

BEYOND STORY-TELLING: ETHOS OF ORALITY IN SELECT WRITINGS OF INDIA'S NORTH-EAST

Sanghamitra Sadhu*

Abstract

The article attempts to address the phenomenon of orality, a pervasive presence in India's North-East with a focus on the writings of Temsula Ao and Mamang Dai – two foremost writers from India's North-East. The article focuses on Temsula Ao's *These Hills Called Home: Stories from a War Zone* (2006) and Mamang Dai's *The Legends of Pensam* (2006) in a framework that reads orality as a way of life for Adis- and Ao-Nagas (two prominent ethnic groups from Arunachal Pradesh and Nagaland) to understand history and identity of a community shaped by reality, myth, memory and imagination. The article argues that the act of story-telling and recounting the past, which define the world of Aos and Adis Nagas, is far from a naïve exercise of a community isolated in history and lost in the complex web of modernity, but is a pointer to an indigenous knowledge system and ethos of a collective culture. The article reflects on the changing dynamics of history writing in India's North-East with the role of the story teller being swapped with that of a chronicler of history, as well as the act of story-telling which has come to be redefined with a perpetual practice of telling and transmission of legends, myths and fables across generations characterised by a collective memory.

Keywords: Orality, story-telling, tradition, in-betweenness, identity

Introduction

Negotiating the past through narration of tales, myths and archetypes in a time that inherently shows the complex interface between tradition and modernity has been of frequent concerns to the writers in the North-East India. While chronicling the past and

* Assistant Professor, Cotton University, Guwahati (Assam).

its tradition in the wake of globalization, the storyteller is caught in a double bind: she makes past accessible in participating in the narratives and at the same time distances herself from the present milieu, someone like Walter Benjamin's "The Storyteller" (1968) who loses immediacy of the present. The article looks into the practice of storytelling in the North-East India which is termed as "a veritable folklorist's paradise"¹ underlining the texture of orality which is an identity marker, an essential trope and a paradigm to analyse a tradition. The linearity of identities is blurred with globalization that dehistoricizes identities and creates a space of in-betweenness where the demarcation between home/non home and inside/outside remains perennially porous and hence the imperative is to address such nuances through the trope of orality where a tribe exists in 'legends', and 'hills' are another name for 'home'. The article deliberates on the ethos of orality, a lived reality in India's North-East with a focus on the writings of Temsula Ao and Mamang Dai – two prominent writers from Nagaland and Arunachal Pradesh. The article focuses on Temsula Ao's *These Hills Called Home: Stories from a War Zone* (2006) and Mamang Dai's *The Legends of Pensam* (2006) in a framework that reads orality as a way of life for Ais- and Ao-Nagas to understand history and identity of a community shaped by reality, myth, memory, and imagination. The article also makes references to Temsula Ao's *The Ao-Naga Oral Tradition* (2000) to comprehend orality from the author's lived experience as well as her engagement with it.

The 'narrative turn' in literary theory that benignly underlines story-telling as a natural and universal tendency among human beings also predicates that the process of storytelling in a culture is an epistemological one that leads to the complex project of world making. It is a crucial moment in the history of a culture that undergoes refashioning in the transition from orality to literacy. The terms orality and literacy have been revised over the time since Walter J. Ong's seminal work *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word* (1982) where he explains the shift from an oral tradition to chirographic practice in the modern world following many ramifications on the culture. It would be innocuous to place orality in binary opposition to literacy as the problematic of orality and literacy is writ large in the negotiation between past and present with the issue of textuality intervening the discourse of oral and chirographic traditions. The article aims to look into the dynamics of orality in the process of story-telling; in other words, it explicates the ways in which orality is made palpable in chirography or

narration, as orality and literacy are complexly enmeshed with each other. Paradoxical it might seem, given the demarcation between orality and literacy, orality in the present discussion of the texts does function as a dominant trope in storytelling which is originally an oral phenomenon later appropriated in writing.

Orality as History

In the complex interaction between orality and literacy not all oral cultures have embraced literacy in the same way; the nostalgia for orality remains and hence the tendency is to look back into orality that writing can never dispense with. As Walter Ong observes: "Writing from the beginning did not reduce orality but enhanced it, making it possible to organise the 'principles' or constituents of oratory into a scientific 'art', a sequentially ordered body of explanation that showed how and why oratory achieved and could be made to achieve its various specific effects" (Ong 1982: 12). Ong's observation is germane to our discussion where presence of orality in a culture is heightened in writing so much that it becomes repository of historical realities of a society bestowing ordinary people the power to narrate and make history. The process of recollecting and interpreting the past through orality gives leverage to oral testimony as historical source. The Ao-Nagas and the Adis-Nagas, who are otherwise "hidden from history"², to use Sheila Rowbotham's resonant phrase, become participants in the narratives as well as historians, thereby challenging the normative historiography and historical interpretation based on the lives and records of men. This dual project of story-telling and history making reinstates orality as an important facet of historical project. Speaking of embeddedness of history and oral tradition which has redefined the project of history writing, Robert Perks and Alistair Thomson (1998) comment that in this new enterprise "the narrator not only recalls the past but also asserts her interpretation of that past, and in participatory oral history projects the interviewee can be a historian as well as the source" (Perks and Thomson 1998: ix). The intersection of orality and history brings forth two things: the changing scope and dynamics of history writing, and power to ordinary people with an autonomy to write their own histories. Seen from this vantage point, the author too becomes a chronicler of history further reinstating the importance of private conversations, numerous information and interpretations in shaping history of a community. The writings of Temsulo Ao and Mamang Dai represent a worldview where knowledge of the past and

the present is produced in the most mundane everyday life, where story-telling, gossips and private conversations of a community have meaningful import into the lifeworld of a community at the threshold of a changing socio-political milieu. The article argues that the act of story-telling and recounting the past which define the world of the Aos and Adis is far from naïve exercise of a community isolated in history and lost in the complex web of modernity, but a pointer to an indigenous knowledge system and ethos of a collective culture. In the introduction to *The Ao-Naga Oral Tradition*, Temsula Ao has succinctly explained “the verbal dimension” of the culture of the Ao-Naga community: “Ao-Naga Oral Tradition represents an integrated and holistic approach to the culture of a people who for generations have lived in the morality of a verbal dimension” (Ao 1999: vii). She further adds that such oral tradition “has evolved into a comprehensive and integrated network of indigenous knowledge systems, incorporating art with reality, history with imagination, and the ideal with the practical. In this sense, the tradition constitutes for the Ao the world of his origin as well as the idiom of his continuance within the world” (Ao 1999: 174).

The Story-Teller as Explorer

Terming oral tradition as the literary heritage of Arunachal Pradesh, Mamang Dai in an interview says, “Except for the Buddhist communities, the literature of the different communities of the state collectively known as the ‘Tani’ group is based on the belief that we are descended from a common ancestor called Abo (father) Tani (man) recorded in verse and memory. There is a body of literature that is chanting performance recounting the history and migration of community, the birth of the universe, earth, sky and the creation of man” (Sarangi 2017: 2). Mamang Dai belongs to the Adi tribe who do not have a scripted language, and her worldview is largely shaped by oral tradition of the region, and therefore she inhabits a world of stories, which for her is more than simple act of telling and remembering; rather it is a means to explore the Adi world through its symbols and myths. Dai further states, “Oral narratives are generally perceived as a simple recounting of tales for a young audience but I think their significance lies in the symbols embedded in the stories about the sanctity of life, about what makes us human. My response to myth/stories is akin to a quest. It is a worldview I am still exploring” (Sarangi 2007: 2).

In consonance to her worldview, Dai’s *The Legends of Pensam* (2006)

places the storyteller at the cusp of anachronism and modernity reinstating a return to primitive world through the narration of the myths and an account of retrogressive history. It is not merely marked by the temporal in-betweenness of time past and present but is spatially connotative of an anachronistic geography of the tribe of the Adis. Referring to the elusive chronotope that the Adis are part of, Mamang Dai in the beginning of the narrative writes:

“In our language, the language of the Adis, the word ‘pensam’ means ‘in-between’. It suggests the middle, or middle ground, but it may also be interpreted as the hidden spaces of the heart where a secret garden grows. It is the small world where anything can happen and everything can be lived; where the narrow boat that we call life sails along somehow in calm or stormy weather; where the life of a man can be measured in the span of a song” (Dai 2006: n.p)

The everyday life of a community where “anything can happen and everything can be lived” is largely shaped by the stories and myth and the behaviour of the community is guided by “ethnography of speaking”³, to use Dell Hymes’ expression. Dai’s narrative is replete with plethora of stories real and mythical that the Adis have lived by. The narrator accompanied by her friend Mona who collects unusual true stories for her magazine *Diary of the World* creates a story world through numerous tales narrated by the people of the community who gather at any time, “just to talk, gossip or to sit on the veranda sipping black tea and rice beer” (Dai 2006: 12) and the chance visitors who too become part of the story-making process. Throughout orality functions as a recurrent trope as Dai’s narrative mostly verges on the myth-historical tradition of the Adis with the verbal transmission of the folklores across the time. While part of the narrative centres around the mythic stories of Hoxo, the villager, who descended mysteriously from the sky to the green forest of bamboo trees and seemed to live in ‘a timeless zone’ and would follow his interests in the lives of men, animals, plants, in the origin of the universe, sitting in the village, it also enforces the power of orality as the story of Birbik, the water serpent is circulated for generations and being entrenched in the collective memory. However, Dai’s narrative foregrounds an in-betweenness, which is derived from the primordial worldview of the Adis who were believed to be in a nebulous zone that divided the worlds of spirits, making reality contingent and imbricated in illusion. When Kamur, in his strange fit of madness, killed his baby daughter and his younger son, people tried to justify such act with the encroachment of a supernatural phenomenon into their lives as the murderer was believed to have

been under the spell of an evil spirit. The psychopathic aberrations were related to a strange but natural phenomenon like the growing of an aubergine plant bearing poisonous-looking flowers to the size of a tree and Kamur's behaviour was traced back to his occasional sitting under the ghostly tree and the perpetrator of the violence was pitied by the village elders: "He is not to blame. It is something in the blood...there are men and women, guardians of history who can identify this fault in the blood" (Dai 2006: 31).

Dai's narrative predicates a world where storytelling becomes enmeshed in an in-betweenness of human existence and history-making being a part of an oral tradition where historical consciousness of being connected to history, though at the level of the community, is writ large. As the Lotang family of the Migu clan proleptically traces back its family history to the story of a floating vessel, the text resonates with the recuperative power of an artefact to contribute to a clan's history. It is in the complex articulation of myth and modernity, orality and literacy, tradition and history that culture-as-narrative emerges in a third space where the everyday lives of the people, whether in story-making or tracing history, constitutes the dominant narrative. In the story "Daughters of the Village", Nenem gifts her daughter a trunk – a treasure trove of "box of stories" which she "can shape them, colour them, and pull them out at any time" (Ao 2006: 123) and story-telling acquires a dimension of materiality beyond immediacy and contiguity in the narrative. Storytelling becomes a philosophical topos where the public partakes in the process of definition of literature as world and of the world as literature. The phenomenology of living with stories is aptly pronounced by Michel de Certeau (2011):

"Rather than merely represented in it, the ordinary man acts out the text itself, in and by the text and in addition he makes plausible the universal character of the particular place in which the mad discourse of knowing wisdom is pronounced. He is both the nightmare or philosophical dream of humanist irony and an apparent referentiality (a common history) that make credible a writing that turns "everyone" into the teller of his ridiculous misfortune" (Certeau 2011: 2).

The Legends of Pensam through the trope of orality reinstates Certeau's idea that turns everyone into a teller. The old man in Dai's narrative voices his opinion about oratory: "Words are important. You can change a man's thoughts by the use of right words...where you live they think we only sit around the fire and talk, but this is our business, words can solve riddles and transform a life" (Dai 2006: 158).

If Mamang Dai narrativizes the destiny of a tribe through articulations of myth and legends entrenched in the collective memory, story-telling as a habitual practice returns in Temsula Ao's collection of short stories *These Hills Called Home* (2006) with the haunting image of the old storyteller surrounded by a group of young people by the hearth fire on a cold night of December. Nevertheless, the seemingly naïve act of story-telling is enmeshed with larger issues in the text, as Ao captures the tensions of identity and the precarious life of the Nagas in a time when the category of home/non-home remains perennially porous in the face of the war launched by the Nagas in their demand for independence from the Indian State in the 1950s. Narrating her stories at the backdrop of the struggle, Ao recounts the displacement of identity among Naga people in the ensuing fight and the loss of traditional Naga way of life at the advent of 'progress' and 'development'. Home as a primordial unit remains an unsettled phenomenon and the basic impulse of *synoikismos*, a Greek word meaning 'dwelling together in the same house' or 'making home together' is at stake for the Nagas as we read Ao's account; people abandon home and family to join the 'underground' army in the freedom struggle while others are rendered homeless through forced migration. The un-homing experience brought in its wake a new vocabulary into the everyday language of the Nagas as everyday words like 'convoy', 'curfew', 'grouping' and 'situation' acquired sinister dimensions in the ongoing fight. In one of the stories entitled "Soaba" Ao narrates the story of Imtila's gradual loss of her personal domain with the underground army encroaching her private space: "She could no longer call her home her personal domain, there was no peace and quiet for her or the children because her husband's lackeys seemed to be everywhere, inside the house, in the compound and some even had the audacity to enter their bedroom on the pretext of giving a message to Boss" (Ao 2006: 15). The displacement of the border between home and non-home leaves everyday life beset with confusion where "the private and the public become part of each other, forcing upon us a vision that is as divided and disorienting" (Bhabha 1994: 13). With ever-shifting meaning and context of home, the fixed hills become another name for home.

However, like Dai, storytelling as a way of living for the collective common pervades Ao's narrative. In "The Last Song", the storyteller lives with the story of Apenyo who was raped and killed mercilessly by the soldiers as she commemorates the event on her death anniversary among the young audience who seem to hearken to the last song of the Apenyo drifting from the whirling wind on that night. Stories

such as Apenyo's evoke the uncanny and the supernatural that rules the social and moral lives of the people of these communities. One can appropriate Malinowski's analysis of nature of myth and stories that regulate the lives of the natives and meaning(s) of such stories and myths that the natives cannot dispense with. In the similar spirit, Ao and Dai reinstate the indispensability of myths and stories in their cultures. "These stories," to appropriate Malinowski's analysis, "live not only by idle interest, not as fictitious or even as true narratives; but are to the natives a statement of a primeval, greater, and more relevant reality, by which the present life, fates, and activities of mankind are determined, the knowledge of which supplies man with the motive for ritual and moral actions, as well as with indications as to how to perform them" (*Myth in Primitive Psychology*, cited in Strenski: 87).

Conclusion

In their narratives Temsula Ao and Mamang Dai blend myth and memory that encircles the Ao and Adi world. What is striking in these narratives is the authors' sensitive portrayal of these life-stories which are not only the means to retain and reclaim orality, but also a tool to reclaim the lost past. The 'tribal societies' in India's North-East have witnessed a dramatic transition following the advent of Christianity and the subsequent conversion which came as a threat to the tradition and way of life of the people. Although the missionaries had been instrumental in introducing the hill tribes to modern education, the influence of Christianity was antithetical to the *weltanschauung* of the hill people. In an essay, Ao records a similar discord in the wake of such transition:

"Embracing this religion meant discarding all forms of ancient ceremony, dress code, ornamentation and food habits as previously practiced by them. In other words all customs were to be shunned as 'heathen'. The suppression of the traditional religion, however was most severe as it condemned an entire way of life which had sustained the people for centuries and which was now portrayed as irrelevant" (Ao 2005: 168).

In the face of such socio-cultural dislocation, native ethnography in the form of story-telling and oral tradition becomes a strategic necessity to reclaim the past and its tradition. K.C. Baral (2013) traces two interconnected factors while writing about the emerging literatures of India's North-East: "colonial legacy in the form of ethnographies" and "ethnocentric imaginary" that mark the contemporary writings in the North-East. What emerges from the

intersection of such dynamics is the reinstatement of an ethnic cultural identity and a resistance towards modern/colonial identity where storytelling becomes the means to reclaim the past, as “the past is an integral part of the present where the oral informs the written in that the creative writers redefine ethnic cultural identities in reprocessing cultural memory” (Baral 2013: 7). Temsula Ao and Mamang Dai have been witnesses of such socio-cultural conflicts and their narratives depict the predicament of a tribal culture caught between tradition and modernity along with a tacit responsibility of the community/ survivors to hand over the past to the successor which they need to unearth, for it is not merely the practice of storytelling of a bygone past, but retrieving and recreating the past for the present. In Ao’s story “The Old Man Remembers”, the old man who was once forcefully inducted in the camp of the underground soldiers voices deep urgency of circulating the stories about a land of a bygone past to the land’s descendents, as he recounts his past to his grandson: “I had to tell you this because it is the secret of our lost youth and also because I realise that once in a lifetime one ought to face the truth. Truth about oneself, the land and above all, the truth about history” (Ao 2006:112). It is through myths, legends and tales the story-teller, as it were, becomes wistful to retrieve the nostalgia through evocation of the past and recreate history which is heavily reliant on oral tradition as distinct from the common conception of history. As Temsula Ao writes, “In absence of any written history the numerous myths, legends, tales and names as well as other aspects of the tradition have been the only link between the historic past and the present. The tradition may not be ‘history’ as we understand the term to be. But it is also not ‘fiction’...” (Ao 1999: 175). The life-force of oral tradition lies in its ability to maintain a balance between hinging on the past as well as recreating the past according to the necessity of the present milieu. As Stuart Blackburn (2007) aptly writes, “oral stories present a culture’s reflection on itself, a commentary that has been abstracted from everyday life, passed down from generation to generation, and shaped according to the local narrative conventions and taste” (Blackburn 2007:420). In Ao and Dai’s accounts, the figure of the “storyteller” assumes a new import, where “storytelling” as a process has not come to closure as Benjamin⁴ argues, but signals a return of a different tradition of storytelling and with it transmission of history from one generation to another in India’s North-East as the storyteller swaps the role of a chronicler and a history-teller and storytelling being an everyday art for the common. The figure of the classic storyteller has perhaps

come under revision with narratability of life-stories being a domain shared and narrated by the common in India's North-East.

Notes

1. Birendranath Datta in his Foreword to Temsula Ao's *The Ao-Naga Oral Tradition* defines that the region of North -East was and remains 'a veritable folklorist's paradise'.
2. The phrase by Sheila Rowbotham which has gained popularity in the academic domain derives from her noted work *Hidden From History* published in 1973.
3. Dell Hymes puts forward the concept of 'ethnography of speaking' or 'ethnography of communication' as an approach to analyse communication in a wider socio-cultural context mutually reliant on the beliefs of the members of a particular culture or speech community.
4. Benjamin argues (1968) that in modern times story telling as a craft is dying out as experience which is the main source of writing stories has fallen in value in the modern world that has witnessed a rapid transition from past to present resulting in an incongruity between storyteller's past experience and present bearing.

References

- Ao, Temsula. *These Hills Called Home*. New Delhi: Penguin Books India in association with Zubaan Books, 2006.
- _____. "Ao-Naga Myths in Perspective". *Between Ethnography and Fiction: Verrier Elwin and the Tribal Question in India*. Eds. T B Subba and Sujit Som. New Delhi: Orient Longman, 2005.
- _____. *The Ao-Naga Oral Tradition*. Baroda: Bhasha Publications, 1999.
- Baral, K.C. "Articulating Marginality: Emerging Literatures from North East India". *Emerging Literatures from North East India: The Dynamics of Culture, Society and Identity*. Ed. Zama, Ch. Margaret. New Delhi: Sage, 2013.
- Benjamin, Walter. "The Storyteller: Reflections on the Works of Nikolai Leskov" in *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*. Ed. Hannah Arendt. New York: Random House, 1968. Pp 83-109.
- Bhabha, Homi. *The Location of Culture*. New York: Routledge, 1994.
- Blackburn, Stuart. "Oral Stories and Culture Areas: From Northeast India to Southwest China", *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies*, 30:3 419-437, 2007. DOI: 10.1080/00856400701714054.
- Certeau, Michel De. *The Practice of Everyday Life*. California: University of California Press, 2011.
- Dai, Mamang. *The Legends of Pensam*. New Delhi: Penguin Books India, 2006.
- Hymes, Dell. "The Ethnography of Speaking". *Anthropology and Human Behaviour*. Eds. Galdwin T & Sturtevant W.C. Washington. Washington: The Anthropological Society of Washington, 1962.
- Ong, Walter. *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word*. London and New York: Routledge, 1982.

- Rowbotham, Sheila. *Hidden from History*. London: Pluto, 1973.
- Perks, Robert and Thomson, Alistair. *The Oral History Reader*. London and New York: Routledge, 1998.
- Sarangi, Jaydeep. "In Conversations with Mamang Dai". *Writers in Conversations*. Vol. 4, No. 2, August, 2017.
- Strenski, Ivan. *Malinowski and the Work of Myth*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992.