Philosophical Anthropology and Globalization: A Reflection on ka thymmei u hynniew trep ki saw Dorbar Blei

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As a practice, story telling has been a means of handing down to the younger generation certain cultural values, practices and beliefs among many tribal societies of Northeast India. Oral narratives can be in the form of prose, poetic prose or in the form of verse that are generally chanted or performed by singing. Each narrative in whatever form it is rendered, always has a sense of novelty. In addition, it has a spirit that the narrator has to bring into or is supposed to bring into the rendering, for it provides its raison d’être or explanatory context. The explanatory contexts provide the logical, moral and causal connections between the world in which these narratives are created and what they “narrate” about that world. Stories whether in the form of ballads or in prose, as important sources of knowledge, are always accessible to a community of storytellers and listeners. Through these telling myths, legends, proverbs and other intangible cultural products get distributed. The stories constitute an archive of teaching-learning material and are used for educational purposes in preliterate and oral societies. In Khasi society, as Esther Syiem argues, “folk tale is the repository of cultural values that inform the present and invests it with a living sense of tradition” (2005:29). Some variations in the tales may emerge especially when the same tale is told by different people or in different places, yet the content of it remains the same. The folk tradition among the Khasis is still a living tradition. It comes back to the cultural participants in different forms even though the society has undergone through phenomenal changes. In a globalized world where boundaries and identity markers are getting blurred what happens to this living tradition is the concern of the present paper.

In contextualizing my concerns I would like to examine Jespil Syiem’s written rendering of Ka Thymmei U Hynniew Trep Ki saw Durbar Blei, a folk ballad on the origin of Hynniew Trep, the four Divine Durbars. The ballad is a collection from various sources and versions including the presentations of some elders from memory and then composed into an integrated whole. In spite of the composer’s subjective incursions and explanatory notes to suit to contemporary beliefs and practices, the work contains the traditional belief system, wisdom, perception and philosophy of life of the Khasis. The text indeed is an important source of understanding Khasi Culture and Religion.

The question pertinent to ask here is, what role does religion play in a globalized world? If economies of the world get integrated and technologies reduce our physical distances, can such integration happen in matters of faith? In spite of the fear that globalization will erase most of our cultural practices, I am of the opinion that it cannot erase what is inherent to a culture, for example, our belief systems. Technology may bring in comfort and luxury to our existential needs but it cannot totally erase faith, as we need it whatever may our existential situation be.

In Northeast India the tribal societies have experienced radical transformations during a short period of time. From the preliterate to a modern society, from an anistic belief system to Christianity (though a few still practise the traditional religion), from community-oriented social practices to self-centered individualism, or in other words from premodern to modern to postmodern or global conditions, the societies have undergone radical transformations. After the inertia that catches you in a hurry having no time to sit and stare, time has come to look into the past and reexamine some of the cultural notions that still provide the cultural mooring and consolidate the concept of identity from an inferiority that has always been part of our consciousness and somehow guides us in our daily activities. This internal impulse of being a Khasi or a Mizo is more important than the external trappings always considered important. The external markers of identity have been central to colonial anthropologists and ethnographers. Philosophical anthropology looks at the internal impulses of our cultural and racial character. It is in this context, I would like to argue that what makes the Khasis what they are, and their worldview that is embodied in the folk traditions not in the external trappings of difference.

I take up here for discussion Jespil Syiem’s Ka Thymmei U Hynniew Trep Ki saw Durbar Blei. The first part of this text narrates about God and His creation including human beings and how they come to inhabit this world called the Ka Pyrthei. This is followed by the coming of the Hynniew Trep to “Rule” this world under the supervision of God. Since righteousness prevailed, everything was in the state of peace and order. This was the era of Aiom Ksiar (Golden Era). But ka Pap (evil) entered into the world, as Ka Hok (righteousness) relinquished the world. Such a situation resulted in the suffering and misery of all creatures including man, as God snapped His relationship with the world. This was followed by some acts of repentance. Eventually man as the main protagonist managed to re-establish the relationship with God. This relationship was attained through two factors, viz. ka Niam (Reason) and ka Jutang
From these lines it is clear that the Khasi worldview underlines righteousness as an instrument for existence and also for peace and harmony in this world. It is the principle of religion that defines and determines the nature and character of a human being, for God assigns him with certain rights and privileges. If man turns away from God as a result of sin he has to face pain, suffering, turmoil, despair, trouble etc. In the words of Hamlet Bareh, “the virtues have faded while vice is becoming supreme by casting gloom in the society. Man laments the departure of peace, the established rule of God... An inner man is deprived of conscience while an outer loses his manly charm” (1969:63).

Culture without religion for the Khasis is disastrous. Religion therefore becomes a means for good life. Humanity can flourish only where religion plays a vital role. It is religion that promotes morality in the form of earning righteousness (Kamai ia ka Hok), knowing one’s maternal and paternal relatives in the Khasi context (Tip Kur Tip Kha) and also knowing other human beings and God (Tip Briew tip Blei). These principles can be considered as the core of Khasi Ethics and Religion. They become the moral norm for each Khasi to be followed in his personal and social life. Thus the Khasi society views itself as an ethical community following W.H. Halverson that every religious group as a matter of fact is constituted as an ethical community (1868). This concept is further strengthened by what Alasdair Maclntyre says that religion is always an expression of the moral unity of a society (1984).

In the context of Khasi Society religion is not to be understood as a set of dogmas or institutions, but it refers to the way of life of the people, where morality acts as a guiding principle. I have argued in my work Culture and Religion: A Conceptual Study (2004) that religion is one of the most important elements of culture, which gives meaning to various practices or activities. However, culture as such is a very broad concept that includes not just religion, many other aspects of our existential reality. But what is significant is that religion by giving shape to our worldview also connects to our other cultural practices and activities or constitutes the very core of our existence.

What Jesupil’s work tells us is that a society no matter how strong or developed it is, cannot flourish or progress without taking morality into account. A society or culture may have developed naturally or scientifically but it cannot abandon faith. Faith actually is not dogma but reasserts the dignity of man in a network of relationships with animate and inanimate equally thereby by contradicting the secular view that religion has nothing to do with the society. Science has been able to explain many things following cause and effect paradigm but there are issues it cannot explain. For example, the subjective intentions of a person cannot be explained in term of cause and effect (Davidson: 2001). I would say that beyond the world of facts there is a world of value that lies beyond the scaffolding of scientific enquiry.

Philosophically, the question that needs validation is what is the use of following the rules or why should I follow them? Even if moral law is intrinsic in my nature, how far can it affect the conduct or my life? Kant’s ethical
theory necessitates the existence of God and thereupon develops the concept of immortality of the soul as a moral postulate without which the whole theory would have failed. If one is not rewarded or punished in this life would be awarded or punished in after life. To be rewarded in life one has to practice “Kamai ia ka Hok” or righteousness in thought and deed. But the aim of morality is not to be followed here and now rather it is escathological. Escathology simply means what Talal Asad has called a project of integration of the future with the past (2003) that amounts to re-mixing of the faith and pragmatic aspects of reason. Supported by reason and rooted in the righteous life Khasi religion has universal application as it does not think religion as a kind a political weapon but a socio-cultural instrument for a fuller development of the human person.

Khasi religion also keeps the speculation alive that the chosen One or U Ta will come from heaven to redeem them. This aspiration underlines the messianic hope not only of a redeemer to be incarnated but of changes that need to be adopted with changing times for the betterment of the individual and the society, for reconfirming and revalidating the values of traditional wisdom in the contemporary context. Therefore religious impulse removed from its ritual and other forms is a means of reinventing oneself in a moral order. That U Ta will not come to abolish the old religion but shall restore it and make it complete. Religion here is considered as a practical system of belief that organizes human life individually and communally. Barnes Mawrie says that Khasi religion is holistic because it consists of “Ka Niam Im” (Religion for the living), and “Ka Niam iap” (Religion for the dead). The religion of the living is based on the ethic of right living and conduct thereby providing the society an ethico-religious framework to transact the daily business of life. That is why for the Khasis ethical norms are synonymous with religious norms.

It is quite obvious therefore to say that the Khasis have always strived for an ethical life, as a kind of commandment of God. There is a problem in Jespil’s overemphasis on a Christian worldview that negates the broad, universal impulse of Khasi traditional religious worldview thereby circumscribing or subordinating individual effort for growth and progress. Further morality should not be considered as of transcendental origin only. Religion need to be culturally validated within which personal perceptions of rules and norms may be accommodated within the community’s view and if need be might go against it. Similarly, an aggressive form of individualism should not go against the broader goal of humanism. If religion circumscribes the meaning of humanism, individualism sometimes underscores it. Religion and cultural practices, which are subject to mutations because of internal and external factors, need to keep on readjusting with each other for making a society progressive.

I would conclude by saying that U Ta is a kind of messianic concept. The U Ta therefore should not necessarily be identified with the Hebrew or Christian concept of Messiah or Redeemer. Rather it can be understood as a concept of native messiah, which is culturally circumscribed. If the messiah can bring salvation to the Christian or Jews, the Messiah can, no doubt, bring salvation to the culture as a whole. It is not always that the Messiah will free us from the bondage of sin only. A culture or society suffers from all sorts of evil, pain, exploitation, abuse etc. due to reasons that may be found in environmental pollution, deforestation, immorality, wickedness and so on. In spite of the fact that religions have become a way of life of the people, yet, no solution has emerged from the narrower and institutional practice of religion. Killings, exploitations and other forms of evil still exist. Nature is exploited to its limits. In short the culture itself suffers from all sorts of evils. To come to a solution, there is a need for a “redeemer” or a Messiah not as Christianity understands it, but a Messiah who would save the culture from all sorts of evil and cruelty done by people to fellow human beings. The U Ta therefore signifies liberation of a society from all sorts of inhumanities, immoralities and destructions. How can I live or perform my duties properly where my dwelling place has been polluted, the air I breathe, the water I drink are also poisoned? Similarly how can I express myself where my right has been denied or my goal has been taken away from my reach?

Therefore we need to follow a morality rooted in the traditional humanistic spirit of the religion that has been a product of culture with a sense of achieved participation on the part of the individuals for making this world worth for living.

Jespil Syiem could be credited with narrative re-production of the vision of U Ta, who is a native and culturally rooted messiah. Therefore, if messianic spirit has been there within Khasi culture based on a prior morality, it is possible to have a domain of faith and religion. Given this context of imagination, a non-transcendental and practical idea of ethics that emerges from the Khasi context can serve as the source of re-appraisal of the so called global/local dichotomy. It could be re-evaluated from the point of view of liberation that is a part of the agenda of globalization. That liberation necessarily has a cultural ontology, in this case, a religion based on the priority of morality results in a situation of two dimensional appropriations of the global: liberation as well as right living in one’s own context of history and culture that integrates future with the past.

References
The theme of August 2006 issue of *Indian Folklife* is

**Post-field Positionings**

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“Fieldwork” has long been viewed as the *sine qua non* of the discipline of cultural anthropology, a rite of passage for its students who anticipate moving into their professional identities as full-fledged anthropologists after returning from “the field.” In such usage these terms are meant to conjure fieldwork as a relational and temporal entity rather than a geologic or geographic one: *fieldwork* is a period of intensive, direct engagement with people whose lives bear meaningfully on the particular arena of social and cultural life the scholar has chosen to designate, for the purposes of a particular scholarly project, as his or her “field.” In such usage the *field* is a highly malleable and conceptual entity, created anew each time a scholar delineates its contours for the purposes of a given study.

And yet certain assumptions about both “the field” and “fieldwork” remain relatively fixed. In the first half of the twentieth century when anthropology was young, for example, a link was assumed between the ethnographic field and those geologic formations known as fields; images of khaki-clad anthropologists tromping into the bush come to mind. Cultural anthropologists, who study contemporary human culture wherever it lives, have subsequently worked hard to dispel these associations. However the idea persists that the ethnographic field is necessarily tied to a landed place (a geographic area effectively predetermined, if not by lakes or land masses, then by nation-states and their borders) that exists prior to the scholar’s project. Instead we must recognize that in current scholarly practice, it is we who delineate the fields in which we then track the changing topography of social worlds.

And this “we” too has expanded. Anthropologists are no longer alone in using the methods of intensive fieldwork: scholars from a wide range of social science disciplines now view social and cultural life as a field of affairs that deserves direct study, including linguists, historians, psychologists, sociologists, and folklorists as well as scholars of theater and gender studies.

What then is the model of fieldwork we want to employ in our current scholarship? Should we be content to bound the effects of fieldwork off as a discrete entity in time, “the fieldwork period,” if already we recognize that the field no longer remains bounded in space? What can the experiences of a group of scholars willing to reflect honestly on the ongoing effects of fieldwork on their personal and professional lives teach us about the nature of intense cultural and cross-cultural encounters?

In embarking on the collaborative, reflective project I here call “Post-field Positionings,” there are several interventions I want to make in generally-held notions about the field and fieldwork. The first is to suggest that even when we focus our interests, as we do in this newsletter for example, on cultural phenomena that bear the imprint of a particular place – the referent “India” in the phrase “Indian Folklife” being a fine case in point – we already recognize culture as living in and among people, without insisting that those people remain tethered to any geographic, geologic, or nationalistic physical terrain. Indeed our work concerns psychic, social and practical formations of human activity. Such activity moves, carried by people, and circulates in often unpredictable ways.

The second set of interventions builds on this first premise. I have solicited researchers’ reflections on the realities of how the give-and-take inaugurated in the field between ourselves and the subjects of our research live on, beyond the canonical fieldwork period, to affect our lives post-field. The post-field phase of our scholarly endeavors is generally longer than the fieldwork period itself. Yet to date, the post-field effects of fieldwork have garnered very little scholarly attention. The topic is difficult to write about; it demands baring one’s whole self. The generally anecdotal passages that have been published in several collections of reflective essays on anthropological fieldwork, while welcome, still treat periods of fieldwork itself as their primary objects of contemplation (e.g. Brettell 1993; Golde1970; Kulick & Wilson 1995; Lewin & Leap 1996).

Breaking this mold, I asked the six contributors who have agreed to write for this issue of the newsletter instead to make the sequelae of fieldwork in their lives the focus of their attention in these essays. Learning to take seriously the effects of our lives on others, and vice versa, will, I trust, benefit us all. Given the broad range of their experiences and the subjects they studied – all of which do concern in various ways Indian folklife — these scholars’ reflections on their post-field relations and relational identities promise a rich entree to a new arena of scholarship.

Contributors to the project hail from a range of disciplinary homes including Religious Studies, Theater Studies, South Asian Languages & Civilizations, and Anthropology. They represent an equally wide range of personal identifications with Indian culture, from Native-Born-Indian to Indian-American to Foreigner-Interested-in-India. Post-field, some have chosen to live in India permanently; others to visit regularly; and others to keep a carefully negotiated distance. Such processes of post-field positioning, it seems, are as dialogic as the best periods of fieldwork, and ongoing. For not only does experience tend to exceed anything we might make of it, it also resists
containment in pre-selected beginnings, middles and ends. If indeed our interactions in the field were as intimate and interactive as we now realize they must be for any real transformations of knowledge-through-experience to occur, and again if these transformations continue to be the ground to which we return again and again in memory and meditation to fashion the magical stuff of our best works, then the field extends into the lives we continue to live as professional scholars of cultural life.

References