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“Lines that speak”

The Gaidinliu notebooks as language, prophecy, and textuality

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This article navigates my experience of returning copies of the “Gaidinliu notebooks” from the Pitt Rivers Museum (Oxford) to the Zeme Nagas of Assam, India. The notebooks were confiscated in 1932 by the British administrators and donated to the museum. They are from a religious movement, the Heraka, and their prophetess, Gaidinliu (1915–1993). Returning the notebooks highlighted a number of theoretical issues in approaching texts, particularly since these were written in a language that is “untranslatable.” I argue that their textuality requires one to examine the notebooks in relation to the unfolding of the kingdom (*Zeme: heguangram*), using the notion of textuality (Uzendoski 2012) grounded in dreams, prophecy, songs, and visions. Second, to appreciate the value and purpose of the notebooks, one must pay attention to the sonority of sound that manifests the words of the notebooks in song. Finally, these issues point to significant ways in which we understand the relationships between history, language, and experience.

Keywords: Gaidinliu Notebooks, Heraka, textuality, prophecy, language, writing and orality, (un)translatability, India

To unlock a society, look at its untranslatable words.
—Salman Rushdie, *Shame*

I first heard of the “Gaidinliu notebooks” when I was doing research in North Cachar Hills of Assam, India, in 2005.¹ These “notebooks” are associated with the prophetess,

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1. North Cachar Hills is an autonomous district council in the Indian state of Assam inhabited by different ethnic groups, some of them Zeme Nagas. These Naga areas are contiguous with other Indian states of Nagaland and Manipur. Collectively, they are known as Zeliangrong Nagas (who comprise of three kindred tribes: Zeme-Liangmei-Rongmei). North Cachar Hills has recently been renamed as Dima Hasao District but



Gaidinliu (1915–1993), affectionately also known as Rani (Queen), who was the leader of an indigenous religious movement known as the Heraka. No one possessed the notebooks in their entirety. Therefore descriptions were elusive and mysterious—some people talked about them as “god given,” and others as a “script” that contained in it many “signs” about future events. There was speculation that once the notebooks were made available, translated, and understood, it would usher in the *heguangram*, generally translated as “kingdom.” What is this kingdom? And how is one to recognize it? To examine these questions, I realized that the Gaidinliu notebooks required many layers of interpretation that included different modes of communication, and how experience plays a central role in understanding these dynamics.

About this time, on my different field visits, other requests came in: people wanted to know of these “notebooks” and whether I had seen them.² I assuaged their curiosity by informing them that I had seen a copy of the “script” in the Pitt Rivers Museum (PRM) at the University of Oxford. I assured them that I would request a copy from the curator. Upon returning to Britain, I contacted PRM regarding the Gaidinliu notebooks and about taking a copy to the Zeme people of North Cachar Hills.³ They scanned the notebooks and provided copies to take back to the community.

This article, first, is an attempt to reflect on the “afterlives” of these notebooks once they find their way back to the community through issues surrounding textuality, prophecy, and untranslatability. I was also curious about the pervasiveness of the Gaidinliu notebooks in the Zeme imagination. After all, they had not seen them for many years and the Zeme had always told me they were “untranslatable.” These two dimensions together became significant as I attempted to answer this question: what is the relationship between a text that is untranslatable on the one hand and its value to a community on the other? This paper explores the role of the ethnographer, who “returns” an artifact of value, but also someone who helps mediate the relationship between the past, the present, and the future, in a way neither the ethnographer nor the community envisaged. It is written in a reflexive tone that shows my own process of thinking through the issues upon my “discovery” of the notebooks.

The more I started to think about these issues, the more it became apparent that one cannot approach the Gaidinliu notebooks as a text that simply involves reading and writing.⁴ In order to navigate through these complex concerns, this article

most of my Naga informants are unhappy with this change, which was prompted largely by the political leverage the Dimasa ethnic group holds in the district. I retain the use of North Cachar Hills to provide some continuity with colonial records, while also recognizing that this name is largely retained by many of the Zeme Nagas I work with.

2. There are different adjectives used for the Gaidinliu notebooks—diary/script/book/text. For the sake of clarity I use both “Gaidinliu notebooks” (its official nomenclature) and “script” due to the Heraka’s reference to it as “Gaidinliu *sam*” (script). But I will primarily be using the term “notebooks,” as the word “script” tends to refer solely to the written word.
3. I use Zeme and sometimes Zeliangrong interchangeably, although I do use Zeliangrong when referring to the group of tribes rather than simply the Zeme.
4. In this article I focus primarily on what the lines of the pages represent when I returned the copies to the Heraka, rather than on the materiality of these notebooks themselves,



will focus on the idea that texts of this kind cannot be read “cold.” Rather I want to suggest that examining the notebooks as a form of textuality that is grounded in experience, involving dreams, prophecy, songs, and visions, brings about a rich analysis. It allows us to understand the notebooks through the dynamic interaction of the different senses and active participation with the community whose own ambiguous relations with them point to important ways in which we understand the connections between history, language, and experience. Narratives shared by Gaidinliu herself about what the notebooks mean and my own experience of “re-turning” them to the community affirm this view.

Second, rather than look at the notebooks as mere materialization of ink on paper, their textuality requires one to examine the notebooks in relation to the unfolding of the kingdom (*Zeme: heguangram*). Moreover, to appreciate the value and purpose of the notebooks, one must pay attention to the sound that manifests the words of the notebooks in song. Some of the Heraka claim that the songs they have been singing—while the notebooks were inaccessible—derive from the script. These songs—also largely untranslatable due to the use of different languages—are the way in which the words of the notebooks are transmitted to Gaidinliu’s followers. It is not simply the literal meaning of these songs but their overall *affect* that must be understood. Before discussing these issues, it is important to appreciate some of the context surrounding the Gaidinliu notebooks and how they came to be lodged in a museum in England. But first let us turn to some of the theoretical aspects that ground this paper.

Textuality and prophecy

Recent studies have questioned the notion that orality is inferior to alphabetic literacy, or that orality gives way to the written form (Uzendoski 2012; Finnegan 2007; Ingold 2007; Gow 1990; Goody 1996). Many cases from around the world have demonstrated that the manner in which people communicate does not necessarily oppose the oral and the textual. Indigenous peoples, argues Michael Uzendoski, have developed intricate ways of understanding textuality in which “cosmology is inscribed within the body, the social, and the surrounding ecological world” (2012: 55). How are we to understand “text” as a cultural production however? Text, from the Latin *Texo*, means “to make” and more specifically “to weave” (Mignolo 1994: 236). In general, text can be viewed as a technique of weaving a narrative that is inscribed and patterned in images, designs, paintings, and musical notations. Text is therefore a kind of “interweaving or interlacing” (Arnold and Yapita 2006: 6) of voice and writing, a point made by Jacques Derrida (1976). Drawing on Derrida’s understanding of the relationship between text and voice, Denise Arnold and Juan de Dios Yapita (2006) argue that Derrida’s “dynamic play of text” must be broadened to include glyphs, marks on ceramic, footprints in landscapes, and designs—in other words, the “whole conglomeration of signs in any given territory, both above and below” (Arnold and Yapita 2006: 6–7). These deliberations,

which would need another essay to do justice to its considerable intersections with current anthropological literature (Engelke 2007; Keane 2013; Kirsch 2011; Miller 2005).

although useful, require more localized instantiations created in social and cultural spaces than those discussed by Arnold and Yapita.

While textuality is central to understanding the relationship between cosmology, the body, and the natural world, one must also pay attention to the notebooks and their relationship with prophecy, given that the community have not seen the notebooks in over eighty years, and that there is a prophecy associated with their return, heralding the *heguangram*. Prophecy plays an important role for the community. It is referenced in speech through the interpretation of dreams, visions, and predictions, used to explain the mundane and fantastic; woven into stories of old; and often devoted to discussions of change. If we combine the idea of prophecy as “revelation” (Anderson and Johnson 1995; Leavitt 2000), and Ramon Sarró’s notion of prophecy as requiring “constant actualization in the interpretation of the present and equation of the future” (cited in Blanes 2011: 99) we come to understand how the prophecy of the notebooks and its association with *heguangram* unfolds.

First, the bringing of the notebooks is fulfilling a prophecy—my bringing them and what *heguangram* means for the community. Second, the difficulty in understanding their value is compounded by the fact that the notebooks are inexplicable and everyone agrees that this is so. So how are we to “place” them? Just as we are to understand that the notebooks are part of a prophecy, it is also prophecy that enables us to understand the meaning of the notebooks. This brings us to the centrality of a notion of textuality that includes prophecy to illuminate the relationship between text and community, issues surrounding translatability, and how the “eye hearing the script,” sometimes through song, all play an important role in mediating the relationship between the notebooks and their place for the Heraka.

According to the Zeme, the word “*heguangram*” means *heguang* (a state of freedom or “one who is the agent of this freedom”), while *ram* literally refers to a village or community having territorial connotations (Longkumer 2010: 160). Based on tradition, it basically means that a state of freedom will be exercised by an agent in a particular territory. Sometimes, people interpret *heguang* with economic development and access to better health and education. At other times, it is associated with a person, which in the folk tradition was often associated with heroic characters. Rani Gaidinliu, for example, saw herself as the *heguang* in the sense that she brought about a degree of freedom to her people through the reforms she initiated, particularly in the form of the Heraka. Others like Namteduing, whom I will introduce below, see themselves as the *heguang*. At one event Namteduing told me that “if we get *heguangram*, it will be one king rule. The king will be that person who knows the story of the Zeliangrong people from the beginning. Educated persons cannot be king, as they don’t know the history of the Zeliangrong people” (Longkumer 2010: 194). I encountered diverse reactions to the notebooks’ return, marking moments of celebration and anxiety. For some, the memory of the notebooks was like the embers of a dying fire, now rekindled. For others, the return of the notebooks was a form of “heritage,” largely forgotten and representing an era far removed from contemporary society. While Namteduing represents the former and embraces the Gaidinliu notebooks, Ramkhui the president of the Heraka Association represents the latter and rejects the Gaidinliu notebooks. This also demonstrates the tension between urban and rural populations, with urban being associated with forward-looking, progressive attitudes.

Therefore, the tension over the prophecy of the notebooks, I argue, is largely due to the fact that it authorizes a particular discourse (Lincoln 1994) over claims of leadership materialized, in this case, through its return but also through the tradition of *heguangram*. It is once we reflect on these ideas of textuality and prophecy in the form of *heguangram* and the place of song, that we can have some understanding of the place of the notebooks for the Zeme.

Gaidinliu and the “magic books”

The notebooks first came into prominence in 1932 when the British were trying to quell an uprising among the Zeliangrong people of Northeast India in the present states of Manipur, Assam, and Nagaland. The Zeliangrong leader Jadonang and his distant cousin Gaidinliu were at the forefront of this “uprising.” Its purpose was to oust the British from the region, stop the spread of Christianity, and to “reform” their own indigenous religion so that it would meet the challenges of the modern world. In the late 1970s, this movement came to be known as Heraka. Before that, it was simply called the Jadonang—and then Gaidinliu—movement. Today the Heraka is one of the largest indigenous religious movements in the Northeast of India, followed primarily by the Zeliangrong Nagas of Assam, Nagaland, and Manipur drawing on certain influences from Hinduism and Christianity. Heraka, then, literally refers to a process whereby one fends off other gods, who are now seen as “dangerous,” and instead gives primacy to only one deity, Tingwang (the sky god). For example, Chuprai, the god of grain, central to pre-Heraka cosmology, is now replaced with Tingwang. The exact process of how this came about cannot be explained here, but it was related to economic and social reforms, particularly associated with sacrifice. In other words, the economic realities associated with sacrifice had a direct bearing on the cosmological revision of deities (see Longkumer 2007). Rani Gaidinliu is therefore credited with making this transition possible—no sacrifices and obeisance to one god, Tingwang. One of the ways this move was made possible was through the medium of songs. Songs, thus, were powerful ways to protect the people from these “abandoned gods” as the Heraka negotiated this religious change.

However, in the 1930s the British were concerned that the uprisings in Northeast India would destabilize the harmony of the British Empire, as they threatened to ignite ethnic conflicts between different groups of people. For instance, the British were worried that the Zeliangrong would start targeting the Kuki people due to past grievances caused during the Kuki rebellion of 1917–19 (see Longkumer, forthcoming). As a preventive measure, Jadonang had to be stopped. He was seen as inciting the people of the region by proclaiming a “Naga raj” that would reportedly oust the British and “massacre the Kukis.” Jadonang was caught and hanged by the British in 1931, while Gaidinliu escaped to the North Cachar hills, although she was eventually captured and imprisoned the following year.

The first known photograph of Gaidinliu shows a teenage girl, wrapped in a shawl looking rather stricken (see figure 1). When she was captured she was just 16 years old. Her captor, J. P. Mills, who was a colonial administrator, anthropologist, collector, and author, also discovered some curious notebooks. He offered this unflattering description of Gaidinliu:

Magic books of the sorceress Gaidiliu [*sic*] captured with her other property in March 1932. The writing is apparently nothing but meaningless scribbling. She is a Kabui girl of no education at all and taught herself to scribble. Her “literary” power gave her immense prestige and she used to send written messages to her adherents—with verbal messages to say what they meant. (JPM 5/18/32)⁵



Figure 1: Photograph by John Comyn Higgins. Sent to J.H. Hutton, 18 January 1932. Hutton Collection, Cambridge University Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology. P.57507.HUT.

This note appears in an accession book entry associated with the objects when they were donated to the PRM collection. Alongside the confiscated notebooks, the original basket in which the notebooks were kept was also retained. The twelve

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5. Pitt Rivers Museum (PRM) 1928.69.1570.1/2. The entire collection of the Gaidinliu notebooks are classified under the accession number: 1928.69.1570: 1–14. PRM also has other things belonging to Gaidinliu like her ornaments and shawl.



notebooks resemble schoolbooks, with the stationary supplier's name—such as “Swan Brand Exercise Books” or “Swaraj Exercise Book”—inscribed on them (see figures 2 and 3). Most of these notebooks have English names, while some also have Bengali writing in them. Two of them have a photo of Mahatma Gandhi on their cover, and this type of notebook was circulating widely across British Administered India. This suggests that Gaidinliu either procured the exercise books from local bookshops or borrowed them from friends, or that she herself attended one of the government and Christian mission schools in the region.

With regard to the specific “magic books” themselves, nothing much is written. Mills' is probably the last written account of what we know of these books. The fact that Mills kept the notebooks points to his obvious interest as a collector and anthropologist for the colonial archive. Intriguingly, it could also suggest that he took the power of Gaidinliu and the notebooks seriously: to prevent the spread of her influence, the action by Mills forever imprisoned the notebooks, rendering them dormant in the colonial museum.⁶ However, there was another curious incident around this region of India, recorded by the British administrator J. H. Hutton in 1922, and relating to a village in Manipur, Megwema. He calls it the “curious case of the ‘child authoress.’” He writes,

There is a girl who produces sheets of scribblings representing the names of natural objects at the dictation of 10 familiar spirits, six male and four female. There is no doubt but this child, aged about 7, is very much in earnest. She got her mother to obtain writing materials from Kohima at the dictation of the spirits that reside in her and when they arrived fasted seven days of her own accord as a preliminary genna [non-working days—associated with taboos] before beginning to write.⁷

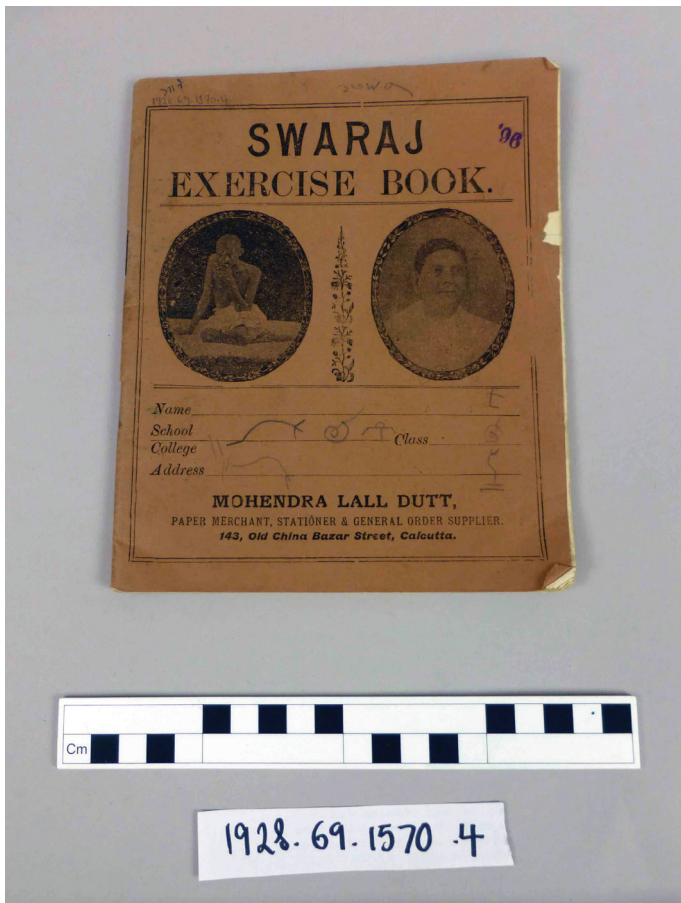
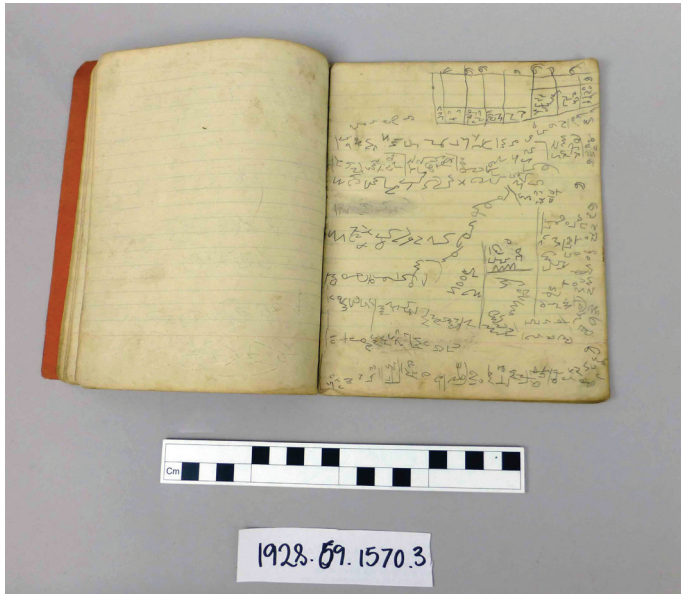
In order to seek some advice with regard to this episode, Hutton then contacts Carveth Read, a British philosopher and logician. In his reply, Read notes,

Your letter about the inspired child who spoils so much writing paper has lain too long unanswered. . . . Amongst ourselves it is a common occurrence for a child to announce its intention of “writing,” and to do so upon every scrap of paper obtainable for some time. But that is plainly imitativeness, and there is no claim to inspiration. This Naga girl cannot have got the idea of writing out of her own consciousness: She must have seen it done or heard it described. She may deny this (I suppose) without intentional deceit. As to the 4 female and 6 male spirits that direct her, does the local belief in “possession” account for such a delusion? . . . What the local belief in possession is I don't know. If it will explain her delusion, that is enough. That the girl should have undertaken to write without any knowledge of what it is to “write,” is impossible; and she herself, therefore, is logically non-existent [*sic*].⁸

6. My thanks to Clare Harris for pointing this out to me (Clare Harris, pers. comm., June 16, 2015).

7. PRM, Hutton Ms. Box 2.

8. PRM, Hutton Ms. Box 3: 74–75.



Figures 2 and 3: Gaidinliu notebooks. Source: Pitt Rivers Museum, University of Oxford, 1928.69.1570. 3-4.



This philosophical arrogance is telling, particularly since Read equates “writing” with a particular kind of learned technique. Anything outside this realm, it appears, is simply dismissed. While it is tempting to suggest that this girl could have been Gaidinliu, who in 1922 was around seven years old, there is no evidence to support this. Nevertheless, the correspondence between Hutton and Read shows that “writing” of this kind was known to exist in the region. It also raises the question of whether or not “writing” is a learned behavior, one that requires imitation. In regard to the Gaidinliu notebooks, it is entirely possible that Gaidinliu herself was aware of writing due to the work of Christian mission and government schools, and the growing presence of the British colonial state. On the other hand, it could also be that writing does not always require a prior exposure to alphabetic literacy but could be related to a kind of retrieval of a previous form of writing, a point I return to below.

It is no surprise that people have dismissed the Gaidinliu notebooks—this includes my own early impressions of the “writings.” When I briefly examined the books in 2005, some pages had writing that resembled the Meitei (language used in Manipur) and Bengali alphabets while other pages had seemingly random lines, circles, and drawings. Overall, the writing was very cryptic. My initial conclusions were that, whatever the reasons for Gaidinliu keeping the notebooks or their efficacy in the minds of her followers, the importance of these writings is that they represent a form of “literary power” that was probably based on imitation influenced by the colonial state (Longkumer 2010: 98). However, this analysis now seems insufficient. An adequate analysis must surely take into account instances where writing is provoked by the spirits (as in Hutton’s report above), and this recognition invites us to consider seriously the manner in which dreams, visions, and prophecy contribute to fashioning the Gaidinliu notebooks. In this respect, the Gaidinliu notebooks can be understood as broadly comparable with other, perhaps more familiar, practices and perspectives, such as those embodied in two competing claims. The first interprets the notebooks as a form of talismanic power drawn from Chinese traditions. The second focuses on how indigenous peoples in the highland areas of South/Southeast Asia—called Zomia (van Schendel 2002)—invoke writing as a kind of retrieval of “lost cultural property” (Scott 2009: 223). The examination of these claims provides a way to understand the larger role of writing and orality in the Zeme context and the tensions associated with what the notebooks represent. However, I find neither of these claims entirely convincing and appeal instead to notions of textuality in order to understand the significance and value of the untranslatable notebooks for the Zeme community.

The spirit of writing

Consider first the idea of the Gaidinliu notebooks as a form of talisman. In Chinese tradition, a talisman represents the “legible” and “illegible” between the “spirit” and “human” world. It serves as a medium that enables communication with, or control of, the sphere of demons and deities. In effect, “talismanic script could express or illustrate ineffable meanings and powers that defy transmission by traditional modalities of communication: oral or written” (Robson 2008: 138). In fact, there is a prevailing theory that suggests that the “earliest forms of writing in China were not used to transcribe human speech but, rather, preceded it and were signs that reflected

the hidden powers of the universe and were used to ‘communicate with the spirits’ (Robson 2008: 136; see also Fleming and Mann 2014). Clearly, the Gaidinliu notebooks could be seen in this tradition of “communicating with spirits,” particularly as Hutton’s report suggests that writing of this kind was present in the region. Furthermore, the only first-hand information we have of the notebooks affirms this view.

According to her biographer, Ramkhui Newme, Gaidinliu said that these “scriptures” (Zeme: *samde*) came from the Bhuban cave, the place where the Jadonang and Gaidinliu movement began. Her biographer says,

In the wall, beside the big stone, there is some scripture. When Jadonang and Gaidinliu enter inside, both of them wrote the scripts in their books. That script is God script. God, Jadonang, and Gaidinliu are the only ones who can read that script. Others cannot read it. With that script, we will know what will happen in the world . . .⁹

This “talismanic model” is useful in so far as it recognizes the “script” as a “communication” with gods or spirits. However talismans were often worn or digested to dispel “demons” or to protect people from any untoward incidents. With regard to the notebooks, the material script itself is not thought to have this power to act like a talisman, nor can it be interpreted or translated. Rather, as I will show below, it is the sound of the “words”—involving an act of seeing sound through song—which offers this protection.

The second viable claim worth considering focuses on “lost cultural property” and views the Gaidinliu notebooks as a kind of “literary power.” Narratives of loss and return are present more widely in Southeast Asian contexts where, for example, they are associated with the return of a lost book among the Karen of Burma. European missionaries bringing the Bible were viewed as bringing the lost “Book of Gold” (Kammerer 1990: 282). A similar theme of loss and return can be seen in the case of the Hmong living in the borderlands of China, Vietnam, Laos, and Thailand, who are said once to have had all of the characteristics of a state-making people, such as literacy, irrigated rice cultivation, and kings. When the missionaries arrived with their bibles and scripts, these texts were seen as the “restoration of lost cultural property” (Scott 2009: 223).

It is therefore not surprising that the theme of loss and retrieval is also found in the case of the Zeliangrong Nagas. One of the few Naga writers to comment on the Gaidinliu notebooks (Pamei 1996) even suggests that they are written in the ancient Naga script rediscovered by Jadonang, who apparently used it widely to compose hymns. Furthermore, some claim that this ancient script has been deciphered (Pamei 1996: 104), but supporting evidence is not easily found. Thus there is a possibility that the Gaidinliu notebooks are related to the myth of the lost script, recovered by Gaidinliu. In different Zeme versions, the script was either eaten by a dog, lost in a flood, or burned during a massive fire; variations on a theme that resonate with other regional cases (see Scott 2009: 221–22). James C. Scott presents us with a viable thesis about the loss of writing among indigenous communities, which could be applied to the Zeliangrong Nagas as well.¹⁰

9. This biography by Ramkhui Newme is not published and is in Zeme. I translated it with the help of Adeule, who worked as a research assistant during my fieldwork in 2005.

10. On a more general note, the Nagas do not have an indigenous written language but have adopted the Romanized alphabet for writing. Hindi is sometimes used but to a lesser degree.



Scott makes the claim that the lack of script in the highland areas of South and Southeast Asia (Zomia) was due to their choice to evade the state-making projects of the valleys. Therefore, to be seen as not having a written history (a mechanism of the state) can work in their favor. Marginalized ethnic groups, Scott argues, can maximize cultural flexibility by abandoning written traditions. The shorter their history and genealogies, the more they can “invent on the spot” and evade state assimilation (2009: 235). Lack of written history, however, does not mean that only writing determines the collective and common past but rather how much history one wishes to illuminate is an active editorial choice (237).

Scott’s model holds that indigenous people choose to reject the written in favor of orality as a form of resistance against state incorporation, so could it not also be that narratives of “retrieving” a script reflect a choice to (re)position a people within a written tradition?¹¹ While Scott’s arguments are interesting, they fall short of explaining the actions of the young girl described by Hutton and too easily dismissed by Carveth Read. The idea that her “writing” could be a form of “lost cultural property” is certainly one point. However, in the case of the notebooks, since they are untranslatable and were possibly never intended to be translatable in the straightforward sense, the idea of “lost cultural property” holds less sway. I would like to consider an alternative possibility by suggesting that the notebooks evoke the importance of dreams, visions, and prophecy to illustrate them as a form of textuality.

Lines that speak

How then do the Gaidinliu notebooks help us think about the nexus between orality, writing, and indeed other forms of communication? Tim Ingold, in his innovative book *Lines* (2007), traces the history of lines and their different manifestations in diverse cultures. Ingold’s intervention allows the possibility to explore the notion that ever since people starting speaking and gesturing, they have also made lines to communicate these sentiments. It is only in the modern period that people started separating language from music, speech from song, and writing from drawing (Ingold 2007: 3). Here, I suggest, it is useful to think about our dominant notions of writing as one of many possible forms of communication, and one that does not necessarily compete with orality. In fact, to see the notebooks as grounded in the poetics of story that “elicit perspective truths” (Uzendoski 2012: 73) in their own right is essential if we are to make any interpretative progress.

Among the Nagas of India, multiple modes of communication are of immense importance in both historical and contemporary practices. For instance, Ao Naga shawls not only demonstrate the identity of the weaver and the wearer but the patterns on the cloth act as a language of power that narrates the place of the individual

11. This is not a one-way process as indigenous people like the Zeme also give importance to writing. In other contexts among indigenous peoples, claims over land and heritage are increasingly becoming important due to the politics of identity. For example, Greg Johnson’s (2011) study shows how Hawai’ians use the written word in the form of genealogies archived in state records to contest claims to ownership over sacred objects. He calls this “courting culture” where the legal domain is used to great effect.

within society (Wettstein 2008). Similarly, material objects like stones recall stories of ancestors and their deeds, enable remembrance of certain events, or point to the origin of peoples through memorials and megaliths (Blackburn 2008). Another vivid contemporary example of textuality is drawn from Zasha Colah's work where she examines the *Luingamla Kashan*—a kind of sarong worn by women in the Naga areas of Manipur—as a comparison with the Gaidinliu notebooks. The *Kashan* tells the story of Luingamla, a girl of fifteen, who was killed by Indian army personnel for resisting rape as she was weaving a *Kashan*. The memory and spirit of Luingamla is kept alive by her friend Zamthingla Ruivah who weaves a *Kashan* using the “luminosity of the red wool, and gaunt elán of the woven designs.” Zamthingla explains that “red meant joy, it hoped to express beauty,” and to evoke the “irrepressible joy and spiritedness of Luingamla” (Colah 2008: 16). In sustaining these memories, the multiple modes of textuality bring in to focus not only its cultural richness but also its quotidian value in evoking something that cannot be captured through the mere writing of words on paper.

In another instance, Peter Gow (1990) recalls how Sangama from the Piro of Peru, an illiterate man according to Western standards, claimed he could read the newspaper like the colonial whites. Sangama rejects the dominant notion of writing by utilizing his own shamanic tradition of seeing, which transformed the paper into something more profound. For Sangama, Gow notes, “reading is a transformation of paper, from a surface covered with ‘design,’ into a corporeal woman who speaks to him, and reveals information about distant realms” (1990: 98). Similarly, shamanic practices of the Shipibo and Conibo Indians in the Peruvian Amazon utilized particular designs, which were interpreted by their early interlocutors as hieroglyphic script. These patterns and designs were woven into cloth, ceramic pots, and thatched roofs. Such patterns, as Ingold argues, could be a kind of “musical code” since songs were sung as cloth was woven to “harmonize the design.” In the words of the ethnologist Angelika Gebhart-Sayer, the Shipibo-Conibo Indian songs “can be heard in a visual way . . . and the geometric designs are themselves lines of sound” (1985: 170; quoted in Ingold 2007: 36). In this sense, if one approaches the Gaidinliu notebooks as a design that requires a literary analysis, or an artistic interpretation, we are missing the point. But seen through the lens of textuality, involving a multiplicity of modalities, the “notebooks” open up new and fresh possibilities of interpretation.

Dreamlines and the future event

One possibility lies in the relation of the notebooks to a particular kind of coded message, an alternative language system that Gaidinliu developed to help navigate her life-world. A long-term follower of Gaidinliu since her teenage years, Peihei, believes that the Gaidinliu notebooks are diary-like, consisting in “words” communicated by God Tingwang in visions and dreams. When I interviewed Peihei in Laisong village in North Cachar Hills, she told me how these writings could predict future events while also operating as didactic instructions from Tingwang, which Jadonang and Gaidinliu could use to teach their followers. The notebooks were thus used to legitimate Gaidinliu as the successor to Jadonang upon his death in 1931. Gaidinliu reportedly told Peihei that Jadonang found out about his

impending death by opening his own notebook.¹² In red ink it said, “this year you will not eat from the harvest”—which meant that his time was drawing to an end. In Gaidinliu’s notebook, on the same day, it was written, “everything is in your hands: north/south; east/west.” Peihei even remembers the words by heart though they are largely untranslatable: “*Nda ningtau nehiu zongpa melin mehui kula melin nehui . . .*” Because the British were looking for Gaidinliu at that time in 1932, she had to hide the notebooks as they contained the main ideas needed to lead the Zeliangrong people. She finally found a hiding place and called it *Heraguleuli* (God-book/belongs to God).¹³ When I asked Peihei if this notebook is the same as the notebooks in Pitt Rivers Museum, she replied, “Yes, but not all of it.”¹⁴ When I enquired again, why these “notebooks” are important for the Heraka, she said:

The script is important for the Heraka and for me. But we cannot read and understand. But one day, we will understand the notebook. When the time comes for the Zeliangrong people, God will send one person to lead. With that hope we live (figure 4).



Figure 4: Peihei, a disciple of Gaidinliu, looking at the notebooks in Laisong village, Assam, in 2014. Author’s copy.

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12. It could be entirely possible that the Gaidinliu notebooks kept at the PRM contained Jadonang’s writings as well. It is difficult to corroborate this.
13. Among the Tibetan Buddhists, texts are often hidden for future “discovery,” and are called Treasures, which are “texts of mystical revelation” (Gyatso 1986: 7). These Treasures have to be found by an adept disciple who then searches for the content of the revelation, later to be disseminated and published as texts.
14. This is rather ambiguous. It could be that Peihei meant that not all of Gaidinliu’s notebooks are in the PRM, or that the notebook that was hidden was only part of the collection of notebooks now in the PRM. She probably meant the former.

This millenarian idea is quite pervasive among the Heraka and was first related to Jadonang. The idea of the kingdom came in a dream. Jadonang dreamed of a “Makam Gwangdi,” or “Naga Kingdom” (apparently interpreted by colonial officials as Naga Raj). This vision of the kingdom, as the historian Gangmumei Kamei explains, “[was] for religious purification, cultural resurgence and social integration, his political dream of a kingdom was a natural response to the British colonialism which was always resisted and never compromised by him, nor by his people in the past” (2002: 30). The way that the textuality of the notebooks weaves a narrative about prophecy is important. The continuities between the past, Jadonang’s kingdom, and the present notion of the “*heguangram*,” are striking. My encounter with Namteduing substantiated these connections.

I had met Namteduing many times. He is known as a “mad” man who has proclaimed that he is Jadonang reincarnated (hanged by the British in 1931 for sedition). He is controversial not only because he has caused division within the Heraka movement but also because his views are seen as very adversarial. For example, he has openly challenged the leaders of the established hierarchy of the Heraka movement by questioning their interpretation of the “true hingde” (true law) of Tingwang, the Zeme high god. So when I met him again after many years, I expected a highly polemical conversation. After a few hours of talking, I brought out a copy of the Gaidinliu notebooks, which I gave to him as a present. We talked for another hour or so and as I was about to leave, he said this:

Once we get the script [Gaidinliu notebooks], *heguangram* will come. But we don’t know who will be the one [who brings the script and translates the untranslatable]. Maybe our friend [Arko] who has brought the script from Oxford will bring about *heguangram*.

I left the place in silence. The silence was only punctuated by a humorous comment from my friends: “I can’t believe our brother [Arko] will bring about the *heguangram*, especially since it is coming from Namteduing.” “You could be the return of Jadonang.” And they laughed. I was slightly unnerved by these comments because in the past when the anthropologist Ursula Graham Bower conducted research in Northeast India in the 1940s, she was often seen as the return of their prophetess, Gaidinliu, and was treated reverentially (Bower 1952: 144–46). It does demonstrate, however, that prophecies of this nature are not only uncommon but people’s reaction to these episodes could mean my own apotheosis.

This incident illustrates two significant points. First is the very nature of the “script” and how its return would usher in the *heguangram*. Although, it was difficult to ascertain if it was the actual notebooks that were required, I got the sense that the copies were equally acceptable because Namteduing wanted his photograph taken with them (see figure 5). It is the secret coded messages reportedly inscribed in the notebooks, rather than the notebooks per se, that are valuable for the founding of the *heguangram*. Here the “afterlives” of an artifact are significant as they animate its relationship with the community, heightened in this case by urgency. For Namteduing, and for some of the Heraka, it is not merely the “return” of the notebooks that is important. The coming of the kingdom also requires an agent to make this transition possible—to render the untranslatability translatable—and to bring clarity to the impending kingdom. The

community now possesses the notebooks, making the unveiling of the kingdom a real possibility.



Figure 5: Namteduing holding a copy of the Gaidinliu notebooks along with his followers in Hajaichak, Assam, in 2014. Author’s copy.

The second significant point relates to the positionality of the ethnographer. Perhaps without the ethnographer the notebooks would have remained, out of sight and forgotten, in the Pitt Rivers Museum. The ethnographer, who searches for and locates the artifacts, has resources available and thus the means to bring copies of the notebooks from Oxford to Assam. This results in the ethnographer, in a small way, making history and contributing to the story of the Heraka. The episode of returning these artifacts highlights the textuality of the notebooks in all their cultural intricacies. Yet, while the return of the notebooks illuminates our understanding of the Heraka’s kingdom, there are abiding concerns within this narrative, especially when we take into account competing stories of “texts” and the authority they represent for the Heraka community.

Telling stories, navigating history

It is important to bear in mind that there is not a single authoritative version of how the notebooks came about. There are multiple versions, or “storeys,” that “to read (to listen to) a narrative is not merely to move from one word to the next, it is also to move from one level to the next” (Barthes 1977: 87). The Zeme are great storytellers, and the term they use to evoke this is *rasam*. Unlike Western notions where myth, history, legend, and folktale are carefully defined, the Zeme notion of *rasam* is a comprehensive mode of social practice.

There are several stories illuminating the origins of Gaidinliu's writings. According to one Heraka story, the notebook "writings" were received in Bhuban cave by Gaidinliu. As mentioned by Gaidinliu's biographer and interview accounts, the walls of the cave were filled with writing. They transmitted an aura of the written form that Gaidinliu took down in detail: the notebooks are probably the only traces of what was then visible in the cave. People who visit Bhuban cave now narrate visions of words appearing suddenly and then disappearing again (Longkumer 2010: 99). Could it be that Gaidinliu captured in written form these images of words as they appeared? Another version of the origin narrative has it that when Gaidinliu sacrificed *mithuns* (a semidomesticated bison), she would cut off the penis and, inside, find the alphabet for the scripture. This version may also signify the emasculation of the male organ over which she now had power. However, the more popular version of this "script" comes from two other stories.

The first story goes like this: Gaidinliu would often visit Zeilad lake, an important landmark for the Zeliangrong people, due to its association with the lake deity, *Hechawang* (python god). On this occasion, the fearless Gaidinliu approached *Hechawang* and caught his large head and emptied some eggs into his mouth as a gift of food. In return, *Hechawang* requested that Gaidinliu bring him a perfect plantain leaf. Using his long tongue, *Hechawang* wrote the script on the plantain leaf and said, "all the good things to be taught through this script, I have given to you." *Hechawang* requested that Gaidinliu write the words down in a book, as the plantain leaf would deteriorate. There are variations in the story of what was written on the plantain leaf. One tradition suggests that a song was written, while another implies that it contained words associated with the Zeliangrong Heraka kingdom.

The second story takes its cue from the Hingde Book (law book) of the Heraka, a book that is now in circulation as an official "religious text." According to tradition, a king whose name was Manshai ruled the world. He could read a mysterious script, called the Hingde Book, and could heal using it. One day he was ill and asked his wife to bring the Hingde Book from the laundry basket where he had kept it. Upon searching, she was unable to find it. Manshai immediately thought that Tingwang (their high god) had taken it away. Because he could not use the secret codes hidden in the Book to cure his illness, he turned to the *herakapeu* (literally, god-communicator) to prophesize. Thus was ushered in the age of prophecy. Mediation was now absolutely necessary to communicate with gods through sacrifice. Immediate access to god through individual effort was challenged by the *herakapeu*. For many generations, it is said, people suffered due to the heavy burden of sacrifice. Now, it is said, the Hingde Book, lost during Manshai's generation, was recovered by Jadonang and Gaidinliu in the Bhuban cave. According to the Heraka, they no longer need the *herakapeu*, as they can access god immediately through the words of the Book (Longkumer 2010: 97–98).

These stories trace a relationship between the official Hingde Book, the Gaidinliu notebooks, and Manshai's script that tradition says existed long before. But what is this relationship? One way to approach an answer is to suggest that all these texts exist in people's imaginations. The Hingde Book is "sacred scripture," mirroring the original Manshai script that was reportedly removed by Tingwang and now returned. This echoes what the French sociologist Danièle Hervieu-Léger (2000)



has called a “lineage of belief” that “is affirmed and manifested in the essentially religious act of recalling a past which gives meaning to the present and contains the future” (2000: 125). But with regard to the Gaidinliu notebooks, the relationship is more complicated. Some have said that what Gaidinliu wrote has no link with the Hingde Book or with Manshai’s script, and that they have a different purpose: they are meant to bring about the “kingdom,” as intimated above.

The more people I asked about the notebooks, the more it became apparent that their history is not entirely related to the Hingde Book, nor to Manshai’s script, nor even to the Book currently in use. Rather, their purpose is more exact but shrouded in mystery because their translatability will be rendered visible only when the time is right. There is also a certain uneasiness among the Heraka elite with regard to the Gaidinliu notebooks. When I showed them to the leader of the Heraka movement, Ramkhui Newme, he was not particularly elated or deferential toward the notebooks. He concluded that no one really understands them now, but that they remain an important artifact of “Zeme heritage.” For him, the Hingde Book is more important. This kind of positioning is also common among others of the Heraka because writing is associated with prestige, with some advantages over orality. Written texts make certain kinds of orthodoxies possible—whether it is stories, legends, myths, rules, or laws. Once a text becomes the indisputable point of reference, certain readings may be discouraged or disallowed. Clear distinctions can be made between what is “original” and what are deviations, particularly when a text is deemed authoritative (Scott 2009: 227). Here is how Helui in the town of Haflong put it:

All of this [laws, rules about practice] is written completely in the Hingde Book. We have not written before, so we have forgotten a lot. So nowadays with the use of Hingde Book, we can be *perfect Heraka* (complete Heraka). If we have our Hingde Book, our next generation, with the help of this Book, can preserve Heraka Hingde. If we have written records about Manshai, *Herakandengpeu* [famous Zeme traditional healer], then we can read through the books and no need to ask the old men.

The distinct advantage of the written word over the oral is visible in the above conversation—to be perfect Heraka requires that the stories be standardized for posterity. In a way it also shifts the balance of power from the community of storytellers to the individual who now has the power to read on her or his own accord. In this regard, the Gaidinliu notebooks cannot act in the same way as the Hingde Book due to the former’s perceived mystifying content. This tension also points to the larger problem of alphabetic writing that has been introduced to indigenous peoples like the Zeme through British colonialism, Christian missions, and the Indian state.

As the above discussion suggests, alphabetic literacy and writing imposes a kind of knowledge. It is a sign of “literary power” related to the capillary powers of the bureaucratic state, schooling techniques, and the job market. Indeed, in this context orality is slowly giving way to alphabetic literacy as the dominant mode of discourse. Therefore, those who believe in the Gaidinliu notebooks are, I was told, “village folk” who decry the present as oppressive and want a better future. The textuality of the notebooks thus opens them to an undesirable diversity of

opinions that are clearly against the grain of orthodoxy. People like Namteduing and Peihei represent the ideal of *heguangram*, the kingdom to come. Claude Lévi-Strauss makes an astute observation with regard to this debate. He says, “Writing is a strange thing. . . . The one phenomenon which has invariably accompanied it is the formation of cities and empires: the integration into a political system, that is to say, of a considerable number of individuals into a hierarchy of castes and slaves. . . . It seems rather to favor the exploitation than the enlightenment of mankind” (quoted in Scott 2009: 228).

The narrative of the Gaidinliu notebooks appears to embrace a paradox—the untranslatable notebooks are a form of resistance to incorporation in the state that requires a certain legitimacy where legible writing is privileged over orality but, at the same time, they demand an orthodoxy of interpretation and thus translation. However, there is also a more quotidian understanding of the notebooks among the Zeme. Asked simply, “what are the Gaidinliu notebooks?” an elderly man answered: “This script has been taught to the people through song. The song is the sound of the script and the song is difficult to translate.”

The embodiment of the notebooks in the hearts, minds, and bodies of the Heraka people is in their songs, confirmed by many of the older people who remember Gaidinliu teaching what the elderly man narrated. The relationship now seemed almost natural but further complicated by the very fact that the songs are untranslatable too.¹⁵ It is said that many of the songs are written in five or six different languages. Even the people who perform these songs could never understand their exact meaning. This raises important questions as to the meaning of the songs and their intended audience.

This issue is not unique to the Zeme. For instance, Ingold notes how for medieval monks in Europe, scripture was understood “not as something made, but as something that *speaks*” (Ingold 2007: 13; italics in original). Listeners were expected to hear the voices of the biblical scripture and learn from them. In a certain sense: “Instead of using their ears to look, they were using their eyes to hear, modeling their perception of the written word upon their experience of the spoken one” (Ingold 2007: 13). Therefore, writing, reading, listening, and understanding were aspects of the same thing. As Dominique Leclercq explains, one was expected to read the text “with one’s whole being: with the body, since the mouth pronounced it, with the memory that fixes it, with the intelligence that understands its meaning and with the will which desires to put it into practice” (quoted in Ingold 2007: 17). Similarly, Matthew Engelke’s work among the Friday Apostolics in Zimbabwe, notes how sound in song is a vital part of their “live and direct” experience with God (2007: 200–23). Engelke suggests that the sensorium of sound for the Friday Apostolics is evident in song: “There is something about the human voice in song to God that serves as a vehicle for God’s presence—that indeed *is* God’s presence.

15. This is strictly not the case, as a few of them can be translated with the help of a gifted linguist or groups of them who speak the three kindred languages—Zeme, Liangmei, and Rongmei, alongside Hindi, Nepali, Assamese, and Nagamese. But the point of the untranslatability of the songs suggests that, at least for the Heraka, the writing of the notebooks is elevated to the divine plane where everyday human linguistic diversity cannot comprehend it.



Singing, as a certain kind of sound, conveys that presence in itself” (2007: 207; italics in original).

While the significance of sound cannot be ignored in the Heraka case, the relationship between the untranslatability of the song and the notebooks requires a closer examination of the distinction between writing, speaking/singing, seeing, and hearing. The relationship between the notebooks and their visualization through song is a helpful way of approaching the Gaidinliu notebooks. The notebooks themselves appear to have no interpreters or readers who can make sense of them in the immediate present. But their chief translator, Gaidinliu, has passed on the tradition to her followers so that now, as the elder earlier commented, “this script has been taught to the people through song. The song is the sound of the script.” The way sounds play a role in language is not unique to this context.

The Qur’an is but one example of the divine presence in language. This is why the Qur’an is often seen as “nontranslatable.” The prophet received oral transmission by the angel Gabriel as sounds, which comprised an inalienable part of the transmitted sacred text. To attempt to translate this would mean exposing the Qur’an to the diversity of linguistic differences and give rise to potential conflict and disagreement. Only in the Arabic text does the Qur’an remain stable (Keane 2013: 7). In contrast, the Bible risks inaccuracy by making it translatable into the vernacular. Nevertheless, the belief is that through these translations, people gain access to God. This inherent conception of language as divine presence can equally be applied to the Gaidinliu notebooks. However, unlike both the Qur’an and the Bible, the Gaidinliu notebooks’ access to God cannot depend on either their non-translatability or their translatability. If we are to suggest that the songs sung by the Heraka are the notebooks in sound this lets us see them in a different way. I suggest that once you understand the notebooks through sound—the eye hears—then their significance and value are better understood. Gaidinliu taught her followers the script through song and whether they understand the language in the song or not, the song becomes the very *presence* of the script. It is through the *presence* of the script that we can understand *both* how the notebooks fit into the prophecy and how the very idea of prophecy becomes so fundamental in any analysis of the notebooks. But let us reflect further on the place of these songs.

The eye hears: The spirit of the song

Heraka songs *speak*. It is not simply the voice that gives them their power but that these songs, like those of the medieval monks, must be sung with one’s whole being and from the heart. It is no surprise then that these songs are infused into the very fabric of the community. During the course of my fieldwork, there were numerous occasions when these songs presented a visual and sonic experience. The ebullient atmosphere when these songs were sung publicly becomes charged with intense emotion—the voice, the feeling, and indeed the embodiment of song through the swaying of bodies dressed in their finest clothes, transports both the singer and the listener to a different plane. The fact that humans cannot understand the songs does not seem to matter to the Heraka; their untranslatability, their ineffability, is to bring the sound of the divine to the human ear.

The popularity of Heraka songs builds on the existing traditions and practices of song, poetry and stories. During the early phases of their movement (1930–60), people were anxious about the various spirits and gods that inhabited the landscape. The textuality of the songs was precisely to appeal to significant sections of the people—those who could not read or write, those without the kind of alphabetic literacy introduced by the colonial state. As discussed, the emphasis of the Heraka was to make the transition from many deities and spirits to a single god, Tingwang. To free the landscape from these competing deities and spirits required a kind of religious “charm” that would embrace them like a shawl. Songs were these protective shawls for the people. When sung, this insured that the actual translatability of the words did not matter as long as they were being sung with proper learned utterances and serious intention. Take, for example, the case of Sanskrit recitations in India where “listening to the sound of religious text is already held to be auspicious and purifying” (Moebus and Wilke 2011: v). Similarly, the seriousness of the song must be underscored. When Gaidinliu encountered the goddess of Bhuban cave in September 1928, according to her biography, the following words were uttered to remind her about the importance of singing these songs. This ritual is practiced to this day in remembrance of this event:

For what purpose have you come here?
To make you live or die is my will
But sing this song for everlasting life.

It is helpful again to recall the way in which the world of talisman or amulets written in legible and illegible esoteric script were worn or digested to repel “demons” in the ancient world, a practice found from the Middle East to East Asia and used in a variety of religious contexts (Robson 2008: 130–31). Similarly, the construction of these songs has a specific purpose for the Heraka, as Namteduing, the “mad” man, said:

In Heraka songs, all the gods are praised—all the gods of the eight corners of the sky and earth. So that is why we are free from the evil spirits as we praise them through our songs.

Songs invoke all the spirits so that none are excluded from praise. Indeed, songs are not meant to dispel these gods/spirits but to attract and put them under the spell of the songs, to render them ineffective. The songs therefore could be seen broadly as having talismanic power that is woven with words and is traced along the lines of the body. Songs involve all the senses—the reading of the notebooks through singing made visible through the body, woven into the fabric of everyday life for the Zeme Heraka. They take on a “sacred” dimension for the very reason that they were inscribed in writing in the Gaidinliu notebooks, but were also taught by Tingwang to Gaidinliu through dreams and visions, forming a prophecy. The immediacy of the sound from Tingwang’s mouth is as real to the people as when Gaidinliu memorized them. In effect, the voice of Tingwang is not simply *represented* for the hearers. Rather, as already intimated, it is brought to their *presence* so that they can engage with it directly (Ingold 2007: 37).

As a way to round off this discussion, I offer a literal translation of the song *Heguang Samdin Wang* (narrating *heguang*’s return). It leaves open the “spirit of the



song” to heal and transform the landscape, weaving lines that thread the memories of the past, present, and the unfolding of the notebooks in the future.

Heguang! waiting for your coming with hope
 To bring all the things in our village
 With the songs and the *words*, we are enjoying
 Waiting for your coming
 With hope¹⁶

Conclusion

Language plays a crucial role in how cultural worlds are navigated. It is in this context that the Gaidinliu notebooks present a particular challenge. How do we comprehend something that seems incomprehensible? Everyone is agreed that nobody knows what the writing in the notebooks says and nobody knows how to read it. Indeed, people like Mills (Gaidinliu’s captor), and to some extent myself, were skeptical about her rather cryptic and undecipherable notebooks. However, the episode of their return to the Heraka demonstrated that to dismiss the notebooks as mere scribbles means losing something of value. Nor is regarding them as having talismanic power or as a retrieval of lost cultural property entirely satisfactory, although each sheds some light on the interpretation of their significance. If we take the notebooks as an example of an indigenous language system in its own right, however, the picture is transformed. I have suggested that to understand the Gaidinliu notebooks, one must consider the nature of textuality, with its multiple modalities—from the body, to writing, songs, dreams, and prophecy—grounded in human experience and understanding of the world. Thus recognizing the notebooks as *experienced* and not simply read or understood opens them up to fresh interpretative possibilities.

The texture of the stories associated with the Gaidinliu notebooks allows another reading that must be taken seriously: that of the future-event whose coming will unravel the notebooks and bring about the Heraka kingdom. In one sense, the return of the notebooks can be viewed as an enactment in the “tense of a meta-physical present,” where the past-present-future shape meaningful narrative sequences out of experience (Connerton 2004: 43). In another sense, the prophecy of the notebooks can be historicized as a “temporal projection” (Blanes 2011) situated within a linear timeframe, starting with its colonial capture, its present revelation, and its unknown future. Therefore, my role in returning the notebooks is now central to the narrative of this kingdom but also highlights the power of the notebooks themselves, albeit copies. While much of the conversation I had with the Heraka happened around the copies and not the originals, it was never quite clear if the coming of the kingdom required the return of the “original” or the “copy.” In many ways, it is more important to appreciate the textuality of the notebooks rather than the materialization of the text in the original notebooks.

16. Italics mine. This is a popular Heraka song. *Heguang* here refers to the one who will bring about this kingdom. Translation by the author.

The untranslatability of the notebooks becomes less significant when the text is mediated through song and divine language enters the human world. For the Heraka to navigate through their social life the songs became a powerful medium to protect the people from “evil spirits” that roamed the land, as they moved from one cosmology to another. But what is equally interesting for me is the nature of the object that I was returning. So what was it that I was returning—the notebooks, the words, the lines, the pages, or some hidden codes? One argument could be that the “script” is already present in the songs and therefore the documents themselves are not needed. But as I discovered, the bringing of the notebooks elicited a positive response from those who wanted to discuss the idea that the material presence of the “script” itself would initiate the coming of the “kingdom.” In a way the script acts as a metonym for this coming kingdom.

The discussions surrounding the Gaidinliu notebooks point to the larger issue of material objects and their consequences as they interact with the world. Here I return to a discussion highlighted by Nicholas Thomas (2013), that material objects must be grounded in social relations that animate the way we navigate our worlds beyond the walls of the museum. On the one hand, as I have shown, the notebooks in themselves have continued to exercise agency—mediating the agency of Gaidinliu, Jadonang, or Tingwang—even after their removal by the British administrators. This article has suggested that returning the notebooks has caused anxiety and celebration, eliciting different responses from different audiences. In this way, it must be underscored that artifacts and the meanings they produce can move beyond the confines of museums to spaces where they can be animated through social relations. So what began as a project to return the notebooks to the Heraka transformed into an insight about the “afterlives” of material artifacts. For the Heraka, the return of the notebooks is a step toward the coming of “the kingdom” and thus, rather than simply returning an artifact, my own role may be regarded as bringing the realization of “the kingdom” closer to fulfillment. While the ethnographic task is to reflect critically on the nature of such cultural productions, the encounter itself holds the power to shape the future.

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“Des lignes qui parlent.” Les carnets de Gaidinliu: langue, prophétie et textualité

Résumé : Cet article évoque ma restitution de copies des “carnets de Gaidinliu” du Pitt Rivers Museum (Oxford) au Nagas Zeme d’Assam (Inde). Les carnets furent confisqués en 1932 par les administrateurs britanniques et confiés au musée. Ils avaient été composés par un mouvement religieux, les Heraka, et leur prophétesse, Gaidinliu (1915 - 1993). La restitution des carnets révéla plusieurs problématiques théoriques liés à l’approche des textes, en particulier parce que ces carnets étaient écrits dans une langue “intraduisible”. Je suggère que leur textualité doit être examinée en rapport avec l’histoire du royaume (*Zeme: heguangram*), en utilisant la notion de textualité (Uzendoski 2012) qui repose sur les rêves, la prophétie, les chants et les visions. De plus, afin d’apprécier la valeur et les intentions de ces carnets, nous devons être attentifs aux sonorités manifestées par les mots des carnets qui se reflètent dans les chants. Enfin, tout cela suggère des façons de comprendre les relations entre l’histoire, la langue et l’expérience.

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