

Collaborative Animation Film-making as a Method to Connect to Indigenous Cultural Knowledge

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Abstract

The oral storytelling traditions of indigenous, tribal and Adivasi societies in India established and sustained fundamental relationships extending from the village communities towards the local geography, the natural environment and between each other. The narratives, transmitted from generation to generation, were a tool to understand individual and collective impact that reaffirmed responsibility towards the protection of environment and community. At the same time, the stories were infinitely creative and they made for easy entertainment on those long dark nights in the rural homestead.

More recently, unprecedented exposure to the modern world introduced the village society to new products and values, and it expanded the requirement for income generation. This primary force for younger people from these communities to seek Government employment and business opportunities neglects economically marginalized local artistic practices. My study of how the medium of animated film could be used to reengage younger people from these communities in their existing cultural practices further highlighted the function of collaborative film-making as a method to decolonize indigenous research and reconnect to foundational values.

Keywords: tribal animation, tribal film-making, alternative education indigenous media

The folklore of the indigenous, tribal and Adivasi societies in India, transmitted by oral retellings from one generation to the next, connected the community to the geography and it established a sense of personal and collective identity and history. Vivid mythologies and stories of origination spoke of integrated primordial existence: of animals, plants and even rivers, mountains and stones that are animated and could communicate with one another. By centering local heroes, places and events, these narratives that presented holistic visions of social structures and kinship relationships embracing the entire organic domain were relevant to the local population; at the same time, the oral traditions nurtured the vital sense of human responsibility towards co-existence and protection of the ecology upon which human life is dependent. The stories

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were a record of community resilience: conflicts over land and resource rights; accounts of vanquished enemies and the pacification of malevolent spirits that would otherwise be held responsible for famine, draught and disease. In this context, the intimate knowledge of nature was essential for survival in isolated regions of wilderness and rugged terrain. The rural folk adapted what was available to them with ingenuity and resourcefulness, and accordingly they developed precise practical knowledge, solutions and remedies. The self-perceptions that are communicated by their own narrative traditions contrast romanticized, stereotyped images of the native as the idealized 'noble savage' that can be traced back to Dryden's work: *The Conquest of Granada* (1672).

The accelerated scale of exposure to the world beyond the peripheries of what was known and experienced introduced unprecedented modifications to these traditional societies. Modern education has broadly replaced the traditional institutions and methods of knowledge transmission and by now ubiquitous mainstream entertainment media and easy access to the internet through personal mobile communication devices also divert younger viewers away from their indigenous narrative practices. In the North East region of India The impact of the increased introduction of market imperatives in the traditional societies, and the migration and settlement of mainland people to has heightened the struggles for resources and the competition for the limited number of jobs and other assets. The lack of opportunity for young people in the village environment leads them from the rural areas to the urban centres for education and employment. In this environment their cultures are widely unrecognized, they are required to speak the dominant language and their inadequate qualifications lead to a precarious entry into the job market. The news of current affairs in the North East region focuses on social and political discord; whereas their images are normally absent from the mainstream entertainment media. When these young people fail to see their cultural identities represented with accuracy, it broadly conveys the idea that their knowledge is outdated and unimportant.

My question is how can the interest for culturally relevant local knowledge be sustained as the younger generations absorb new priorities and values? Coomaraswamy's (1977: 9) theory that the language of metaphysics that informs folklore is 'imagistic', suggested that the visual medium of animation may be more appropriate to represent indigenous ideologies, oral narratives and visual arts than, say, literature written in English that may not be accessible to many young people in the areas of this study. There have been initiatives worldwide to adapt local narrative retellings for the medium of animated film to preserve the stories and to retain vernacular languages. For instance, West Highland Animation experimented with translating the Scots Gaelic oral tradition (*am beul aithris*) into short animated films over a period of twenty-five years from 1983 to 2008. These films were made in a variety of ways, either by children, community groups and participating artists in each part of the Highlands and Islands or by professional animators at the West Highland Animation studio in the Scottish Highlands. The primary aim of the company was to bring the Highland oral tradition to life for children through the contemporary and popular medium of animation. I was curious to see if these methods could be transferable as a way to sustain the tribal stories that had been marginalized in India: would there be any local artists who would be willing to collaborate to adapt a sample collection of folktales for the medium of animated film? My research project, *Tales of the Tribes: Animation as a Tool for Indigenous Representation* (2015) was initiated as an investigation into the use of the

popular medium of animation to reengage younger people in their existing cultural practices in five selected communities in Central and North East India.

Identity, knowledge and research

The indigenous label typically refers to the original populations that resided in often isolated geographical regions prior to colonization, brought about by the influx of new dominant social groups (Ashcroft et al. 2007). In India, Scheduled Tribes are recognised by the Constitution, Article 342 (Ministry of Tribal Affairs 2012), and according to the 2011 census (Ministry of Home Affairs 2011), the tribal population is just over 84 million or 8.2% of the total population. The exclusive use of the term ‘indigenous’ to refer to these groups is disputed on the basis that the wider Indian caste society is also ‘native’ to the subcontinent.

In the central belt, these people are collectively referred to as *Adivāsi*, which literally translates as “original inhabitants” (Minority Rights Group International 2008). The indigenous groups of the North East frequently refer collectively to themselves with the English word “tribes”. The term ‘tribe’ has a highly contested history, and remains contentious in India. During the colonial period the designation of some marginalized groups as tribal conferred upon them exclusive entitlements to exemptions, benefits and reservations that were intended to provide them with equality and protection (Schleiter and Maaker 2010; Sharma 2012; Srikanth 2014). However, the criteria outlined by article 342 of the Indian Constitution for their inclusion in this category had the effect of stigmatizing them as primitive and backward. André Beteille (1992) argued that the ethnic tribal communities were excluded from Hindu civilization, which contrasts the counter interpretation that they were ‘backward Hindus’ (Thurston 1906; Ghurye 1943 205). In contemporary India, *adivasi* and tribal groups experiences of marginality are re-inscribed through discourses of ‘backwardness’, promulgated by organisations such as the Rashtriya Swayamsewak Sangh (RSS) and the Vishwa Hindu Parishad (Froerer 2006). In this way the heterogeneity of tribal groups is misinterpreted as a threat to projects of economic integration and societal cohabitation, with the result that *adivasi* cultures remain devalued.

It is necessary to establish that the hybrid cultures of the North East region of India are modern, complex constructs that contrast the essentialized, ossified images of indigenous identification perpetuated in popular print and television media. Under the British colonial system in India, anthropological and ethnographic studies were needed to present detailed knowledge about the local populations to facilitate British administration (Stocking 1991). The representations that were produced during the colonial period contributed to an ideology based on the purity of indigenous culture suspended in time (Smith and Ward 2000). The romanticized images that continue to influence perceptions about the people in the regions of this study are present in the marketing of tribal tourism (Sreberny-Mohammadi 1997: 64; Mohanty 2007; Barman et al. 2010) and the placement of tribal artefacts and handicraft in the ethnographic museum setting further conveys the notion that these cultures are remnants of the past. In India, such imagery has dubious contemporary validity in relation to the changes that these communities have experienced, and this presents the case for updated contemporary images.

For tribal communities, the knowledge that was transmitted by the village elders, through an awareness of cultural traditions, the history of the community, social values,

beliefs and rituals, and which was retold in stories from one generation to the next, was profoundly valuable. It was in these narrative traditions that life skills were imparted along with a sense of identity, community belonging, and responsibility towards the protection of biological diversity. The myths, songs and stories that have been repositories of indigenous education (Scroggie 2009:78; Iseke 2013) must, therefore, be sustained if the social well-being of these communities is to be ensured. Animistic belief systems that do not separate nature from culture, ascribe objects, nature and the entire cosmos with life (Haus der Kulturen der Welt 2012). Indigenous ontology recognises the interdependencies of existence, nurtures ideas of interspecies kinship and evokes necessary action to protect and sustain these connections for the survival and well-being of the community. To the Angami people in Nagaland in North-East India, Man is the younger brother of Tiger and some people are believed to have the spirit of a tiger (Singh 1977: 72-73; Sutter 2008: 276); in Central Arunachal Pradesh Donyi-Polo addresses a pair of omniscient deities –the Sun and the Moon– who are the supreme witnesses to any oath or promise that is made (Abraham 2004: 50) and Abotani, regarded as the ancestor of the Tani group of tribes, competes against his younger brother who is held to be the ancestor of the invisible supernatural beings who are omnipresent. In both stories, the territory is ultimately divided between the spirit, human and animal realms. The role of storytelling, rituals, ceremonies and artistic practices for social cohesion address aspects of collective life and regularly reaffirm and negotiate these relationships. On the other hand, this outlook is broadly regarded as pre-modern, comparative to concepts of Western scientific progress that depersonalize the living world so that nature is just a resource to be exploited by mankind for commercial benefit.

Colonial practices and ideas remain at the foundation of the current BJP's neoliberal economic programme, in which Sanskrit ideology is increasingly propagated by the national political party above other traditions. The dominant logic of accumulation, investment, profit and surplus which drives the BJP's brand of neoliberalism was largely unknown to the small scale subsistence economy of the tribal communities. This disjuncture has resulted in indigenous forms of knowledge being mistakenly deemed incapable of meeting the productivity needs of the modern world. The unprecedented global impact of unparalleled destruction of habitats, the repercussions of intensified industrial activity on climate and the environment and unmitigated extraction and consumption of resources signals the space to review the revitalization of particular paradigms at the core of indigenous ritual and philosophy. This work is vital at a moment when global economic, technological, political and cultural shifts towards populism and automation are coinciding with and reinforcing the move, amongst India's current political leadership, towards projecting nationalist cultural values to the forefront of the Hindutva movement (Savarkar 1923; BJP undated).

The call to critically dismantle universal approaches to questions of indigenous and tribal representation (Battiste 2005; Battiste 2011) is the key to recognizing local perspectives. Methodologies deemed appropriate for indigenous research have been defined by researchers worldwide to present a framework to empower marginalized people to resist and recover from colonial oppression. The aim of my study is to produce media artefacts that incorporate the perspectives of those studied (Meadows 2009:119) and to encourage the media professional to initiate collaboration with indigenous communities to explore and develop media practices that empower indigenous perspectives. Transparency and the demystification of technical processes are therefore

at the forefront of the development of these collaborative media outputs. For the *Tales of the Tribes* series, the procedure of adaptation from oral text to audio-visual representation was carried out in a series of workshops that were organised at regional locations to share experiences of research, project management and media production. These pre-production workshops introduced the idea that storytelling through animation could provide a method for indigenous young people to communicate about their own cultures with wider audiences using the tools of technology and the media. Therefore the collaboration with a non-Indian researcher was perceived by the local collaborators as a good way to access this exposure. My role was as a 'gatekeeper' facilitating the effort to reach wider audiences, whilst the role of local informants was to be the projects' doorway to cultural knowledge.

Extended periods of field study provided situations for cohabitation and participation in rural village life to promote internalization of the knowledge that I am learning about (Wilson 2001:178). As an outcome of missionary education, some of the younger project participants are bilingual and their role as interpreters and translators has made it possible to interview several of the elders of the communities: the parents and grandparents who are acknowledged as the custodians of traditional knowledge. The recognition of the potential for personal transformation is fundamental to the research. For instance, the unfamiliar environment establishes distance from the zone of comfort and this is the context for acculturation. The experience of insecurity is common to both the subject and the researcher. Ives (2004:10) and Friere (2008:11) illustrate this by describing how alienation, doubt and incomprehension occur during periods of major social change as is the current experiences reported from indigenous communities in India. Conversely, Johnson (cited by Robben and Sluka 2007) extends the concept of liminality to include the researcher. In both instances, preconceptions are reduced through long term interaction and a foundation of trust is built on an approach of equality and humility and the insight by all parties that the discovery process is mutual rather than a one-sided learning experience provided by "experts".

Intersection of tribal art and animation

The incentive to adapt vernacular cultural content to the medium of animation responds to a personal ambition to reconnect animation as an artistic medium of expression that links the viewer to the artist and fulfills the social function of art (Coote and Shelton 1992: 52). For animation to work as a tool for representing indigenous cultural content, the compatibilities between the animation medium and the context of indigenous narrative and artistic practices need to be established.

The traditional artistic practices of the tribal and Adivasi communities in India include figurative painting and sculpture, jewelry design, handloom and handicraft, poetry and performance. It produced utilitarian objects for personal and home use; artistic creations and practices that also fulfilled ritualistic functions to remember, evoke, 'animate' and appease the divine entities that were expected to influence the harvest, personal health and community wellbeing. Art was created to commemorate ancestors and to celebrate important seasonal festivals - important activities that brought the community together. More recent folk art is also produced specifically for sale which influences the choice of materials used, the themes depicted and the methods of production. However, the decisive requirement for income security has meant that

young people are more frequently directed to apply for Government employment or business opportunities than they are encouraged to pursue a future in the arts. The option to adapt and incorporate traditional art forms and techniques for the medium of animated film presents openings for younger local artists to explore new applications for their work and it can lend appropriate visual designs to endorse the narrative content.

The adaptation of tribal art for animated film challenges particularly repressive Eurocentric definitions of indigenous cultural and artistic authenticity as rooted in the handmade and the rural (Errington 1998: 145). Notions of authenticity created the demand for primitive art that spoke of pre-colonial themes, and few art galleries in the either USA or Australia collected or displayed contemporary Native art until the 1970s (Berlo and Philips 1998; Fraser 2012). Nelson's stipulation (cited by Young 2010: .35) "to live the life of an Aboriginal person" in order to produce an authentic Aboriginal work is a dubious but popular concept, and indigenous artisans are encouraged by foundations and governments to produce work for sale according to traditional aesthetics (Hutchinson 2009). However, Conklin (1997) and Wright (1998) have critiqued displays of reconstructed pre-colonial culture that deny change, putting forward the argument that the performance of essentialized identities based on symbols from the past that appeal to Western views of exoticism, is the only capital available to indigenous communities without economic or political power. In contrast, Dean and Levi (2003: 2) have argued that when indigenous people use the media, link to the international community and become politically active they also risk being perceived as inauthentic. The term *ethno-kitsch* was used by Graburn (1996) to refer to the modern phenomena of 'exotic' tourist art; produced by indigenous artists worldwide, removed from its traditional context and made for sale. In the case of the *Tales of the Tribes* films and, with reference to future cultural adaptations through the medium of animation, the contextualization of the narrative content and the incorporation of references to the symbolic content of indigenous art during the process of adaptation leads to more meaningful representation, thereby avoiding accusations of the production of *ethno-kitsch* films.

The example from India of the Pardhan Gonds shows how external patronage over the past three decades led to the development of complex visual artworks with modern materials (Bowles 2009). The initial contact with researchers, and in particular with the contemporary artist J. Swaminathan at Bharat Bhavan in Bhopal has ultimately led to the 'repositioning' of Pardhan artists as 'non-metropolitan contemporary artists' and this has had the effect of widening the circulation of their art in a particular global circuit (Hoskote 2009). The more recent exposure that brought the Pardhan artists into contact with Producer/Director Leslie MacKenzie from West Highland Animation, led to their artistic involvement in the adaptation of one of their folktales for a short animation film, *Best of the Best* for *The Tallest Story Competition* (2015) series. These hybrid examples illustrate how external exposure can contribute to new developments for contemporary indigenous artistic expression that acknowledge empowerment and change. My long-term contact with the group of Pardhan artists who had worked on the Scottish series, and the subsequent enthusiasm from audiences towards this first manifestation of their art in animated form, strongly supported the inclusion of another narrative, *Manjoor Jhali* (the Story of the Peacock) from the Gond oral tradition in the *Tales of the Tribes* series. This story of Baradev's best invention, the proud peacock who was dissatisfied

with his ugly legs, was chosen by the Pardhan artists on the basis that the message to be content with what you have is important for life in the village.



Still image from the film *Manjoor Jhali* from the *Tales of the Tribes* series

The labour intensive process of producing animated sequences is attested by the fact that 24 separate images are required to create a single second of animated film. When it first appeared in the 1920s, experimental animation was considered a hybrid art form and it attracted modern artists as a way of adding movement to their paintings and graphic designs. Artists were drawn to the medium as a means of exploring their creative personalities and practitioners commonly worked on their own or with small teams. They rarely sought or found popular success. In contrast with the unity of style in ‘orthodox’ animation, experimental practice often also combined different modes of animation – hand-drawn artwork and other techniques that included pixilation, oil painting on glass, and stop-motion animation. An early example, *Free Radicals* (1958) by Len Lye is an abstract display of marks scratched onto film stock that punctuate the beats of traditional drumming and singing by the Bagirmi Tribe of the Republic of Chad, in north-central Africa.

Short films were commissioned by producers and broadcasters from independent ‘auteurs’ who experimented with a variety of techniques and materials that included manipulating sand, beads, collage, cutout and model animation. Some Government funding was allocated to encourage and support these small scale independent producers and artisan film-makers to develop national identity and technical capacity in the media in the UK, the former Soviet Union and in some East European countries. From the 1940s, the National Film Board of Canada also supported experimentation by film practitioners who challenged the hyperrealism of Disney (Slowik 2013). Animation director Caroline Leaf disclosed that the films developed under the Film Board during this period were not asked to address a mass audience, but could instead be made for small, specialized audiences, for example, people interested in the arts, members of a specific culture, school children and researchers. These films from the Film Board received worldwide appreciation testified by more than 5,000 awards including 11

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Oscars (NFB nd). In essence, this approach would be ideal for developing an Indian animation sector targeting specific rather than mass audiences.

As the technological advancements of audio-visual software and hardware development accelerated from the mid 1990s, independent film-makers found it increasingly difficult to keep abreast in the pursuit of their singular productions. The global liberalization of goods and services markets, economic privatization, the expansion of satellite tv channels and the unprecedented new demand to fill air time and the parallel intensification of digital animation production made it profitable to outsource the bulk of animation production work to countries including India where labour was cheap. The prospect for revenue generation from commercial animation and spin off merchandising transformed the format into a new business model and products that were designed to have universal appeal for juvenile audiences across the world.



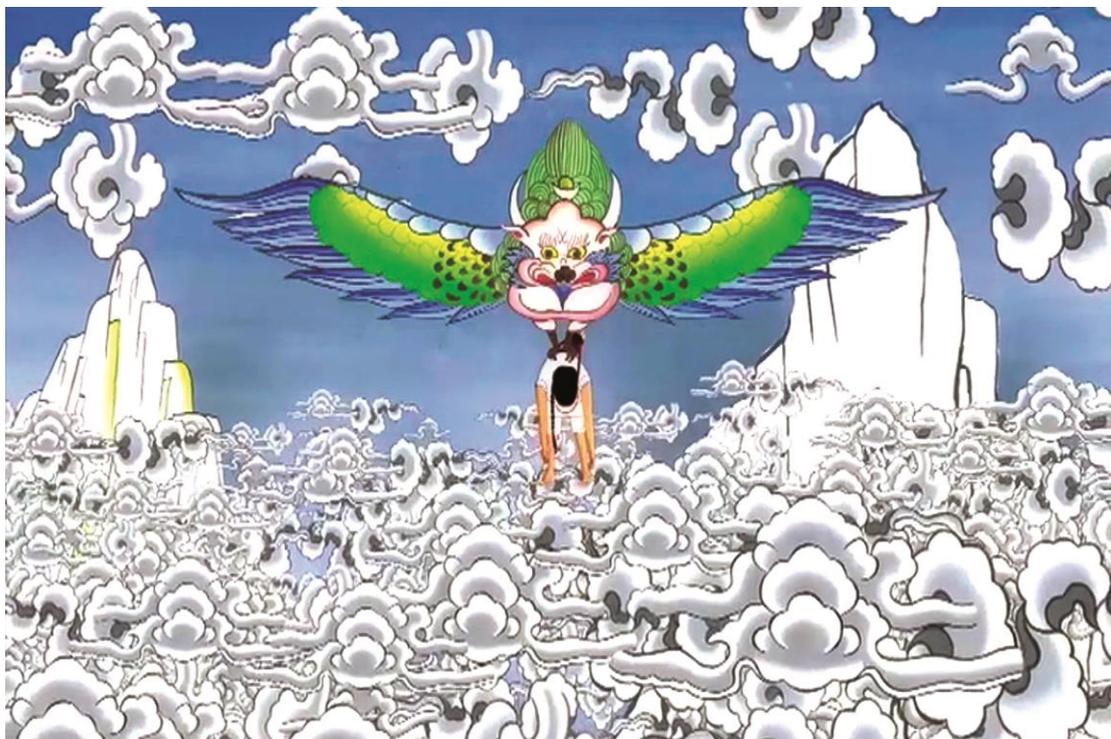
Animators and participants creating the title sequence for *Man Tiger Spirit* from the *Tales of the Tribes* series using cowrie shells

The costs of the technological investment to set up commercial studios for animation steers the productions that are made for national broadcast towards prioritizing financial success and influences the preference for the selection of well known Hindu epics for adaptation and the use of formats of narrative and design that had been developed by the American productions. Initiatives to develop films as adaptations of indigenous narratives and art-forms present a direction to diversify from this formulaic mode of production. As the resources of commercial animation production are not available to indigenous film production pioneered by young artists in secluded areas, more accessible methods must be used, and the exemplary work of independent film-makers that include Jan Svankmajer, Ishu Patel, Caroline Leaf and Yuri Norstein suggest approaches and techniques that can be adapted to retell tribal stories in animated form. Looking at the vast potential resource of original Indian indigenous narratives and folk art styles, it is perfectly feasible that experimentation by indigenous artists and animation practitioners

can contribute to demonstrating that traditional does not have to mean unoriginal. However, when the ambition to ‘make films from our own culture’ is replaced by economic considerations it can result in a ‘globalised’ way of making films in line with international ‘Americanized’ culture (Mackenzie, personal communication 2015). This supports the argument that Government support in India can help to free the artists to experiment more

In the case study of the production of the *Tales of the Tribes* series, the artists from communities that had strong figurative designs and established identities in their traditional visual depictions (for example, Pardhan Gond contemporary painting and Thangka art from Sikkim) recognised how the adaptation of their styles would contribute to the originality of the character and background designs in the respective films.

The findings of this research are indicative of the complexity of representing ethnic identities in the culturally diverse North East region and local advisors cautioned against depicting cultural accessories that were associated with specific tribes, purely on the basis of aesthetics. For instance, the attempt to integrate artistic material sourced from several tribes in Nagaland to extend inclusivity for the adaptation of *Man Tiger Spirit* that was based on the Angami version of the story for the *Tales of the Tribes* series risked being perceived as cultural appropriation by the Angami tribe. The strategy was not repeated in Arunachal Pradesh, where the selected story of *Abotani* had versions that were shared by several tribes. This highlights the dilemma of the accuracy of representation and aesthetic decisions and it is a good example of the significant role local indigenous cultural expertise has towards decoding representations that are acceptable to the local communities.



Still image from the film *Nye Mayel Kyong* from the *Tales of the Tribes* series

Indigenous media and participatory media practice

Indigenous media, termed 'Fourth Cinema' by Maori film-maker, Barclay (1990) has emerged as a category of politically engaged film-making worldwide which produces images that are controlled by indigenous peoples and which represent their concerns and customs (Martens 2012; Murray 2008). Indigenous media responds to the postcolonial context by becoming a form of resistance to outside cultural domination (Meadows 2009) and a study of the genre contributes towards defining a practice which can critique forms dominant in India.

A selection of animated films made by, or in collaboration with, indigenous film-makers from Aboriginal Australia, Native America, First Nations Canada, Africa, Estonia and the Arctic was screened for the first time to audiences in North East India at the Tribal Animation Film Festival, held in March 2019 at North-Eastern Hill University (NEHU) in Shillong, Meghalaya. The collaboration with the Department of Anthropology for the event was the occasion to review the potential contribution that could be made through animated film to making the study of peoples' beliefs, practices, cognitive and social organization more accessible to wider audiences than say, literature written in English that may not be accessible to many indigenous young people in the North East region. It also aimed to explore whether the wider Indian society could also benefit from exposure to the diverse cultures of the region through the accessible format of contemporary film, promoting an appreciation for the wealth of knowledge that is embedded in these marginalized narratives, as well as an awareness about the relevance of this knowledge to the social and ecological challenges of modern life.

The intersection with visual anthropology is part of decentering the media practice. It was important to interpret and reflect on the ethnographies represented at the *Festival* to establish the relationship of visual form and function: who was the intended audience, whose interests were represented and what were the compromises that are entailed in adaptation from one medium to another? The anthropological perspective contributed to illuminate the different ways of "seeing" associated with the views of different societies and assisted in framing the unconscious bonds of culture, gender and social positioning that inevitably influence the analysis and representation of unfamiliar cultures. Scholarship foregrounds the relationship between the film-maker and the spectators and between the film-maker and the subjects and shows how film reflects the artistic sensibility of the film-maker more than the subject depicted.

On the other hand, the anthropologists observed that animation can be as socially engaged as informative films in a presentation that is less solemn. It can also be effective for representing aspects of culture that would be difficult to depict in ethnographic film: for example, the visualization of the supernatural characteristics of the mythologies; and because it is evocative, animation can highlight subjective feelings. The invitation of film-makers and cultural activists promoted a two way learning experience to frame the theory and practice using the visual as the object of study and the method. The presentations by film-makers and the inclusion of documentary films about the making of some of the animations drew attention to the pro-filmic: the manifold processes and activities that took place in the shooting of the film including the decisions and the motivation of the producer.

Tales of the tribes

The traditional folk stories that are the foundation of this research are the cultural property of the local communities and any new adaptations require local inputs as to how the cultures are represented. By using the method of participatory film-making practice to develop the *Tales of the Tribes* films, traditional protocols should be respected. Alia's (2010) argument that decision making by consensus and collective action has carried greater weight in traditional societies than individual accomplishment supported the choice of this method. This also meant that collective action to redefine animation production was as important as the outcome of films.

A series of five Animation Workshops were organised for this project in five regional locations: Nagaland (2009), Sikkim (2010), Manipur (2012), Ahmedabad for the Gond film (2012) and Arunachal Pradesh (2013). Two additional workshops were organised in New Delhi (2014) and in Bhopal (2015) to follow up the work. These workshops were the occasions to assemble diverse groups of participants to study the issues that arose in the representation of indigenous identities in the media. The participants were recruited by local partner organisations², and three weeks duration was considered the optimum time to engage volunteers who were required to take time off from their regular activities to attend the workshops. As the workshops also aimed at empowering local artists by providing an introduction to the animation film-making process, it was logical to engage the participants in the practical experience of the initial pre-production process of animation: the selection of a popular folktale to adapt for a short film, and the adaptation for a script and storyboard, the creation of character and background designs and some experimentation by creating test animation sequences to determine the appropriate techniques to use.

Ethical considerations are critical to the proposal to introduce a dominant form of communication for indigenous people who have been marginalized by overbearing representations of power. The workshop model establishes a method for collaborative research practice that focuses on the primacy of experience over theory (Chabrán 1990). This is in keeping with indigenous ideologies and ways of learning (Mel 2001). Having studied animation at West Surry College of Art and Design in 1993, the decision was made that I would introduce the participants to storytelling through audio-visual media using the same teaching methods - that of starting with pre-production. My role as a 'guide' to the adaptation with reference to the language of narrative animation was necessary because a lack of a definition about what had to be done next would have contributed to a general feeling of uncertainty and indecisiveness in the novice groups (Babbie 2001: 278). However, the assumed professional stance entailed the responsibility of repeated re-evaluation to monitor my awareness of the personal challenges of learning how to learn, how to change, how to organise and how to act. For example, I maintain a personal commitment towards avoiding the replication of pervasive educational techniques of one way transmittance to passive students and tendencies towards standardization (Chambers 1997: 65). Inviting collaborative

² Tribal Weave (Nagaland); Namgyal Institute of Tibetology and Echostream (Sikkim); Manipur Film Development Society (Manipur); National Institute of Design (Ahmedabad); Rajiv Gandhi University and CCRD (Arunachal Pradesh); Lalit Kala Academi (New Delhi) and Indira Gandhi Rashtriya Manav Sangrahalaya (IGRMS) (Bhopal)

partnerships with people from indigenous groups to translate the meanings held in the tribal narratives for the medium of animated film can empower tribal perspectives, nurture a range of skills and sensitize the incomers to the value of indigenous knowledge.

As the aim was also to produce films of a professional standard of production, at least two Indian animation students or recent graduates were invited to each workshop as a resource team. The participation by animators has functioned to accomplish the practical targets of the animation pre-production. Their participation also provided cultural exposure and work experience to the animators as part of the objective of this research to raise awareness of the value of indigenous culture with non-indigenous people; it was also evidently inspiring for the young participants to work with technically skilled artists of their own age group and this contributed to their level of engagement in the participatory practices. The extended phase of production to complete the series of films by the professionally trained animators delivered the *Tales of the Tribes* series in 2017, seven years since its initiation.

A study about using animation as an educational tool locates the visual impact of the animation as secondary to the content (Lowe 2001). This implies that in developing films based on indigenous cultures, the focus should be on the quality of the content over what has been described by Darley (2000: 103) as the business of ‘astonishing the senses’ through which technique and image prevail over content and meaning. By these criteria, the Animation Workshop model provides the best environment for developing indigenous content for films and also reflects the social function of storytelling as a community activity, especially if it can include intergenerational dialogue to help deconstruct obscure meanings. By focusing on the process in the Animation Workshops two stories were produced - that of the artefact, and that of the making of the artefact.

Particular ethical issues were presented with the choice of institutional associations and venues for the workshops. The workshop participants interacted as naturally as possible within the formal educational environment and the hierarchies of this environment. However, I also acknowledge that the formal setting of the interviews may have altered the behaviour of participants. For example, the environment may have detracted from the spontaneity of the responses and the participants are likely to have felt restricted with regard to overt criticism of the system that had provided for their involvement.

In conclusion, the field research trips and the workshops provided indications of the current trends, but to present a comprehensive study of the ramifications, the duration of the study would need to be extended to accommodate adjustments to the workshop process, to monitor the influence and extend the exposure to experimental animation films and to encourage active participation and reflection. The workshop practice provided for the first phase of development and adaptation for animation film, but the logistics for sustained localized animation production by indigenous artists has yet to be established. To anticipate the production and completion of animated films by indigenous artists, extended timescales are required to accommodate sustained exposure to technical processes and the range of software that is now considered as standard to produce animated films.



Participants making animation models in the workshop in Arunachal Pradesh for *Tales of the Tribes* series

Conclusion

During the workshop discussions, two primary reasons emerged to adapt cultural content for the medium of animated film: these initiatives would help to sustain the oral narratives for the future and the participatory media practice and outputs would contribute towards making the tribal cultures more widely known, which would reduce the misconceptions about these cultures. This illustrates the priority of relational accountability to get the details right (Wilson 2008: 77). The existing exposure and enthusiasm for animation that was reported by the participants makes it a more dynamic medium for communicating culture than written literature, particularly in areas where there are few bookshops or libraries.

The discussion showed that from the point of view of the film-maker, indigenous narratives contain the elements that make good animation films: they often have a moral within the storyline; they illustrate how people may have the same field of experience (Goswami 1983); dramatic narratives of conflict are graphic and vivid and hold more attention; they exhibit archetypal characters (the hero, villain and trickster are examples), and magical or supernatural characters that are suited to delivery through the medium of animation. The fact that the adaptation of traditional folktales for the medium of animation was perceived as more than cultural preservation and rather as a way to “reinvent our story” further supports the theory of adaptation: every retelling is reworked by the teller and there is no single correct version. The dialogue about the narratives that was directed towards identifying how specific details could be integrated in the audio-visual presentation can be viewed as an effort at a perpetuation of “living

knowledge”. At this juncture, I propose that our commitment to being advised by elder members of the community who were invited to the workshops corresponds to an initiation process and reaffirms the traditional mode of intergenerational knowledge transmission.

The scope of the media production accommodated contributions from storytellers, traditional artists and musicians, as well as from digital artists and animators. The workshops were the space for indigenous and non-indigenous scholars to encounter one another and to remember and redefine the oral narratives. It was an enriching learning experience for all: even participants and visitors with no manifest inclination towards a future career in art or animation appreciated the value of the animation workshops as an arena for cultural discussion. Therefore the role that animation had in this project for encouraging dialogue, both in the community and with media professionals, was an innovative approach that led the younger members into positions of inquiry in the challenge to provide information, whereas the condition of marginalization and the generation gap frequently silences them.

Sullivan’s (2010) deconstruction of art practice as research showed how insights into indigenous art and culture may be gathered in the process of making the animation films. The works that have been produced aim to blend and combine animation practice with collective interpretation of the subject matter, and in this way I hope to have portrayed some aspects of the conceptual scheme through which specific indigenous populations of India approach their environment, and some of the complexities that these populations currently face. By combining computer based graphic techniques with traditional artistic practices a new form of multimedia representation of indigenous culture can emerge. I have argued that the multimedia approach that defines all the films in the collection can firstly draw from the richness and depth of traditional culture and then use a modern medium to translate it into a contemporary form. To achieve this, in-depth research on the context and cultural meanings of the folk narratives in literature combined with field research and collaboration with local practitioners can ensure that representations maintain the integrity of the original stories within the tradition of community cultural ownership.

The use of animation as the tool for research was an innovative method to incorporate artistic practice and theoretical knowledge. From a personal perspective, the project had a transformative effect to help realize my purpose and the impact of my actions in a more integrated manner. The practice became a method to reconnect me to foundational values as I became immersed in the depth and detail of the narratives and the symbolism represented by the visual art. For instance, it was considered appropriate to consult a traditional Galo priest in Arunachal Pradesh, who subsequently performed a ritual that he believed would guide the successful completion of the *Abotani* film for the series - which was based on a local story from the Tani traditions that communicated the perceived tensions inherent to the space between humankind and the unseen spirit realm. Malinowski’s (1948) study on religion, magic, science, rite and myth had shown that particular knowledge is only obtainable through culturally bound rituals in traditional societies. Shyamacharan’s (1993:10) identification of the intricate relationship between folk art and ritual, further suggested that particular rituals may be appropriate to the adaptation of myths that are based on mankind’s interaction with the supernatural world. As Carpenter (Tribal Eye: Across the Frontiers 1975) has outlined, the investigation of appropriate rituals is part of gaining acceptance by these people on their own terms. In

this way, by acknowledging the role of ritual in traditional communities, researchers acquire a platform to transcend purely academic frameworks and embark on an intellectual challenge to connect more deeply with indigenous ideologies.

I was also more informed about the contemporary experiences of marginalization from the tribal participants. They reinstated the need for balanced imagery when developing specific content targeted at the expanding media audiences located at the periphery, as well as for indigenous media representation targeted at wider audiences; for the media producer these findings assist in fathoming the repercussions of a lack of representation. The research became the position to review and adjust my approach in the attempt to align more accurately with the local paradigms and needs. In essence, the participatory media practice evoked to a sense of cooperation and community between the participants and this helped us to expand our outlook and transcend prejudice and perceptions of ethnic, social and economic difference to engage with other cultures and their context.



Consulting the traditional Galo priest Tama Mindo before completing the *Abotani* film from the *Tales of the Tribes* series

In the production of the *Tales of the Tribes* films, the practice has illustrated how a digital media artist can work with traditional artists to produce new work that challenges dominant attitudes about indigenous cultural expression. Therefore the films show how the combined skills of traditional artists and digital media practitioners can represent indigenous identities in a contemporary form. I summarize that co-creation with indigenous artists broadens the outlook of the animator, and that developing characters and incidents that reflect the sensibilities of the group helps build the local audience appeal.

It was important to return to the regions where I had conducted the research to screen the films to the local communities, and to achieve this, the series needed to be translated and dubbed into the vernacular languages of the communities represented: Tenyidie,

Galo, Apatani, Lepcha and Manipuri, in addition to Hindi and English. This was another key area to engage local talent in the project. In this instance, elders (teachers and community leaders) accomplished the translation of the dialogues and narrations and the procedure initiated detailed discussions about the diversity of regional dialects, specifics of pronunciation and the transference of idiom and meaning in the activity of translation.

The premiere screening of the *Tales of the Tribes* took place as part of a cultural event that was organised in July 2017 at Patangarh village in Madhya Pradesh: this was the native village of the Pardhan artists who had worked on the *Manjoor Jhali* film. The event was followed by an extended tour of the North East region to screen the films at cultural centres, schools, universities and colleges and to record the feedback from local audiences in Sikkim, Nagaland, Manipur, Arunachal Pradesh and Meghalaya. Local viewers typically expressed their enthusiasm towards seeing their own folktales in animated format. The interviews with project advisors and the feedback from students that was recorded during the tour provided audio-visual material for a full length documentary film that was commissioned by Public Service Broadcasting Trust in India to contextualize the animated programme. *The Journey of the Tales of the Tribes* was broadcast on Doordarshan 1 in June 2018.

My post-doctoral research at the Department of Anthropology, North-Eastern Hill University (in Shillong, Meghalaya) promises to adapt more tribal folklore to the medium of animated film as we prepare for a series of participatory media workshops to invite participants from the Wancho and Tangkhul communities in North East India. It is expected that the regional base, mentorship and expertise from the university will promote extended relationships with local groups and artists as we continue to examine the prominent topics, issues and nuances of indigenous cultural representation. Communal stories and ethics remain paramount in the project of human survival. The new project, titled *Stories of Our Ancestors*, is planned to include a short film adapted from the oral narrative traditions of the last remaining Andamanese people of the Andaman Islands for comparative study to register how local traditions have prioritized respect for the natural environment and restraint in the use of resources. The overarching aim of this project will be to illuminate the wisdom of indigenous community knowledge and to resituate traditional subjects from a frozen past to a dynamic present. This work has therefore acquired significance as an activist project to create socially responsible media, nurture skill development and analytical processes, and at the same time to contribute to decolonize research and knowledge production.

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