

From Literature to Visual Arts: Verrier Elwin's Collection and Definition of Adivasi Art

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Abstract

The article returns to the first book fully devoted to *The Tribal Art of Middle India*. Published in 1951, by the missionary turned ethnologist Verrier Elwin, this book provides both the first list and the first definition of what would be labelled thereafter 'tribal art' in India. Hence, the book has a second title: *A Personal Record*, so by re-locating the author's claims in the context of India's post-independence and under the influence of functionalist and culturalist anthropology, we give a deeper understanding of Elwin's aim as well as of his limitations.

Key words: tribal art of India, âdivâsî, Verrier Elwin, William G. Archer, functionalist, anthropology.

“Black seed is sown in a white field: when the crop is cut, it sings...
– A song written on white paper”
(*dhandhā* or riddle, Elwin and Hivale 1935: 147)

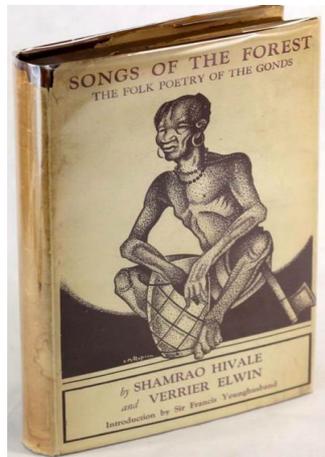
Adivasi art is a specific topic in India, and in order to understand its “institutionalization” in catalogue and museum, I turn to the first books devoted to this type of art: *The Tribal Art of Middle India*, and *The Art of North-East Frontier of India*. These books were both published in the 1950s by the same author: Verrier Elwin, a missionary turned ethnographer at the precise moment that the discipline was being professionalized in India (Vidyarthi 1978). I will show that these books constitute a true illustration of tribal creativity, in a strategy of recognition of the specificities of these groups within a recently independent India (1947). In other words, art definition has also deeper meaning and consequences, which remain valuable to the present...

The author and his early interest in literature

“When I was younger I had a feeling for Nature akin to that of the young Wordsworth. Natural beauty haunted me like a passion. (...)

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But I think that from the very beginning of my time in tribal India I moved on to Wordsworth's further stage of hearing oftentimes 'the still, sad music of humanity' against the background of nature. This was particularly true of my years in Bastar." (Elwin 1964: 189-190).



Cover of *Songs of the Forest*, 1935

Verrier Elwin (1902 – 1964) defined himself as a “philanthropologist” (an expression from Haddon, Elwin 1958: xxix). The son of an Anglican bishop who died prematurely, he was brought up in his mother's strict evangelism, while being fascinated by the ‘pantheistic’ poetry of the English romantic poet Wordsworth. He studied English literature and then theology at Merton, Oxford, where he became interested in Indian mysticism (Elwin 1964: 37). In 1927, he reached India to join the hermitage of Father J. Winslow, founder of a Christian community of service (*Christa Seva Sangh*) for the poor of India. In January 1928, he met Gandhi at Sabarmati, and is fascinated by his personality, before turning to support the Indian Congress openly during the Satyagraha movement. Considering Gandhi as a living “saint François” (as many Christian intellectuals did at this time), he followed his perspective on Truth present in every faith (*The Story of my Experiments with Truth*, 1927), and abandoned the missionary character of his work in 1931, to serve the poor only. He then thought to work among the “Harijans” but, after a visit of the Bhil Seva Mandal at the invitation of its founder Amritlal V. Thakkar, and on the suggestion of Seth Jammalal Bajaj, he decided to devote himself to the Gond of Central India (Elwin 1958: xii, 189).

In January 1932, with Shamrao Hivale, he founded the “ashram of Saint-François”, in Karanjia village (Mandla district), associated with a Gond Seva Mandal, and soon a dispensary and a school for the Gond children (Elwin 1964: 105). In 1934, he summed up the principles of his organization: Truth, Love, Purity, Prayer, Poverty, Respect, Knowledge (including the arts and music, “purifying and enlarging the mind”), Unity, Discipline, Daily bread, National Education (in Hindi, “to recreate the national self-respect of the Gonds and to foster pride in their ancient heritage” (Emilsen 1994: 341)). The Mandal slowly became the centre of a web of schools attended by more than two hundred children, mostly Gond. A young brahmin from Sabarmati, Shrikant, was responsible for the teaching, and completed his skill by learning the Montessori method

at Shantiniketan². One can note that this Karanjia ashram had a small chapel and a house of five rooms, with their mud walls decorated and painted “in Gond fashion with mud animals, tigers, elephants, camel and a peacock”, by male and female villagers who were well paid for this work (Elwin 1958 : 41). According to Elwin, Shamrao initially resisted to the project, fearing that it would “foster animistic superstitions”.

Elwin actually moved his activities thrice in the Gond areas, from Karanjia to Sarwachappar in 1936, this time without a chapel (Elwin 1958: xxix-xxx), and then to Patangarh in 1942, each time paying the villagers to build their settlement. He thus became the first to patronize villagers for their decorative art. His Patangarh house was destroyed by a typhoon, but a photography of his library-museum showing the animal decoration has survived:



Figure 8: Verrier Elwin's home in Patangarh village, 1952.

“Verrier Elwin's home in Patangarh village, 1952”
(Photo copyright Ashok Elwin, Douglas 2018: 13, Fig. 8)

Interestingly, this latter village is more famous now as the birthplace of the Pardhan-Gond painter Jangarh Singh Shyam (Bowles 2009; Luis 2019). The long-lasting interest of Elwin for Adivasi decorative art and masks can also be seen in a photography of his library in Shillong (Elwin 1964).

Meanwhile, as early as the December 1932 (the 20th), Elwin realized the difficulty of implementing the Gandhian reformist rules (cotton spinning, fasting, abstinence from alcohol, sexual continence) among a people who, on the contrary, value games and dance, community meals including the consumption of local alcohol, and the sensuality of the body. Shamrao and him make, he says (Elwin 1958: 52):

“desperate attempts to introduce spinning and carding, having been given to understand that this is the only really valid form of village service but as no cotton grows in locality, difficult to make it a business proposition. Besides, Gond all say that they don't want to waste their time working and would much rather dance. Try to perform daily *yagna*

² Elwin 1958: 55-62. The Italian educationalist Maria Montessori met Rabindranath Tagore in 1925, who had developed his educational project at Shantiniketan since 1905, and the conjunction of their respective projects contributed to the opening of various “Montessori-Tagore” schools in the late 1920s (Leucci 2018: 260).

(sacrifice) of spinning myself, but only Srikant – whose character has been purified in jail – joins me in this pious exercise.”

He officially broke with the Anglican Church in 1935, and distanced himself explicitly from Gandhi's puritanical ideals two years after (Singh 1970: 18). He then began to indulge in literature. His first book on Adivasi literature, *Songs of the Forest* (1935), cowritten with Shamrao Hivale, is a collection of 1 500 Gond songs (mostly accompanying *Karma* dance) translated and condensed into poems, which he presents as the literature of the Gond composed *by and for* themselves, their “real culture” (Elwin & Hivale 1935: 33, 44). In the introduction, he sums up some myths and stories of gods and heroes, collected from Pardhans. According to him, the Gond poetry expresses less a romantic perception of nature than an “Elizabethan” atmosphere (like poets such as Francis Beaumont and John Fletcher), with their convocations of a “wood-god”, a “Puck-fairy” hidden in sacred trees or strangely-shaped stones, of ferocious animals (tiger, spider, giant crab, cobra, etc.), and of their attachment to their village “dear as the moon”, as also the poetic association of the forest with happiness and pleasure/love (*Nandanban*, *Madhuban*), and, not least, their satire (*Sanjani*) (Elwin & Hivale 1935: 35-44). Still, the dominant style expresses a sort of rustic and more realistic romanticism:

“Here is a poetry free of all literary convention and allusions: a poetry of earth and sky, of forest, hill and river, of the changing seasons and the varied passions of men: a poetry of love, naked and unashamed, unchecked by any inhibition or restraint. When Wordsworth says that in humble and rustic life, “the essential passions of the heart find a better soil in which they can attain their maturity, are less under restraint and speak a plainer and more emphatic language ; because in that condition of life our elementary feelings co-exist in a state of greater simplicity”, he is describing exactly the poetry of the Gonds” (Elwin & Hivale 1935: 33).

Thereafter, Elwin never ceased to publish compilations of myths, from the mountains of central India to the Northeast. Meanwhile, towards 1936, Elwin developed a growing interest in Anthropology, through the works of Malinowski and with the encouragement of Seligman (Elwin 1964: 146). His early ethnological works, including *The Baiga* (1939), are thus marked by the dialogue between sociology and psychoanalysis inaugurated by Malinowski (as well as Seligman and Rivers)³. He also received encouragement from J.H. Hutton and the “father of Indian anthropology”, S.C. Roy. In 1940, he visited the Bastar region, where he obtained the status of Census Officer and then “honourable ethnographer”, enabling him to study the Maria and Muria Gond populations. It was a personal discovery and he married a young Gond woman in 1941, then after their divorce in 1949, a Pardhan of Patangarh named Kacharibai whom he renamed Lila and who remained his lifelong wife (see Guha 2000). Once again, we may note that the painter Jangarh Singh Shyam was a relative of hers (Bowles 2009).

Visiting the regions further east, Elwin then worked as an anthropologist in Orissa from 1943 to 1946 (studying the Bondo, Saora or Sora and Kondh populations). While distancing himself from Gandhi and even more from the conservative wing of the Congress, Elwin came closer to J. Nehru, who was paying heed to his expertise on the

³ That's why Elwin wrote about the dormitory of the Muria (following Malinowski 1927), to show that the much free sexuality of the Gond (compare to Victorian and high castes morality) did not mean depravity. That's also why he reported the dreams as expressions of emotions culturally oriented, and not as a 'primitive impulse'.

Adivasi. He was then called as Deputy Director of the newly created Anthropological Survey of India in Calcutta, where he remained until 1949. Let us have a look at his first book on art before we go on to the last part of his carrier.

The tribal art of central India: a mixed and decaying art

Completed in 1946, the manuscript of the book had to wait until 1951 to be published, so that a short essay on the Saora painting came out first in 1947-1948, in the newly founded art magazine *Marg* in Bombay. Further chapters came out later in the columns of *Illustrated Weekly of India*. The medium and content of these articles attracted some criticism, including one by U. von Ehrenfels, a disciple of Father W. Schmidt, who qualified the originality of this art, while being visibly irritated by the audience Elwin enjoyed (Ehrenfels 1949: 103): “The artistic charm of ‘aboriginal art’ in India has been eventually ‘detected’ and begins to be popularized in several fashionable magazines.”

The book itself is a “personal record” of objects collected, drawn or photographed during his fieldwork in Central India (a region including the present-day states of Madhya Pradesh, Chhattisgarh, Orissa and Jharkhand). The book generally follows the outline of the functionalist monographs, starting with body decorations, costumes (including the “buffalo horn” Gond headdress intended to become a real “cliché”) and ornaments, before moving on to artistic creations linked to the life cycle (wedding murals, “totemic” pillars for funerals). The last chapters focus on the rare anthropomorphic figurations (Kondh paintings dedicated to a rain god, statues of a Saora god), on dances and masks, etc., before concluding with a long chapter on Saora murals⁴. The author emphasizes the “functional” nature of tribal art, which often has a religious or magical purpose. Similarly, he rightly points out that these figurations are less representations of gods or invisible beings, than offerings to them.⁵

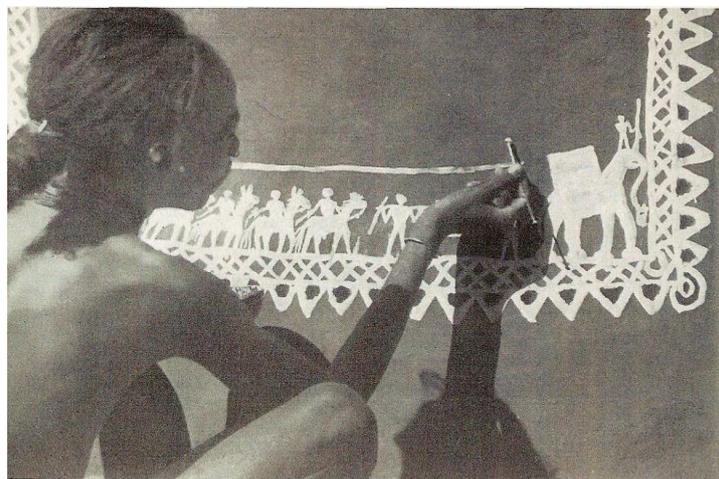


FIG. 209. A Saora artist (*Italmaran*) at work on a picture on the wall of a house at Potta, Koraput District, Orissa.

Photography of “A Saora artist (*Italmaran*) at work on a picture on the wall of a house at Potta, Koraput district, Orissa” (Elwin 1951: fig. 209)

⁴ Albeit very close in style, these paintings did not attract the same attention than the Warli paintings, which came to be known twenty years later. The Warli paintings were produced in the vicinity of Bombay, opening up a real reconnaissance of galleries (Chemould notably), and economic income. Some Sora paintings are now made for sell, while their ritual usage becomes rare, due to the Christianisation (Mallebrein 2001, Rousseleau 2014, Vitebsky 2017).

⁵ Elwin 1951, p. 113 ; Elwin (1955) 1960, p. 127.

The issue of definition is concentrated in the introduction to the book. Elwin says apologetically that the forms he presents do not show the richness and diversity of the arts of Oceania, Africa or America, for which he quotes Raymond Firth, *Art and Life in New Guinea*, Sir Michael Sadler, *Arts of West Africa*, and Franz Boas (without specific reference). For Elwin, the difference lies in the underprivileged material conditions of the tribes in India, as well as the devaluation of their culture and ways of life by the high castes. These characteristics explain why the peasant tribes he mentions employ caste craftsmen to make their funeral poles, for example. These commissioned productions are, however, included in the author's "personal" inventory, partly, he says, because they are made according to the aesthetic wishes of the tribal commissioners, and partly because it is impossible to draw a strict dividing line between tribes and Hindus (Elwin 1951: 3). Despite this precision, Elwin does not mention the "Gond" and "Kondh" brass or bronze statues, that various museums (of India and Europe) had already been collecting since the end of the 19th century. Maybe their style did not fit his taste of tribal authenticity. In any case, such admissions as well as his selection show the limits of the author's classifications.

But the ambiguity of the status of this art appears all the better when the author approaches his comparison to other tribal art. Elwin uses the distinction between "decorative" and "representative" motifs⁶, to show that India's contemporary tribal geometric themes (not figurations) more closely resemble the pottery paintings of the Indus Valley, for example, than the indigenous motifs of New Guinea or America⁷. In other words, the tribes of India retain a style more akin to those of their country's protohistoric civilizations than to other styles of tribal art around the world. Their culture is therefore not alien to that of the newly proclaimed nation. This does not prevent Elwin from taking their specificity for granted, and from fearing that the schooling of tribal youth, which is obviously necessary and beneficial may, if badly implemented, destroy their *joie de vivre* and creativity. This conclusion will become more nuanced, as we shall see, when Elwin writes as the person in charge of such an educational policy. Before arriving at that point, we may compare Elwin's perspective to that of a friend of his who shared his artistic interests for a long time.

W. G. Archer: from a friend and lover of tribal poetry to a rival

William G. Archer (1907-1979) was Census superintendent of Bihar when he read *The Baiga* (1939), and then invited its author to accompany him to Santal and Oraon villages. He was also an aesthete with a passion for Oraon poetry (Archer 1940, which he collected between 1934 and 1936) and for India in general who, on his return to England, joined the Victoria and Albert Museum in 1949 as a specialist in Indian painting (see M. Carrin in this volume). His wife, Mildred, is also the author of several pioneering studies on the "popular" paintings of India. In the preface to his book on Central Indian art, Elwin acknowledges that Archer was his "guide to art and poetry". He mentions elsewhere a study of the Santal that convinced him to encourage tribal arts and which enriched his own contribution (Elwin 1964: 142, 153), probably the Archer

⁶ He may have borrowed this distinction from earlier books on Indian art, or from Boas whom he quotes in his second book on art (1959). Boas distinguished the formal dimension from the representative one (subdivided in figurative and symbolic) in art (Boas (1955 (1927))).

⁷ Elwin 1951, p. 6-7. On this topic, he quotes Starr 1941. See also Ehrenfels 1949, p. 104.

couple's article on Santal painting (1936). The oblivion of Archer's name can be better understood when one knows that the friendship between the two men foundered precisely due to their disagreements about tribal art (Guha 2000: 207). According to Elwin, Archer wanted to be the first to publish a book on this theme, which is why he criticized Elwin's choice of objects, even denying the existence of "Indian tribal art" as such, with the exception of a few works from the northeastern regions (Elwin (1955) 1960: 126).

Whatever Elwin says, the disagreement between the two authors was also rooted in a profound difference in approach. While Elwin's work was taking time to appear, Archer published *The Vertical Man* (1947). This is not a book on "tribal art" in general, but a more specific study (carried out in 1935 and 1938) of a type of anthropomorphic sculpture from Bihar. Made by stone carvers (Gonrs) or carpenters (Barhis), these statues are commissioned by Kishnaut Ahir shepherds who raise them to secure the favors of a god who protects cattle (Vir Kuar). Through the legendary and ritual explanations of the erection of the statues, Archer seeks to determine the *raison d'être* of two local styles that can be isolated by certain "formal values" (Archer 1947: 10). Archer is explicitly inspired on this point by the writings of the sculptor Henry Moore, according to whom every sculpture is a result of emotions linked to certain abstract forms (Archer 1947: 19). From this perspective, each of the two styles would be informed by different versions of the myth: one describes Vir Kuar as a superhuman being who protects buffaloes from tigers, the other as an ancient Ahir killed while protecting a buffalo, as a matter of fate. As the message is different, the expressive form is different as well.

The same approach reappears in a short argument co-signed by the author, that accompanied an exhibition on "The primitives Influences on Modern Art" (Archer, Melville and Read 1948). In it, Archer and Melville evoke the absorption by Gauguin, Picasso, etc., and Moore again, of "distortions" of forms that these artists discovered in the arts of Africa, America and Oceania, as well as in the prehistoric arts of Europe. One should note the absence of Asia in this exhibition, which might reflect again the doubts of Archer towards the Indian tribal art. These borrowings and convergences of styles may, according to them, answer to similar problems of expression. Picasso, for example, is said to have borrowed the "angular distortions" of African masks as an aesthetic solution to reinforce the "presence" and "carnality" of his *Demaiselles d'Avignon*, qualities that were then attached, in his Western eye, to African productions.⁸

Archer's aesthetic 'formulas' may sometimes seem too artificial, but the scope of his attempts goes clearly far beyond Elwin's 'personal collection'. Elwin sought supposedly pure 'tribal' art forms, while Archer sought to compare parallel aesthetic solutions between various art forms. In any case, the race for primacy was prejudicial to both authors, who would have benefited from the combination of their respective skills, as they had succeeded to do in their editions of oral literature. Elwin still had one last, great debt to Archer: it was he who invited him to Northeast India when Archer was appointed to his last post in India in June 1947.

⁸ Archer, Melville and Read 1948: 24. For a sound criticism of the comparison between 'Primitive' and 'Modern' Art, overshadowing their respective contexts, see Clifford 1988, chap. 9.

The art of North-East Frontier of India: a genuine art to improve

Even before the publication of his book on Central India, Elwin deemed necessary to supplement it by a survey of the art of North-East India (Guha 2000: 224), a region less influenced by Hindu values. He got the opportunity to carry through this project thanks to J. Nehru. Taking note of Elwin's experience and commitment, the Prime Minister appointed him as consultant in 1953, and then "adviser to tribal affairs" to the North-East Frontier Agency (now Arunachal Pradesh), a post he held until his death (1964). Published in 1959, this second book on tribal art is more achieved and detailed in terms of the analysis of decorative themes. After a general presentation, Elwin launches into a vast synthesis on the patterns of the fabrics of the whole region, proposing some interpretations as to the meanings of some of them, and sometimes suggesting parallels between the "temperament" of the groups and their aesthetic choices (Elwin 1959: 36, 40). The presentation continues with a description of the ceremonial costumes and masks of Buddhist groups close to Tibet. The main chapter is devoted to the "central cultural area" and its many weavers (Daflas, Apa Tanis, Miris), while the last chapter deals with the "Naga" art (Wanchos, Noctes, Konyaks, etc.) of "Naga Hills-Tuensang area", a label including wooden sculptures and brass pendants representing human heads.

The spirit of the book is developed in its conclusion, entitled "A Frontier of Hope". Elwin wants to avoid for Northeastern art the fate he has observed coming to the art of central India. According to him, a true "renaissance" in this field is only possible within narrow limits: between a traditionalism doomed to disappear through the transformation of living conditions, and a modernist development happening too quickly. In his view, the ideal conditions consist in providing quality raw materials and technical means, while maintaining "psychological" conditions favorable to creation. Such mental conditions depend on the "sense of pride in their own traditions" maintained by the tribes, in particular through the "respect and humility" that Indian officials would be able and willing to show them (Elwin 1959: 187). Elwin also raises the problem of the creation of a "class of artists" in societies where no such group exists, and warns against the desire to "improve" tribal models through an allogenic taste (Elwin 1959: 190, 200). The policy which he proposes to apply—and which would in fact be instituted—was to increase the number of "cultural centres", and to add a museum of local forms, a library and an emporium, in order to modernize traditional design while respecting the cultural "genius" of each group (Elwin 1959: 187, 203). To support his reasoning, he cites African, Native American and Australian examples. From a book about young Australian Aboriginal artists, he extracts the following quotation, which also expresses his political positions at the time of decolonization: "From their own people they learned what no white man could pass on to them - the deep, aboriginal feeling for the land, an ancient mystical and magical sense, which they infused into many of their paintings."⁹

Today, Elwin's books on tribal art should be read in keeping with his earlier functionalist monographs, in which the "material culture" and aesthetic forms of the groups studied already figure prominently, as well as the political debate of the time.

⁹ Millar and Rutter 1952: 4; Elwin 1959: 194. For the other continents, the author quotes among others Clarke 1949 and Adam 1949.

Art as an expression of the Self: Between functionalist aesthetics and culturalist psychology

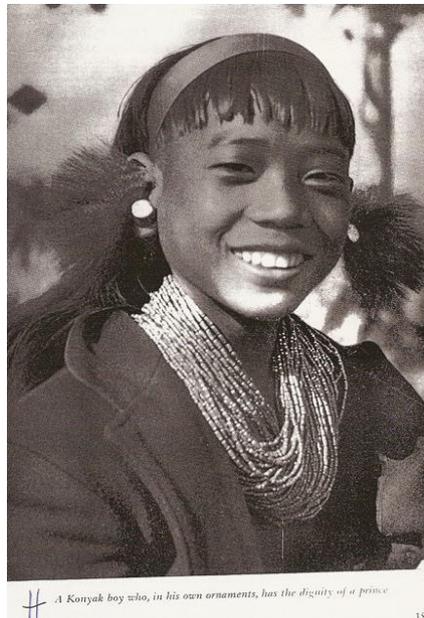
According to Elwin, tribal autonomy is also reflected through specific aesthetic values and ends. Indeed, he shows that Saora paintings, for example, aim at the pleasure of the gods and ritual efficiency more than at “pleasure of the eyes” or “art for art’s sake”, even if the two criteria are not completely independent. Similarly, according to him, the creativity of the tribals is rooted in simple *joie de vivre* and in forms inspired by nature, which give a beauty of their own. In the environmental metaphors of the Adivasi, he found some echoes of the “pantheism” of his youth. One can ascribe this view to his Romanticism, but that is not the whole story.

Elwin’s initial perspective on tribes as integrated wholes is rooted in his functionalist approach. He recognized in various texts that Malinowski’s books fascinated him. What Malinowski demonstrated through his long fieldwork (an idea which was new at that time in anthropology, something we often forget), was essentially that even the so-called “primitive” societies had systems of norms, kinship, ethics, aesthetics, etc. They were not closer to instinct or ‘animal nature’ than the so-called civilized, contrarily to the prejudice then common. Malinowski particularly discussed Freudian theses which he confronted with his own knowledge of Melanesian kinship and sexual behavior. He showed that the biological urges always had to pass through particular configurations of sentiments, which vary according to the societies. In other words, one cannot judge the behavior of other societies without knowing their own norms and codes of conduct. Elwin followed Malinowski’s theory of culture not only in studying sexuality without Victorian prejudice, but also in seeing the “creative impulse” as organically linked to the autonomy of these societies, as a reflection of the vitality of their “social body”. As he wrote in defense of “the modern anthropologists” (by whom he meant mostly the disciples of Malinowski), their work “is not to collect museum pieces, but to reveal in coherent and logical beauty the entire cultural organism of a people” (1943: 27). Focusing on the present, he seeks to show that, not only do the tribal peoples have aesthetics and ethics (like all societies), but that theirs contribute to a more egalitarian and united society than the caste system, and that their worldview is consistent with their living conditions. According to him, even if the tribal societies have their own “wars” to win against disease and fear, “The idea that there is something inherently vicious in primitive life must be abandoned.” (1943: 19) On the contrary, among other examples, the status of women in tribal groups (divorce and remarriage rights of women and widows) is often better than in patriarchal high-caste India.

One gets a better view of this topic from Elwin’s book entitled *The Aboriginals* (1943), than from his booklet curiously untitled *Loss of nerve* (1942) which elaborates on the same topic. The latter expression may come from a formula of Rivers, speaking of loss of interest in life among Melanesian converts (Guha 2000: 159), but B. Malinowski, J.H. Hutton and S.C. Roy expressed similar ideas in their own words. In both publications, Elwin distinguishes three main categories of Central Indian tribes. At one end of the spectrum, we find the isolated tribes which continue to lead their life in the forest, and at the other end, there is the Raj Gond aristocracy which has retained some of their traditions (clan names, totem poles) while becoming educated and getting recognized by the wider Indian society. In between these poles, he depicts the Hinduized tribes in the areas of passage as the most highly affected by a sense of frustration or depression and “loss of vitality” due to various forms of dispossession: the dispossession

of their land and forest rights, the loss of “tribal solidarity” through integration into the lower stratum of caste society, the oblivion of the poetic universe of their mother tongue as a result of compulsory primary education in Hindi (which he had at one time supported), as well as the loss of their own “grace and beauty”, as they doubt the respectability of their own ‘traditional’ values (1943: 15-16). Hence, this depression manifests itself by the loss of the “aesthetic sense” and the “creative impulse”, substituted by the attraction of low-quality industrial productions sold at fairs. Some pages later, he quotes William Morris against the ‘civilized’ industrialization destroying the beauty of life (and of craft production).

Similarly, the decline of tribal art was a symptom of the growing absorption of these cultures into caste society, and their loss of autonomy. Moreover, the author's focus on the integration of cultural ethos, especially its enculturation in adolescence, and his attempts to determine a “temperament” specific to each community, link his work to the “culturalist” school of anthropology. As it appears in the quotations of his monographies, Elwin read various American anthropologists, among whom Abraham Kardiner, Margaret Mead and Ruth Benedict, who theorized about the formation by each culture of a basic personality and ethos in the individuals who make it up. In this perspective, art is conceived as a reflection of fixed cultural tendencies, rather than of changing socio-political structures. This view of cultures as organic totalities in direct contact with nature effectively echoes Elwin's youthful romanticism, but goes beyond it. In the same way, he obviously identified himself with Saora philosophy as he formulated it as a tolerant and “worldly” humanism, which defines “in India, the poet as against the puritan; the free, uninhibited, happy life of the hillmen as against the morbid restrictions of the ascetics and the prudes” (Elwin 1955: 571).



“A Konyak boy who, in his own ornaments, has the dignity of a prince” (Elwin 1959: 185)
The promotion of art as a defense of Adivasi values, and against puritanism

Elwin attacked the obsession about moral purification of the Indian elite, and chiefly that of Gandhi, as he knew only too well (from his own childhood) that such preoccupations were a Victorian Puritan heritage, mixed with the older caste prejudice (see Alter 2000). From his own personal experience, he considered art as a celebration of

life, which did not involve moral degeneration (as against the puritan prejudice), on the contrary. Apart from further monographies on tribes, most of Elwin's writings of the 1950s-60s aimed at defending the Adivasi from old prejudices against their supposed 'savagery', 'superstitions', 'immorality', etc. On this matter, he was involved in a well-known controversy with the sociologist G. S. Ghurye, who attacked him in 1943, as a partisan of the *isolation* of the tribes (Guha 2000), while he was supporting himself their total *assimilation*, denying them any anteriority on the land, or cultural peculiarity, considering them as only *backward Hindus* (Ghurye 1959:19).

In order to respond to such criticism while refusing a simple policy of assimilation, Elwin is forced to elaborate both what he means by the autonomy of tribal cultures and what he advocates as control of their contacts with the outside world (that he supported rather naïvely; it should be recognized, in 1939). From 1943 onward, he clarified the middle path of a *protectionist* modernization that respects self-determination (Elwin 1943: 27):

"Another puerile complaint is that the anthropologists want to put the aboriginals in a zoo (...) Many anthropologists do, as a matter of fact, desire to see a considerable measure of protection given to the aboriginals, and some would like to have established National Parks or Reserves where they could live their own lives in unhampered liberty. But this is a very different thing from wishing to keep people as specimens for study in a zoo."

To this end, Elwin defends the social utility of anthropologists (Elwin 1943: 29):

"To study a people is to learn to love them, and to publish your studies is to make them widely loved. The ignorant and patronizing scorn with which all but the very best officials, politicians and members of the public regard the tribesman is seen in the use of the words 'uplift' and 'backward classes' (abominable expressions that should be banished from our vocabulary) and the very common belief that the tribesman is a sort of animal incapable of the higher love or spiritual perception."

In conclusion, the Government should enforce safeguards (education in the maternal language, and in practical matters following the *Wardha scheme of Basic Education*, 1937; development of the tribal economy from a local point of view, etc.) in order to enable the aborigines to "civilize themselves" according to their interest, by guaranteeing them freedom from fear, want, and interference (*Ibid.*: 30-1), because:

"The aboriginals are the real swadeshi products of India, in whose presence everyone is foreign. These are the ancient people with moral claims and rights thousands of years old. They were here first: they should come first in our regard."

In his later works about the Saora and Naga, Elwin also significantly deepens the historical sources on the one hand, and the modalities of modernization in respect of self-determination on the other. In a book about Gandhi addressed to the inhabitants of the north-east, the former rebel missionary turned official ethnologist invokes the principles of self-sufficiency of the country (swadeshi) and self-respect of the Indian nationalists as an example for the Adivasi (quoted in Guha 2000 : 245):

“We should be ourselves, not imitations of others. We should not be ashamed of our own culture, of our own religion, of our art, of our dress; even the simplest, it is ours and we should be proud of it. That is the true meaning of *swadeshi*...”

In the guise of praise for Gandhi, Elwin turns the anti-colonial argument of the nationalists against the tendency to “internal colonisation” that threaten the Adivasi. Just as he had supported Gandhi and the autonomy of India against his native England, Elwin (who opted for Indian nationality in 1947) now claims respectability and beauty for the Adivasi traditions, against their reduction to “inferior” Hindu cultural forms. In his irenic will to spare both sides, he nonetheless adds a more genuine Gandhian conclusion on the importance of non-violence and national unity. Influenced by the Soviet treatment of minorities, Nehru takes his inspiration from Elwin by giving a great deal of autonomy to the regions of the North-East in his “five principles” of 1959 (Mukhopadhyay 1989), though this policy was called into question by the war with China (1962), as well as by the struggle of the Naga groups for an independence that was not only cultural but also political.

Through his publications and official functions, Elwin has played a leading role in the institutionalization of “Adivasi art” in India at the time of the decolonization. His two books on the art of Central and Northeastern India also mark the beginning of a sustained interest—and market—for Indian tribal objects (Naga sculptures and necklaces, hinge masks and bronzes, and more recently Saora paintings). His personal collection was, moreover, bought by the National Museum in New Delhi (Guha 2000: 323), thus becoming the reference collection in the field. While Elwin's goal was laudable, his definition of tribal art remains ambiguous because of its ahistorical character. Contrary to his views, a true history (or ethnology) of art shows that these forms are the product of peculiar aesthetic values, as well as interactions and exchanges, which nonetheless do not affect their ‘originality’, as they still follow cultural choices.

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