

# The NEHU Journal

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R KHONGSDIER  
B T LANGSTIEH &  
B M REDDY  
K S NAGARAJA  
KETSHUKIETUO  
DZÜVICHÜ  
ISABELLA LALL  
S N SINGH  
SUKALPA  
BHATTACHARJEE

Vol II No 1  
January, 2004

# *The NEHU Journal*

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*The NEHU Journal* is published bi-annually (January-July) by the North-Eastern Hill University Publications, Shillong. The focus of the journal is on India's Northeast and countries bordering it. Articles on other areas are also welcome. Contributors are advised to consult notes at the back.

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## *Subscriptions*

Single issue	- Rs 100.00 / \$ 4
Single year	- Rs 200.00 / \$ 8
Two years	- Rs 350.00 / \$ 12
Three years	- Rs 500.00 / \$ 16

Payment may be made by cheque/draft payable to "NEHU Publications" and be sent to the Deputy Director, NEHU Publications, Bijni Complex, Laitumkhrah, Shillong-793003. Outstation cheques/drafts may kindly add Rs. 10/- or \$ 1 towards bank service charges.

All correspondence related to the journal may be addressed to the Editor, NEHU Publications, Bijni Complex, Shillong-793003 at [tbsubba@sancharnet.in](mailto:tbsubba@sancharnet.in).

ISSN. 0972-8406

## Editorial

With January 2004 issue *The NEHU Journal* enters the second year of its publication. During 2003, the year of its birth, we at the editorial office were successful in obtaining the ISSN for the journal, getting the editorial board approved by the Governing Body of the University Publications, and starting the process of

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We begin this year with a regret about not being able to utilise the services of our very able copy editor, but are happy to announce that we have now an assistant editor who is on a full-time job related to the journal. With his editorial assistance, Kynpham Sing Nongkynrih, the Associate Editor, and I, hope to be able to pay some attention to the promotion of the journal both within and outside North-East India, which we realise is as important as raising its standard.

As we wish you all a very happy 2004, we would like to request you to kindly send your valuable articles, review essays, book reviews and academic papers for possible publication in the journal. We would also like to inform you that though we have revised our subscription rates, they are still much lower than the actual expenses involved in the publication. We shall be ever grateful if you consider patronising the journal not only by contributing to it academically but also financially by subscribing to it.

**NEHU**

T B Subba  
Editor

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**T B Subba**  
Editor

## CONTENTS

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The Brontë Sisters as Poets of Faith

S N SINGH

Dialogic Space in Art : A Reading of Goutam Biswas'

Art as Dialogue : Essays in Phenomenology of Aesthetic Experience\*

SUKALPA BHATTACHARJEE

BOOK REVIEW

# The Lyngngams as a Hybrid and Evolving Population

## CONTENTS

- The Lyngngams as a Hybrid and Evolving Population 1  
*R KHONGSDIER*
- Ethno-historic and Linguistic Background of Lyngngams and their Demographic Structure 15  
*B T LANGSTIEH & B M REDDY*
- A Lexico-statistic Study of Khyntiam and Lyngngam Dialects of the Khasi Language 43  
*K S NAGARAJA*
- Health Problems of the Aged among the Angami Nagas 57  
*KETSHUKIETUO DZÜVICHÜ*
- Need for Counselling : A Study on Degree Students of Shillong 75  
*ISABELLA LALL*
- The Brontë Sisters as Poets of Faith 91  
*S N SINGH*
- Dialogic Space in Art : A Reading of Goutam Biswas' Art as Dialogue : Essays in Phenomenology of Aesthetic Experience\* 117  
*SUKALPA BHATTACHARJEE*
- BOOK REVIEW 127

## Dialogic Space in Art: A Reading of Goutam Biswas'

*Art as Dialogue: Essays in Phenomenology of  
Aesthetic Experience\**

SUKALPA BHATTACHARJEE

There has been a paradigm shift in aesthetic praxis and the understanding of its historical manifestations in the fundamental categories of poiesis, aesthesis and catharsis. The canonic concerns of mainstream art theories had been the polarity of art and nature, the inseparability of form and content, the attribution of the beautiful to the true and good and the relationship between structure and meaning, creation and imitation. The meaning of aesthetic experience was a peripheral concern in literary hermeneutics. European philosophy since the enlightenment had accorded a high priority to aesthetic questions. Kant found a promise of the reconciliation between nature and humanity in the aesthetic while Hegel did not assign an important place to art. Again, the aesthetic or aesthesis for Kierkegaard is a stage that precedes the attaining of ethical and religious values<sup>1</sup> and for both Schopenhauer and Nietzsche in quite different ways, aesthetic experience is a representation of supreme form of values.

The legacy of western Marxism from Lukacs to Adorno assigns art a theoretical privilege, creating a polemical space for the materialistic current of thought. And so with Adorno's formulation, that art is a space of inscription of social conflict, one perhaps finds an opening to a new sociology of art. The engagement of art in the past, with rituals and religious beliefs was replaced in the age of enlightenment by an autonomous status of art, which

soon got enslaved to a commodification, by the operations of the market. Thus art became an element of superstructure and, as Adorno says, artistic space got subjected to ideological control. A deconstructive conceptualisation of art allows for conceiving of the artistic space as 'aphoristic' in nature. It is not Utopian where all social conflicts would be sublated, it is neither a Keatsian realisation of the illusionary nature of the aesthetic pleasure nor what Trilling calls 'freeing the self from thralldom to pleasure'. It is a field of displacement, a *differance*, an opening up of myriad possibilities where experience is displaced from *being* to the *other*. It is almost a play of the principle of non-identity as a basis of *negative dialectics*, which in the Hegelian sense is a movement towards its other. Heidegger's project of overcoming metaphysics and Derrida's deconstruction of the logos are perhaps constitutive of a double bind of transcendence of the 'being' and an opening to the 'other'. A sublime, which is ideologically produced, or a poetics of irony, fantasy and boundless *jouissance* is that which marks disenchantment with aesthetics. The problem with one's philosophisation of aesthetics begins from this disenchantment, which recalls the imperative to structure the experience. For a revisionary aesthetics of this kind, a problem like "Is there an object of aesthetic experience?" is reformulated in terms of a phenomenology of that experience. Goutam Biswas' phenomenological essays are polyphonic responses to such a problem, following Martin Buber - a leading existentialist thinker who characterises aesthetic experience as a dialogue between *I and Thou*.

Maurice Friedman, in his book *To Deny Our Nothingness: Contemporary Images of Man*, reads Buber's "I-Thou" dialogic relationship, as a "relationship of openness and mutuality between man and man"- an aspect where Buber, along with Marcel and Karl Jaspers, departs from existentialist thinkers, especially Heidegger and Sartre. While some existentialists considered the relationship between *selves as central to human*

*existence*, Buber saw the authentication of the *self* or *I* through an understanding of the *other*. He makes a distinction between direct mutual relation (I-Thou) and an indirect interpersonal relationship (I-It). Dialogue between the *self* and the *other* has a facet of *over againstness and separateness* and so the boundary of the *self* and the *other* both collapse in a dialogic embrace in the hyphenated space between *I* and *Thou*. Dialogic space is therefore a fusion of horizons, where, as Gadamer says, the knowledge of the *self* (familiar) is related to the knowledge of the *other* (alien). The hermeneutic phenomenon encompasses both the *alien* and the *familiar* into a dialogue where the self overcomes its own boundness. Goutam Biswas explores the possibilities of dialogue in art, in determining the relationship between the *artist-art object-critic/ beholder* and the nature of aesthetic experience. Bakhtin makes a distinction between “aesthetic seeing” and “aesthetic being” and says that: “I myself and the object of my aesthetic contemplation, must be [...] determined within the unitary and unique being [...] which encompasses both of us equally and in which any act of aesthetic contemplation is actually performed but that can no longer be aesthetic being”.<sup>2</sup> The dialogic interface between *being* and the *seeing* makes the relationship between the *art object* and the beholder alive in relation to art:

The project of Goutam Biswas in a way consists in overcoming the theories of dialogue. Such theories are constructed by way of interpretation of Heidegger, Gadamer and Bakhtin, by ironically engulfing all of them in their own independent interpretations of dialogue. This is how the concept of dialogue has reached its closure. The author’s extraction from Buber, on the ever-unfolding openings of dialogue, replaces the necessary metaphysical closure associated with *dialogue*. In that sense Goutam Biswas’ serendipity through closures does not inaugurate another project of re-figuring dialogue but configures the internal dynamism and life of dialogue, which is an open project, a project without a project. Therefore Goutam Biswas’ strategy is to take

the already named thinkers as they are or were. He does not dither in calling an aesthetic object, an aesthetic object. In other words, he does not problematise the resources of explanation. The explanans remain the same but the explanandum (art object) changes to bring in a new explanation.

Biswas takes the experience of art as *phenomenological* that overcomes the binary non-intentional or intentional to show up the figures of the subject and the object in a transmuted I-Thou relationship. The relationship presupposes a situation of a beginning, the standing over and against of an artistic object. This presupposition of an initial separateness with a familiar/unfamiliar object of art is a *situation* of the subject who is self-conscious and conscious about the effect of standing over and against an art object. Biswas characterizes the situation following Buber's I-Thou relationship.

One can obviously question whether it is an extrapolation of Buber in an uncertain terrain. The question arises against a background that Buber conceived of I-Thou relationship as a relation between man and man. So Goutam Biswas could be valid only if within the Buberian framework the relationship between man and art could be explained in terms of man and man relationship. Goutam Biswas' reconceptualisation of an art object in terms of an aesthetic experience of human beings draws an equation that *being* of art is the being of a dialogue between *man* and his other. The other appears as an *It* which is characterized by the author as *meeting* following Polanyi's framework of personal knowledge, in which it is neither the *self* nor the *other* which is important in itself. This meeting signifies a *between-ness* which is the space of the relation's own being, an existential space which allows a leap from one level to another level and in which art becomes a dialogic constitution. The transmuted other enters into human consciousness neither as a Kantian thing-in-themselves, nor as an image of the sublime but as an inseparable entity in consciousness. This feature of human consciousness is not innate

but it emerges during an encounter and lasts in virtual time and space. The encounter occurs in the nature of a tension between empirical time and virtual time, which is vital in understanding creativity. This encounter is therefore crucial in Martin Buber's basis of dialogue. Goutam Biswas modifies and widens the realm of this encounter. His inferential component ordines a vector of Philosophical Anthropology - wider than man and man relationship, enforcing itself over the basic experiential dimension and drawing shutters as linguistic entities. The author recovers Buber from this dead end of language and resituates human language in the basic experiential dimension which crosses out the being expressed in language and opens the being of language to its anteriors: prelinguistic and translinguistic - both freezed in its moment of staying in language. The camera obscura of human language is now open to the dialogue, the transaction and the exchange between humans and their world.

Goutam Biswas' retrieval of Buber from the rubbles of aestheticism and cognitivism sets its own task by renaming *philosophy in art as philosophy of art*. The task is not merely to show the bridge between the subject and the object, just as between the camera and the object, but in the flow between the subject and the object enveloped in the field of experience. The exteriority of the art object is an already constituted and produced object that presents itself as before and after of a dialogue. This before and after of a dialogue available in the exteriority of an art object is configured in dialogue in such a way that the temporalised moments appear in a continuity with an unfolding representation, as series inexhaustible in any located position of subjects. Subject taken as enveloped in the consciousness reveals itself in conjunction, transaction, expression and exchange. Revealing is an act of exteriorisation from what has been so far concealed in consciousness. This simultaneous splitting and doubling of consciousness without the defined subject and the object, without polarities, make a continuum filled with various temporalised

moments. These moments are merely renamed as I-Thou relationship, a relationship in flux only to reveal the relationship with the trace of its identity.

Goutam Biswas' explication of the I-Thou relationship and his essays on the phenomenology of aesthetic experience(s) have also provided for an inter-textual space. His understanding of art as a "relational network comprising man, world and the work" (p.16) conceives of *artistic unity* where the roles of the artist, the beholder and the critic overlap. This unity is like the Emersonian *Over-soul* "within which every man's particular being is contained and made one with all other". Biswas's thesis seems to echo the problematic idea of the centrality of man in Emerson, and that "man is the soul of the whole, the wise silence; the universal beauty of which every part and particle is equally related; the eternal one."<sup>3</sup> However, Biswas deconstructs the ontology of Man into a dialogic encounter between man and man - (for there is not one man but many men in the world), and stresses that "dialogue is the basis of knowledge of man by man" (p.45). A world of art then becomes a poem in the Wordsworthian sense, with a man speaking to man.<sup>4</sup> The I-Thou dialogic relationship renders an esemplastic element to art, a shaping and modifying power like Coleridge's secondary imagination, "which by its plastic stress - reshapes objects of the external world (...)"<sup>5</sup> It is almost, as Goutam Biswas says, "a transcendence of the disjunction of subjectivity and objectivity in art" (p.40), the play of an active agent, which "dissolves, diffuses, dissipates in order to recreate".<sup>6</sup> The aesthetic object reappears in a dialogically meditative space, in between where *I* as concept or substantial entity loses its own significance as I and emerges as a *concrete experiencing being*. The dichotomy of the subject and the object is thus dropped out. The intentional acts follow from the relation's own being. For Goutam Biswas, even this kind of transcendence is a dialogical one where dialogue(s) enter(s) into metadialogue. This transcendence is also central to Tagore's views on art and aesthetics. For Tagore, there is a "self-conscious principle

of transcendental unity within man” (p.99) and truth, beauty and harmony are knitted together in art when *personal man* is in dialogic encounter with the *world*. Similarly, in Radhakrishnan’s philosophical inquiry, man is in dialogue within the World through human intuition, which is a form of “sublimated knowledge”. Thus Goutam’s essays redefine dialogue as that which exists not only in language, but in “preceding and over passing language” (p.4). Dialogue according to Goutam Biswas starts with experience, proceeds through language and reaches beyond language. One of the significant facets of this dialogue is its translanguistic quality, which accommodates “silence or suspension of verbatism” (p.5) as dialogue between man and man, man and art. Silence in art while making art appear as inexplicable, opens up “ever unfolding possibilities of meaning” (p.15). The element of silence renders an objectivity to art objects which is beyond the traces left by the artist. Aesthetic object thus becomes, as Dufrenne says, “meaning within itself and is a world unto itself”. This point perhaps can be best explained by Keats’s poem “Ode on a Grecian Urn” - as to how art objects retain their identity as separate from artists, beholders and critics. The world of the Grecian Urn with its inscriptions is a world in itself, which is capable of telling a tale even without words, or producing music without sound. A dialogue between the urn and the poet is capable of communicating those qualities that all beautiful things have and so the aesthetic experience is produced. Aesthetic experience is trans-experiential (experience in the empirical sense), because it is capable of making us conceive of that which is beyond our experience. The urn is only a point of reference, from which the poet starts his detour and then comes back to it, only to see a different urn. Aesthetic experience is never exhausted, for, the meaning(s) of art object can never be deciphered fully and so Keats in the “Ode on a Grecian urn” says - “Thou, silent form, dost tease us out of thought/As doth eternity”<sup>7</sup> Aesthetic meaning and *aesthetic meeting* is an endless *difference*, which is never conclusive but dialogic as Keats finally ends the poem,

succeeding only in relating beauty and truth into a dialogic chiasmatic construction.

Goutam Biswas' explication of the element of *quasi-subjectivity* to aesthetic object, after Dufrenne could have been explained better, in relation to the Romantic tradition in literature. His passing reference to Baudelaire would tempt one to remember the Aesthetic Movement and the Decadence. The author would do well if he had elaborated his point on *being for itself/themselves* by mentioning the French doctrine of the self-sufficiency of art object along with Edgar Allan Poe's "The Poetic Principle" of 1850 which states that the supreme work is a "poem per se". According to the author, one of the primary tasks of the phenomenology of aesthetic experience is to explicate the nature of dialogue and communion, not only as a means of transcendence but also as an end - the consummation of art experience. Perhaps Yeats best expresses the nature of this consummation in his vision of the land of Byzantium - a refuge of art and artifice in his poem *Sailing to Byzantium*. In fine, one must admit that Goutam Biswas' text is extremely insightful and brilliant in its projection of the possibilities of dialogue(s) in art and literature.

### NOTES AND REFERENCES

\* Goutam Biswas, *Art as Dialogue: Essays in Phenomenology of Aesthetic Experience*, Indira Gandhi National Centre for Arts, New Delhi, 1995.

1. Kierkegaard's hedonistic idea of aesthesis or sensuousness is the first of the three stages of the aesthetics-ethical and religious. Maurice Friedman discusses the ethical and the religious position of Kierkegaard in *To deny our nothingness: Contemporary Images*

- of man, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago and London, 1967, p. 263.
2. Bakhtin's categorical assertion of the disjunction between the "Content of aesthetic seeing" and the "actually performed act of the one who sees" is made in the book *Toward a Philosophy of the Act*, Trans. Vadim Liapunov, ed. Michael Holquist and Vadim Liapunov, Austin: University of Texas Press, 1993, pp. 15-17.
  3. From Emerson's *Essays*, Sherman Paul, Everyman's Library, Dutton, New York, 1980, p.150.
  4. Wordsworth defines the poet as a man speaking to man in the *The Lyrical Ballads*, published in 1798.
  5. Coleridge makes a distinction between 'Primary Imagination' and 'Secondary Imagination' in the XIIIth Chapter of the *Biographia Literaria*, published in 1817. While the Primary Imagination is a 'repetition in the finite mind', 'Secondary Imagination' is a power to re-create.
  6. *Ibid.*
  7. Quoted from *Keats' Poems of 1820*, Edited by D.G. Gillham, Collins Publishers, London and Glasgow, 1969. The poem is an explication of Keats' vision of Hellenic beauty.

James Henry Green (1893-1975) was a soldier of the British Indian Empire in its waning period. He joined the Burma Rifles as its recruitment officer and worked up to 1935 in the 'Excluded Areas' Kachin Hills, northern Burma. He left Rangoon (now Yangon) in 1937 for Singapore to take up the post of military intelligence officer. After the fall of Singapore in 1942 during the World War II, he returned to London, where he remained for the next ten years in the British Foreign Office. He was a photographer

## Book Review

Elizabeth Dell (ed), *Burma: Frontier Photographs: 1918-1935*, James Henry Green Collection, Merrel Publishers Ltd, London, 2000.

The British presence in the Brahmaputra valley loomed large from 1825. This thinly populated, little exposed, and highly forested region was destined to be the pioneer tea plantation of the empire. The tea industry attracted numerous fortune seekers, influential industrialists and even some British bureaucrats preferred planting tea bushes to serving the empire. These potential tea-growing areas were also the play fields for the various tribes in search of slaves and trophies of human skulls. These tribal raids in the later British tea growing territories led to numerous pacification expeditions to the hills resulting in carving out of the various hill districts as loosely administered 'excluded areas'. That is how Garo Hills, Mikir Hills, Naga Hills and Lushai Hills districts were created in the province of Assam by the turn of the nineteenth century. Through the same process the northern triangle of Upper Burma, soon to be known as Kachin Hills, were carved out as a distinct administrative arrangement in 1895 in the northernmost part of the British Indian Empire. The book under review refers to the region, its resident Singphos of classical British ethnography (now Jingphaw) and their past heritage.

James Henry Green (1893-1975) was a soldier of the British Indian Empire in its waning period. He joined the Burma Rifles as its recruitment officer and worked up to 1935 in the 'Excluded Areas' Kachin Hills, northern Burma. He left Rangoon (now Yangon) in 1937 for Singapore to take up the post of military intelligence officer. After the fall of Singapore in 1942 during the World War II, he returned to London, where he remained for the next ten years in the British Foreign Office. He was a photographer

par excellence, who used classical ethnographic technique as a tool for military intelligence and recruitment. In course of his nearly twenty years of stay in the Kachin Hills, he took numerous photographs, collected ethnographic exhibits, and wrote his tour diaries containing priceless data on the lives of the people and events of the region. The James Henry Charitable Trust placed 1600 photographs, 200 textile exhibits and diaries with the Royal Pavilion, Library and Museum, Brighton, England for up keep and research. *The Burma: Frontier Photographs: 1918-1935* is based on photographs and accompanying texts, spread in five chapters and contributed by four scholars. These chapters are lavishly illustrated with appropriate photographs from Green's collection. The book contains 230 photographs of different sizes, a priceless collection of photographic album running into 90 pages. Biographic note on J H Green, bibliography and index at the end enhance the utility of the book for the readers.

Elizabeth Dell in her 'Introduction' to the book, titled "Mapping Burma: the James Henry Green Collection of Photographs", found that the photographs formed a part of a particular unequal transaction between peoples, and stand as a record of those transactions and points of contacts. They also have a life and meaning beyond intentions, skill, luck and vision of the photographer and as archival evidence they are witness to an era, events and institutions long gone by (p.9). As a recruiting officer with the Burma Rifles he travelled to remote northern hills previously unmapped by Europeans. His fascination with the people of the region aroused a life long interest culminating in a fellowship of the Royal Anthropological Institute in 1928, and a diploma in Anthropology from Cambridge University in 1934 on "The Tribes of Upper Burma North of 24 degree N and Their Classification". He studied the nuances of the customs, beliefs, languages and physical attributes that distinguished neighbouring groups and recorded these according to the anthropological practices prevalent in those days.

On the basis of Green's archives of notes, diaries, speeches, publications and photographs, the volume under review records his role as military intelligence officer and an amateur anthropologist, his observations on peoples and collection of artifacts—specially textiles. Green's photographs should be seen in the line of photography as a tool of descriptive ethnography and as a part of the colonial anthropological heritage since 1860s, which began with E T Dalton's *Descriptive Ethnography of Bengal*. This ethnographic collection of strong visual record of Kachin State also highlights the tension between the past and present of Kachin people engaged in negotiating the place of these records within the contemporary construction of their national identity. Burma proper was administered as a province of India and frontier areas were identified as 'excluded areas'. Even in 1935 the residents of this region had not heard of Burma or Burmans, leave alone of India. Green was aware that many of the ethnological problems were baffling, but thought that "a study of physical anthropology, technology and mythology will solve a good many of them" (p.15). Physical attributes were clearly of importance in recruiting 'types' for military as well as for racial classification of the people, a pet project of the colonial days. He advocated a general knowledge of the culture of people to be of greater importance to the administrators than that of the language.

The strongest part of Green's photographic collection is the portraiture, though there is little in his diaries or route notes that refers directly to the process of capturing images of people. The images of people show Green's interest in physical types, their costumes and their evolution. He was clearly a product of his time and of beliefs and motivations of the empire. His Anthropology, like his photography, was in harness to his official role in military surveillance and control. However, the images collected in the book can point to an understanding of modern construction of identity, nationhood and unity as they are analysed, incorporated, rejected or used as evidence in contemporary Burma. After all, Green's is

part of a tradition of ethnographical documentation through photography, which stretches back to mid nineteenth century. That was the time bulky camera was considered indispensable documentary tool for the benefit of colonial ethnography and useful to the administration.

It goes without saying that publication of the *Peoples of India* between 1868 and 1875 containing 500 photographs of racial, ethnic and caste types was part of an ideology to tabulate, synthesize and ultimately control the culture of India in the aftermath of the mutiny of 1857-58. In spite of the individual photographers' skill to overcome the limitations imposed by the cumbersome camera, the photographs were invariably unsatisfactory: "the people always seemed nervous, their expressions were invariably stupid or stolid and they posed very unwillingly". By 1920s the camera was improved to the extent that its intimidating size was reduced; its portability was increased and its intrusive features were minimized. But by then science of ethnography itself had changed and thus postures and intimacy of camera began to be questioned.

David Odo notes that Green's images attest to the unprecedented access he had to his subjects. Perhaps he was the first European to encounter many of the people he had photographed and studied. Through out the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries photography was largely considered a simple recording, truth revealing, mechanism. Photography played a major role in Salvage Ethnography of the period and much of Green's work can be located within this tradition. Heavily influenced by existing anthropological paradigm of race and evolutionism many of his images are of the homogenizing and dehumanizing 'physical type'. "This is evident from large number of images in which body functions as an object of study. His photograph of two Naga men is one the more extreme examples of this position (No. 0625). Two men are posed in naked and are shown in full length... it nevertheless reduces its human subjects to mere physical specimen...the men's facial expressions attest to their distress at the time they were photographed. They

are pictured without clothing. The subjects are located in 'nature', employing none of the signs such as material artifacts or built environments, typically used to provide information about cultural context. Rather, it is absence of clothing that here serves as cultural marker, for Nagas were stereotyped as 'lazy', preferring to go naked than weave cloth... We learn virtually nothing of the conditions of their lives from this photograph, rather it is informative of the photographer's intentions and ideology and unequal power relation that enabled Green to create it" (pp. 43-45).

For David Odo, Green's photography suffers from two qualities: dehumanising physical types and images of exceptional intimacy and sympathy. Through these photographs of physical typing not only could the subjects of dying races be studied, but they could also be preserved. For him authority also provided a way to salvage the subjects' culture, which was highly paternalistic. Green did not work within Malinowskian model: rather he favoured close-ups and portraits, posed his subjects and tended to eliminate context from his images. By 1920s, the view that photography afforded an objective window to reality that had largely been discredited. These changes contributed to a decline in the anthropological use of photography, as new anthropology was interested in culture, now constructed, and not as visible.

Mandy Sadan's two chapters on 'Contemporary Context' and 'Documentary Record of Contact' raise the issue of the relevance of colonial anthropology to ethnic groups and nationalities on the one hand, and negotiating a relationship with the animistic heritage by contemporary Christian nationalities such as Kachin, Naga and Mizo on the other. She began her research on a selection of Green's archives in Rangoon in 1996. Kachin State emerged as a political entity after the Burmese independence in 1948 and Kachin identity is itself largely political in origin. However, it was the British who initiated the process in 1895 through the Kachin Hill Regulation, an Act labeling hill tribal villages as 'Kachin' for the use of administration. It is also a fact that Kachin soldiers were mainly

drawn from Jingphaw (Singpho) community besides Lisus and others. In this way, the term 'Kachin' was artificially created, like the word 'Nagas' some two decades before that and an ethno-political composition of six parts such as Jingphaw, Lisu, Maru, Nung-Rawang, Zaiwa and Lacid was imposed on northern Burma.

The world of Green's photographs, taken 75 years back, is not only difficult, but also discomfiting and contemporary Christian Kachin nationalists would like to dissociate themselves from their animist past. For many Kachin Christians, their animist cultural context displayed through these photographs can be immensely disturbing. The Kachin theologians frequently cite the oppressive burden of animist rituals as the main reason for their rapid conversion to the Christianity. Against the Burmese attempt to make Buddhism the official State religion, Christianity was drafted as the symbol of Kachin nationalist resistance against the Rangoon regime. Kachin missionaries emphasised on the superiority of Christianity to animism. However, there is a deep-rooted insecurity about how the animist relates to the Christian present and whether such photographs should ever be considered more than simply a record of a degenerate culture. To advance the worth of Green's photographs exposes danger of undermining the foundations of unity expressed through the symbol of Christian faith. Modern Kachin nationalist discourse demands a level of 'standardization' of ethno-cultural uniformity and a level of quality in cultural practices and symbols free from potential ridicule from others. Odo rightly identifies ambivalent interpretations of Green's photographs of the animist past and its role for future (p. 61).

The commonest social and economic opportunities that existed for ambitious Kachin youth in recent years were to enter theological college to train as pastors or priests or to enter K (aching) I (ndependent) A (rmy) as officers. For these young and articulate leaders Kachin identity is a current obsession. In this context, Green's archive seems to offer little towards enabling evidence to them. There are very few Kachins who still believe in animism and

still fewer who practise it. Choosing this as an area of study is to illuminate a world that no longer exists, and few mourn its disappearance. It can also be a potential bone of contention between the past and the present. Green's collection presents a heritage, which is difficult to disown and embarrassing to own up by the contemporary Kachin people.

Green chose to remain a career soldier in preference to a career in anthropology. Green's work in Kachin hills was mainly oriented to military related survey or recruitment or to provide slave-release campaign of the civil administration. The British identified the pre-eminent Kachin socio-political structure as prop to their need in the form of Jingphaw hereditary chiefs - *Duwa*. However, it was not always clear whom to delegate local power as the *Duwa*, because of conflicting over-lap of institution of hereditary chiefs and hereditary headmen. The case of *Duwa Htingna Khuma* (p. 74) is an illustration. The British administration would opt for the enhancement of powers of those chiefs and headmen, who could demonstrate willingness to be co-operative. The District Commissioner would stand as *Duwa Kaba* (great /big chief) to the then Kachin power structure with Union Jack flying atop. Was it not reminiscent of the Red Indians terming the President of USA as the big father/ chief? Here also the administration gets embroiled in the chiefs' demands for communal dues from the Christian villages for animistic festivals as it happened in the Naga Hills District.

Impact of slave-release should have been one the most rewarding exercises for historians and anthropologists with a view to understand the modern Kachin social formations. But for obvious reasons, it is one of the most impenetrable areas of study (p.85) Green's photographs may be seen as one of the personal response to the British encounter to the Kachin primitive world. It was the pattern of Kachin relation building that enabled Green to be intimate and sympathetic to the people. As a result, he developed a uniquely rich heritage of records that is still relevant for a proper understanding

of the lives and vanishing world of the northern Burmese frontiers. A similar situation may be noted from Kachin's western neighbouring Naga Hills, where one finds M/S J H Hutton, J P Mills, Charles Pawse, and Furer Haimendorf empathising with the Naga cause. Green's collection presents a highly romanticising image of tribal life from a distant frontier in to a typical Kipilinsque style of paternalistic approach to simple societies. Inadvertently, the Empire through its omission and commission laid the foundation of nationality formation among the distinct ethnic groups such as Kachins, Nagas and Mizos. In the final analysis, Green clicked his camera for the cause of the Empire, but inadvertently, he contributed to the preservation of the Kachin heritage and priceless source of data for the 'science of man'.

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**Temsula Ao, *The Ao-Naga Oral Tradition***, Bhasha Publications, Baroda, 2003, 185 pp, Rs 125/-.

Temsula Ao's study is an attempt to understand the culture of the Ao tribe of Nagaland in North-East India through their oral tradition. The book is divided into eight chapters. Chapter 1 introduces the Ao civilization as oral tradition, textiles and artefacts. Chapter 2 discusses the indigenous Ao society. In Chapter 3 the "authentic" Ao belief system is presented. Chapter 4 forms the main part of the book and presents some Ao myths and tales. In Chapter 5 a large number of tales are given under various headings such as "Transformation tales", "Some animal tales", "Some tales of the Supernatural", "Some other tales", and "Some heroine-oriented tales". Chapter 6 provides some linguistic details on the

Ao language and a few paragraphs on Ao time reckoning, numbers and weights and measures. In the concluding chapter (Chapter 7) a few words are devoted to changes in contemporary Ao society.

The study is based on the author's personal knowledge and experience as an Ao, her frequent field trips to the Ao area and a writing-up phase at the University of Minnesota. It is a thorough and serious study of oral tradition of a small scale but dynamic culture. The book has an important documentary value as it gives a large number of Ao narratives. Being an Ao herself and a Professor of English at NEHU, the author deserves all praise for her sincere effort to gain insight into her own culture. Not being trained as an anthropologist the result of her work is a well-written historical document for which the Aos have to be grateful. It will be of interest to all those interested in Ao culture as well as to linguists and anthropologists.

My perspective in reviewing this work is that of an anthropologist. For me the importance of this work lies in bringing together cultural data and narratives of the Ao tribe by a native speaker. The collection of texts shows a high degree of variation, often subtle, which makes oral tradition so rich, so beautiful, and so relevant for both modern Aos with an interest in their own culture and contemporary anthropologists. The study is a rich source of data, but its analytical framework is weak. For example, the data on society, civilisation and belief system are presented without a connection with those of the stories. The structure of the book, by and large, follows that of the early scholar-administrators such as Hutton and Mills. A truly integrated analysis would have helped in mapping out the original Ao mentality.

In her attempt to grasp the totality of the Ao culture and to make it understandable to contemporary readership, the author imposes two sets of classifications on the data that seems to me arbitrary. The oral tradition is divided into Primary, Secondary and Tertiary. This division presented in the first chapter does not serve

any purpose, not even in the rest of this book. Another division relates to worship and sacrifice. These are classified as “regular” and “irregular”. This division also does not add to our understanding. The intention might have been to demonstrate historical developments or the dynamics of the Ao culture. On page 29 Ao society is called ‘loosely’ democratic in its structure. This is, however, contradicted by the description of the Village Council (*Putu Menden*) as being a legislative, executive and judiciary power all in one institution (p.34) as well as by the existence of patrons and slaves (p.59). The “highly egalitarian society” (p.29) is thus not so egalitarian having slaves and a strict hierarchy of three high and many lower ranking clans.

While a beginning of an integrated approach to culture and narratives is made on page 15ff about names and narratives, such an approach is missing in the presentation of all other myths, legends and tales. In most cases the author’s comments do not go beyond a kind of functionalistic comment: the myth is told to justify a particular practice or custom (for example on pages 54 and 56). This is rather surprising for the Select Bibliography mentions the works of Claude Levi-Strauss, Brenda Beck, Stuart Blackburn and A.K. Ramanujan who all have analysed oral traditions with a structural rather than a functional approach.

This is a pity for the author shows great sensitivity while commenting on some myths. Commenting on the belief system, for example, she remarks, “their belief about tiger-souls is more akin to the concept of a person having more than one soul” (p.66). Indeed, the Ao concept of personhood needs to be studied on the basis of their narratives. The Ao view on another important cultural aspect – mortality – lies between the lines of the narratives entitled “A girl who was Loved by a Tree-Spirit” (p.122) and “Revenge for a Father’s Death”(p.135).

This book lies at the junction of two traditions. The old tradition of scholar-administrators is followed in its structure and

descriptive nature. At the same time it falls under a recent tradition of anthropological activities by other than anthropologists. The author frankly states in the Acknowledgement (p.iii) that she is "yet only a tentative amateur". As such she displays an emotional involvement. Striving for objectivity she leans on her training and experience in literary criticism. The lack of anthropological knowledge, for instance, appears in the use of the term patriarchal instead of patrilineal; distinguishing clans as major and minor is not incorrect, but it is a more common anthropological convention to describe their ranking in terms of high/low social and/or ritual status; the observation that the family is the first social unit in any culture (p.43); the absence of information on dates and methods of data collection and the years in which the field trips were undertaken.

Notwithstanding these critical comments, I wish to recommend this book to all anthropologists. I sincerely hope that Professor Temsula Ao will continue her journeys into Ao culture while making them anthropologically stronger so that her desire to "understand the intricate interweaving of the oral tradition with the culture" can be truly fulfilled.

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## DECLARATION

### Form IV Rule 8

1. Place of Publication : Bijni Complex, Shillong-793003
2. Periodicity : Biannual
3. Printer's Name : Deputy Director, NEHU Publications  
Address : Bijni Complex, Shillong-793003
4. Publisher's Name : Deputy Director, NEHU Publications  
Nationality : Indian  
Address : Bijni Complex, Shillong 793003
5. Editor's name : T. B. Subba  
Nationality : Indian  
Address : NEHU Publications, Bijni Complex,  
Shillong 793003
6. Name and Address of individuals : North-Eastern Hill University,  
who own the journal and partners Permanent Campus, Umshing,  
or share-holders holding more than Shillong-793022  
one percent of the total capital

I, T. B. Subba, hereby declare that the particulars given above are true to the best of my knowledge and belief.

**T. B. Subba**