painting and even Georgian architecture in India. They did not spare their efforts to deepen their knowledge, and worked hard to reorganize the Indian art collections at Victoria and Albert, as well as at the then Indian Office Library. Their contribution to these institutions led them to publish extensively on Indian art, but we must not forget their discovery of tribal art, which impressed them since its strength seemed to come from life itself.

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