THE ANIMATED MYTHOLOGIES OF TRIBAL INDIA: FROM TALES OF ORIGINATION TO MULTIMEDIA TECHNOLOGY

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Abstract

Indigenous cultures worldwide have long held distinctive beliefs that ascribed a living soul or *anima* to biological and non-biological entities including plants, particular inanimate objects and to natural phenomena. To the people who belonged to these traditional social groups, organic matter was vibrant, sentient and existed in dynamic relationship to Humankind. Anthropological studies seek to decode the nuances of tribal rituals and the traditional practices of 'other' cultures; however, the underpinning of objectivity is challenged by indigenous research, to question the underlying authority. For these societies, the merit is present in the interconnections and relationships.

In India, liminal local perspectives have been largely excluded from mainstream media and this project investigates ethnographic film and animation as participatory media practice by indigenous storytellers in collaborations with the film-maker. The aim is to also present the contemporary experiences recounted by the participants as we revisit their timeless narratives. In the process this becomes a transformative experience that reconnects us with the social function of the artistic practices that have sustained traditional societies.

Keywords: *Indigenous media; tribal storytelling; mythologies; participatory practice, experimental animation.*

Indigenous cultures worldwide have long held distinctive belief systems that ascribed a living soul or *anima* to biological and non-biological entities including plants, particular inanimate objects such as rocks, mountains and rivers and to natural phenomena, for example, wind and thunder. To the people who belonged to these traditional social groups, organic matter was vibrant, sentient and existed in dynamic relationship to Humankind. Cohabitation with non-material beings was not always peaceful (Rose 1998) as some of the supernatural entities were considered to be malevolent. As the tangible and the intangible that surrounded them were responsive, the people of the traditional village community needed to communicate with and appease them: they were motivated by faith that they would then be protected and safe from calamity. They required mediators to determine what sacrifices were to be carried out to placate the spirits that they believed in. The term "shaman" is frequently translated as a healer, who would sometimes become possessed by supernatural entities and would offer gifts including blood sacrifice to them (Hallowell 1960). This "belief in souls or spirits" was labeled as 'animism' by Edward Tylor (1871).

It is now accepted that indigenous knowledge exists from a reference point that is different to the western ideological paradigm. This epistemology that is holistic and focused on interconnected relationships challenges the positivism of the concept of a single reality that can be investigated from an objective standpoint. At this juncture, it is more productive to recognise the possibility for multiple viewpoints to disclose the more complete picture and to engage dialogue for social cohabitation and enhancing knowledge (Wilson 2001), than to reject the tribal narratives on the grounds that they are not literally true. I will discuss how the adaptation of indigenous mythologies for the medium of animated film can become a way to study the cultural meanings of the traditional narratives and to more accurately represent the array of archetypal characters that inhabit these tales.

The indigenous communities worldwide studied their surroundings and they learnt from what they had observed. They were entirely dependent on nature, and accordingly, they revered it. The knowledge embedded in the cultural traditions of these groups includes expertise about the traditional technologies of subsistence (for example, about the tools and techniques for hunting or agriculture), ethnobotany, ecological awareness, theories about the climate, insight on celestial navigation and traditional medicine. This wisdom that was learnt by firsthand experience was tried and tested and had the practical purpose of aiding survival under demanding physical conditions.

The perceived connection and kinship with the intangible entities that they believed vitalized their terrain also meant the assumed responsibility to sustain and safeguard their environment. The evidence that traditional societies have been more focused on preserving their own social, cultural and environmental stability than on maximizing production (Berkes 1993; Mazzocchi 2006) is reflected by the indigenous cultural dynamic of coexistence with nature and its distinction from the approach that is directed at controlling nature and exploiting resources (Overgaard 2010). However this is different from the image of the 'Noble Savage' (Dryden 1672), the idealized stereotype of the 'primitive' person suspended in time that has found popularity with commentators from outside the community.

In India, the people that are classified as belonging to Scheduled Tribes comprise 8.6 percent of the total population (Ministry of Tribal Affairs, 2012) and they mostly live in the Central, South and North East regions. The term 'tribe' is frequently contested by the claim that it was an artificial constructed label ascribed during the British colonial period. The separation of particular marginalized groups into this category conferred entitlements to certain exemptions, benefits and reservations that were intended to provide equality and protection to them (Schleiter and Maaker 2010; Sharma 2012; Srikant 2014) and

the heterogeneity of these groups continues to be considered as a threat to the national unity. The exclusive use of the term 'indigenous' for tribal groups is also disputed in India, on the basis that the wider Indian caste society is also 'native' to the subcontinent.

The values of accumulation, investment, profit and surplus were largely unknown to the small scale indigenous subsistence economy of the tribal communities and indigenous knowledge was found to be incapable of meeting the productivity needs of the modern world. The national policy is to integrate these groups into the mainstream society through the education system under the mandate for development and modernization. Indigenous topics and perspectives are systematically omitted from modern career centered education and in India indigenous languages, worldviews, teachings and experiences are excluded from contemporary educational institutions (Veerbhadranaika et al. 2012; Brahmanandam and Bosu Babu 2016). In tandem with the rapidly changing way of life that is accelerated by the migration from the village setting to the urban centres, the younger generations from these ethnic groups are losing touch with their mother tongue languages, traditional narratives and cultural practices. In the process, indigenous knowledge is becoming neglected and lost. The collective knowledge that was passed down from their ancestors

provided direction and guidance for present, immediate and local circumstances: for example, when to plant crops and when to harvest; how to manage the water supply and how to resolve social conflict. As the stories contribute to provide children with important life skills, this outlines the importance of local knowledge and shows why the myths, songs and stories that are the repositories of indigenous wisdom must be sustained for the wellbeing of the community. This knowledge also established and sustained a sense of identity in the connections to community and landscape.

When oral traditions cease to be passed down, the stories vanish and meanwhile tribal identities are progressively destabilized (Grenier 1998), so that the young generation presupposes that their own cultures are outdated and consigned to the past. On the other hand, mass media entertainment now reaches previously isolated areas of India on television and mobile communication devices and animation is captivating and compelling for the younger people: many of them are now more familiar with imported cartoons such as *Chhota Bheem* (2012) *Kongfu Panda* (2008) and Japanese Anime than with their own cultural stories. The motivation for this research has emerged from my background as an animation practitioner, and the personal interest for tribal narratives and folk art forms. I propose that animation can

be used as a medium to retell tribal mythologies and reignite interest for the younger generation towards the local narratives and cultural values, as well as its use to disseminate this knowledge further afield.

To create animation, sequences of single images are manipulated to simulate the appearance of movement. Traditional techniques of animation included hand drawn or painted sequences of images and stop-motion animation, by which inanimate objects are moved in increments and re-photographed each time. Today most animations are made with computer-generated imagery (CGI). If animation is 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 use of animation as a tool for artists diverges from the commercial productions that link to merchandising for children (Davis 2001). When it first appeared in the 1920s, experimental animation was considered as a hybrid art form. It attracted modern artists as a way of adding movement to their paintings and graphic designs (Starr 1987). 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 rarely seeking or finding popular success (Halas and Manvell 1959). This interpretation of animation

as an experimental, transformational process further suggests how it is compatible with traditional artistic practices.

The *Tales of the Tribes* was a practice-led research project that set out to test the use of animation to represent indigenous narratives and engage collaboration from traditional storytellers and artists to produce a collection of five sample short animated films as adaptations from the oral traditions of indigenous communities in Central and North East India. The project aimed to revisit this archive of local cultural knowledge, and to present it to younger audiences in a contemporary accessible form. The common theme of the animated films is Humankind's mythological connection with animals and spirits – essentially the natural and supernatural realms.

For the traditional Tani tribal communities in Arunachal Pradesh in North East India, their lives were surrounded by a great company of good and evil spirits, above who rises the majestic figure of the Sun-Moon, Doini Polo. This supreme deity is the eye of the world; the witness, who watches, guides, protects and represents the truth: an oath taken in the name of Doini Polo is the most binding of all (Elwin 1958). Their own sacred histories are recounted in the form of the oral transmission of their mythologies and creation stories by the traditional priest. These stories are the narratives that inform all their cultural practices

and establish Humankind's deep connection and integration with the environment. Material existence is animated by supernatural characters: there are spirits for the forest, the mountains, the hills, streams and rivers; spirits of the sky and those that take the form of animals and birds. These entities must be pacified by prescribed sacrifices to ensure social well-being and survival. Anthropological studies seek to decode the nuances of tribal rituals and the traditional practices of 'other' cultures. The underpinning of objectivity is challenged by indigenous research, to question the underlying authority. For these traditional societies, the merit is present in the interconnections and relationships (Smith 1999). The story that was chosen for adaptation from the oral traditions of Arunachal Pradesh of Abotani, who is regarded as the first ancestor of Humankind by the Tani group of tribes in the central region, represents the close relationship and separation of Abotani and his brother Yapom (or Bura Picha to the Apatani), ascribed as the ancestor of all the subsequent supernatural entities in the world.

Indigenous knowledge is inherently tied to particular landscapes - areas that are sought after by Government and multi-national investors who intend to capitalize on the natural resources. In India the discourse that views the indigenous tribes as in need of modernization, integration and development

mobilizes the drive to absorb and integrate the tribal communities into the wider society under the aegis of development, yet these communities are frequently left out of the same development projects that proclaim to bring benefits to them (Beniwal 2013; Venkat 2016). The topical issue of indigenous land rights is also represented in the ancient folklore, and the *Abotani* story from Arunachal Pradesh, in which the central dispute between Abotani and his brother is one example of the theme of conflict over land that offers a description for Humankind's preferred habitation in the valley.

Many of the stories of origination that connect these communities to the landscape relate how their ancestors emerged from the earth, as seen in the story that was adapted from the Angami tradition of Nagaland for the film *Man Tiger Spirit* in the *Tales of the Tribes* (2017) collection. This animated film is based on a story that presents an unusual brotherhood between the three protagonists and it further represents the mythical divergence and distance of Humankind from nature and the supernatural realm. The almost ubiquitous conversion by the Naga tribes to Christianity arguably informs the initial assessment of the spirit as 'evil' during the deconstruction of the story with local informants in keeping with religious monotheism; interestingly, further discussion disclosed the evaluation that as

this character had assisted the human being to succeed in the competition that was set up to determine the partition of the terrain, he could therefore not be defined as malicious. This shows how the adaptation process can ignite analysis of the representation of the original characters from the local people.

As each of the single frames of animation is conceived and created individually, the medium has broader scope than live action to represent the fantastical and the supernatural. To build on this theory, Halas and Bachelor's (cited by Hoffer 1981, p. 3) discussion on how animation film is linked to metaphysical reality, specifically how it is not about how things look, but what they mean, indicates that realism is not requisite in animation. This concept is further reaffirmed by Purves (2010) in his identification of how animation communicates ideas that cannot be expressed in our everyday lives. Coomaraswamy's (1977) theory that the language of metaphysics that informs folklore is 'imagistic', suggests 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 indigenous young people in the areas of this study.

Traditional storytelling was also a community activity: the stories that were passed down from generation to

generation through oral retellings fulfilled an interactive function between the teller and the listener, and in this way they constituted a co-creative project. The short films of the *Tales of the Tribes* (2017) collection were developed in the initial phase of story selection and adaptation for scripts and storyboards during a series of five Animation Workshops of three weeks duration each that were held at regional locations in India. The invited local participants were storytellers, artists and young people who were mostly students of higher education at the the urban centres where the workshops were held. Ethnographic film and animation as participatory media practice by indigenous storytellers and artists in collaborations with the film-maker, can present the contemporary experiences recounted by the participants as we revisit the timeless narratives. For the local participants, the exercise in adaptation from the oral to the animated form also meant that they were prompted to discuss and debate how the supernatural characters of their narratives that had not been previously represented in visual form would be depicted in the animated films.

Further evidence of the synergy between animation and traditional artistic practice draws on acclaimed film-maker Norman McLaren's conceptualization that the true essence of animation is the activity that has taken place between what becomes the final frames of the

film: the creation of movement on paper, the manipulation of materials and the adjustment of a model before the act of photographing the image (Solomon cited by Wells 1998). In a similar vein but on the subject of traditional art, Bendix (1997, p.17) has pointed out that "It is not the object…but the desire, the process of searching itself that yields existential meaning". The importance that is placed on the process in experimental animation practice and in traditional artwork can be related to workshops that emphasize the process of adaptation and collaboration, with the subsequent aim of completing the animation production later in the studio environment as was carried out by the student and professional animators for the *Tales of the Tribes* series.

The *Tales of the Tribes* project has incorporated ethnographic practices of observation and interviewing to record insiders' perspectives that are incorporated into the animated artefacts. However as the films are reinterpretations of traditional content for a new medium, they do not claim to deliver ethnographies of the people or places of the study. In this project, the desire for individual authenticity (Bendix 1997) is closely associated with the aim of connecting with the values of the indigenous culture. On this basis, a brief ritualistic appeasement in keeping with the local Tani traditions was commissioned from a traditional priest in Arunachal Pradesh

before commencing the animation production for the short film from that region. 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, instead of simply demanding that they become acculturated. 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.

The position put forward by this research is established in the existential view of authenticity - that of developing a sense of one's own identity, and then living in accord with ones sense of self (Kierkegaard 1985). In the process of commitment to understanding ourselves as dynamic rather than a fixed state of being that relates to the postcolonial context of this work (Bhabha 1994), authenticity is identified in the participatory process of creating these animated adaptations that explore identity and cultural transformations rather than aiming to capture the image of dying cultures discussed by Errington (1998) and evidenced in the photography by Jimmy Nelson (Merrill 2014).

Adaptation through retelling has given rise to many versions of a single folktale as evidenced by the Tani folklore of Central Arunachal Pradesh (Nyori 2004) and in other stories that are shared by multiple communities in the region. For a film-maker working with marginalised groups, fidelity and cultural sensitivities need to be taken into account. This project investigates how adaptation from oral narratives for animated films can be managed with sensitivity to reduce the risk of falsifying the story and making it less representative of the originating culture (Eaton 2002). Participatory film-making emerges as an appropriate method of practice for this work. Participation by the community in every stage of the research supports a more comprehensive outcome and also encourages confidence from partners to conduct their own research (Webb 2009). However, the question about the extent of the influence of the outsider on the form of the film becomes an issue which demands detailed attention in each production so that a balance is negotiated between non-interference and imparting the methods of good-film making practice.

My research was also directed towards "The mutual transformation of coloniser and colonised" (Gandhi 1998, p. 132) and so has a dual purpose – that of promoting a positive self image for indigenous societies and for non-indigenous individuals to realise a more positive attitude towards indigenous paradigms. Co-creative interaction with indigenous groups and receptivity to indigenous values and practices by outside participants was crucial to the aim of this project to challenge the dominant approaches towards these cultures. Other specific ethical considerations during this research project included the responsibility towards sensitive representation; the awareness of the possibility of misrepresentation and the promotion of egalitarian relationships with research partners.

The *Tales of the Tribes* animation series challenges some of the attitudes that persist today in contemporary arts and media. The film adaptations explore representation that ensures that ethnic detail is not merely providing local colour but is the central feature that gives a specific reference point through the visual design, music, dialogues and indigenous values as cultural signifiers in the film (Ashcroft et al. 1989).

On completion, the *Tales of the Tribes* (2017) went on to generate significant interest and discussion when it was screened back to the local communities in their vernacular languages in 2017. This shows that their investment during the production process had enhanced the interest for the films from local audiences. The liminal local perspectives that have been largely excluded from mainstream media need to be articulated and reconstructed in a postcolonial

presentation and through the format of the participatory media project, the content of the myths are identified, deconstructed and translated for modern audiences. The film production had initiated collaboration between media professionals and artists from local communities to update their representation and raise our awareness of the cultural values and knowledge systems of these communities. This contributes to revive and uphold the cultures and becomes a transformative experience that reconnects us with the social function of the artistic practices that have sustained traditional societies.

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