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Tara Purnima Douglas

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Verrier Elwin as the presenter of the *Tales of the Tribes* films

TARA PURNIMA DOUGLAS, *Bournemouth University, Adivasi Arts Trust*

Scholars of the indigenous folklore traditions of India invariably encounter the work of Dr Verrier Elwin, who documented a vast number of folktales from across Central and Northeast India. Now Elwin's published volumes have provided source material for the *Tales of the Tribes* collection of films. Elwin's work as advisor to the Government of India was influential for establishing the policies for the integration of the tribal areas of North-East Frontier Agency, present day Arunachal Pradesh and his philosophy was that development must take the strengths of the tribal cultures into account. Now that popular mass media entertainment reaches the more isolated areas, this has also seen the decline of traditional storytelling. Elwin (1960: 259) wrote that: 'I am not one of those who would keep tribal art "as it is" and would discourage change and development. Our approach to everything in life must be creative and dynamic'. This has inspired the experimentation with the medium of animation as a tool to sustain indigenous narratives and as a way to communicate tribal cultures to wider audiences in the *Tales of the Tribes* project. Little is known about Verrier Elwin's contribution to the knowledge about tribal cultures in India outside the discipline of Indian anthropology. A graphic representation of Elwin as the Master-of-Ceremonies for the animation programme provides a cross-cultural link to introduce the films in the *Tales of the Tribes* collection, and he also invites young audiences to choose their favourite story. This paper reviews Elwin's approach to the tribal cultures of India to illuminate his role as the presenter of the *Tales of the Tribes* films.

The *Tales of the Tribes* is a collection of animated films that have been developed from oral narratives from Northeast and Central India. Based on my combined understanding

of: India's tribal cultures; anthropological and ethnographic writings; and my background as an animation artist collaboratively working with Indian tribal artists and storytellers – I have decided to introduce these five films by creating an animated "Master-of-Ceremonies" character inspired by a prominent historical figure associated with India's tribal cultures. Verrier Elwin's character, activities, writings, opinions and positions – especially as Pandit Nehru's official advisor on tribal affairs – made him into a leading local, national, and international celebrity, and a highly controversial one. In this paper I present my perspective on Elwin, and explain why I have chosen to create a representation of him as an ideal host for these films. I conclude with an outline of how the linking sequences depicting Elwin as the presenter will be created.

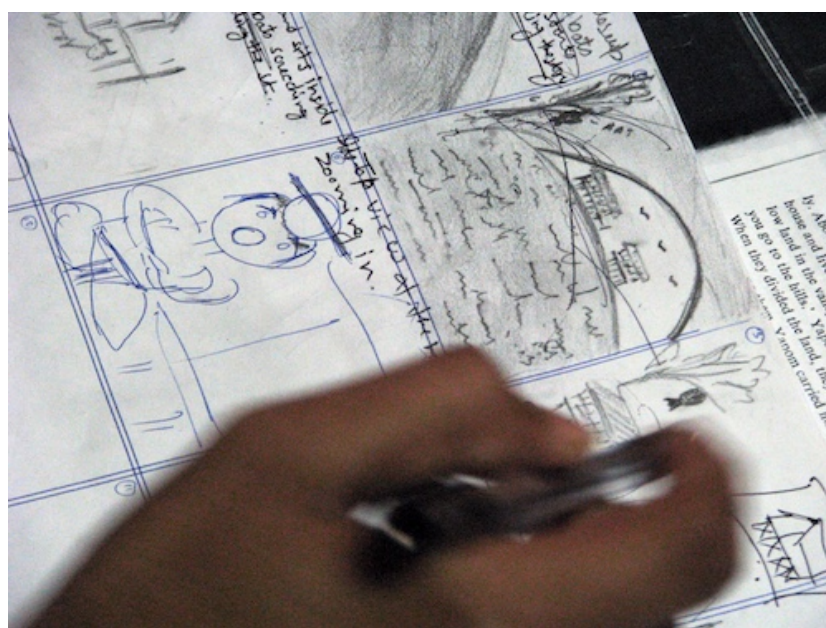


Figure 1. Storyboarding in the workshop to develop the story of Abotani from Arunachal Pradesh into an animated film, 2013

First and foremost, I am an artist deeply inspired by tribal art and storytelling and I am eager to collaborate as respectfully, honestly and sensitively as possible with tribal artists and storytellers and to help them re-present their rich traditions in a new medium that reaches broader audiences. Following on from my role as an animator and the assistant producer for a previous series of animated tribal folktales from Central India entitled *The Tallest Story Competition* (2006) that was produced in Scotland, I made the decision to work in India and to develop a new collection of short films, *Tales of the Tribes*, which became a practice-led PhD at Bournemouth University, to examine how participatory practices could reconnect the young generation with existing cultural forms and practices.

In India, Scheduled Tribes are recognised by the Constitution, Article 342 (Ministry of Tribal Affairs 2012), and according to the 2011 census the tribal population is just over 84 million or 8.2% of the total population. The acknowledgement of 'tribal' as a separate

collective identity entitles some of the most marginalized ethnic groups to additional opportunities for political representation and economic development: for example, quotas for government employment and education (Ministry of Personnel, Public Grievances and Pensions 1981; Mulchand 2008) that are met with resentment from some excluded sectors of the national population, on the basis that it suppresses meritocracy and perpetuates the notion of caste in society (Mondal 2015).



Figure 2. Animation Workshop participants in Arunachal Pradesh with the animation character models that the group made, 2013

In the central belt, tribal people are collectively referred to as *Adivāsi* which literally translates as “original inhabitants”, a word with Sanskrit origins that was first used in the 1930s to refer to the heterogeneous tribal population of India (Minority Rights Group International 2008). However, the term is not universally accepted. The indigenous groups that resided in the Northeast region prior to colonization brought about by the influx of new dominant social groups frequently refer collectively to themselves with the English word “tribes”. This term, contested by scholars due to its roots in colonial anthropology, was used by Elwin interchangeably with ‘aboriginal’; My Naga and Gond collaborators and informants self-identify as tribal so I shall use their chosen identifier throughout this piece. However, I remain attentive to critical academic debates in this sphere

that question the notion of 'being tribal' (Ghurye 1943; Devalle 1992; Rycroft and Dasgupta 2011; McDuie-Ra 2012; Guha 2013). I have also referred to the people of this study in the contemporary context with the umbrella term 'indigenous people' that appeared with the establishment of the United Nations after the Second World War (Dean and Levy 2003), that it is more widely used by nations such as Canada, where the demarcation between original inhabitants and settlers is uncontested.



Figure 3. Animators and participants trying out experimental animation techniques in the Animation Workshop in Arunachal Pradesh, 2013

Beginning with an Angami folktale from Nagaland of three brothers that was adapted to become the short film *Man Tiger Spirit* (2011), the *Tales of the Tribes* collection now also includes *Nye Mayel Kyong* from Sikkim, *Abotani* from the Tani tribes of Arunachal Pradesh and *Tapta* from Manipur, in addition to a story from the Pardhan Gonds of Central India: *Manjoor Jhali*, (the Creation of the Peacock). The films that comprised the earlier *Tallest Story Competition* (2006) series had been introduced by a cartoon presenter called Norman, who was based on a popular Scottish children's comedian: this created a cross-cultural link for international audiences to satisfy the Scottish backers of the programme. Not only did Norman introduce each film, he also invited young audiences to choose their favourite story out of the collection of five, and this gave a practical way to record the numbers of viewers and their responses to the films.

For the new *Tales of the Tribes* collection a decision was made to follow a similar format, with an animated character to introduce the five stories and to invite young

audiences to choose their favourite. This time, the character would be more appropriate to the context of the Indian tribal stories, as well as aiming to bridge the cultural divide and make the indigenous stories more accessible to wider audiences. With this in mind, I decided to develop an animated representation of Dr Verrier Elwin to introduce the films.

To this day, anyone who researches the indigenous folklore traditions of India will invariably encounter the work of Elwin. He documented a vast number of folktales from across Central and North East India, and his published collections include *Myths of Middle India* (1949), *Tribal Myths of Orissa* (1954), *A New Book of Tribal Fiction* (1970) and *Folk-tales of Mahakoshal* (1980). His collections have provided source material for the *Tales of the Tribes*, most notably for the story of Abotani from Arunachal Pradesh that I first read in the *Myths of the North-East Frontier of India, Volume 1* (1958).

Elwin (1998: 144) explained that his method of translation was simple and that above all, he avoided either adding any new images or suppressing those of the original, and in this way he was committed to maintaining the authentic meanings of the stories as far as possible. This aim was carried forward in the production of the animated series, and considerable attention was directed to deconstructing the oral narratives with elder members of the specific communities, for the adaptation of the text to the audio visual medium in the initial phase of pre-production. All folk stories are adaptations by their tellers, and the narrative language of film theory assists in translation from the oral to the audio visual. By combining computer based graphic techniques with traditional artistic practices a new form of multimedia representation of indigenous culture can emerge. I have explored how the multimedia approach that defines all the films in the collection can firstly draw from the richness and depth of traditional culture and then use a modern medium to translate it into a contemporary form - animated film. The participatory method of creation with members of the community and the capacity to represent the context of the story in terms of location, cultural details and message defines the authenticity of these adaptations.

From the start, Elwin did not readily fit any single mould, and a glimpse into his life story reveals immense variety, demonstrating that he was able to reinvent his career and how his capacity for self-reflection led him to reassess and revise his views, which has also been vital to the process of developing representation in the films.

Born in 1902, Elwin was the son of an Anglican bishop. His father died early on in his childhood; however, his mother's devout Christian faith was a strong influence on young Verrier. He first studied at Oxford University where he excelled in English Literature. He next went on to read Theology and it was this period at university that aroused his interest in mysticism and turned him from Evangelical Anglicanism to Anglo-Catholicism.

A religious calling first brought him to India, to work for the Christa Seva Sangh, to fulfil his personal urge for colonial reparation. Elwin recalls how the simple lifestyle at the Christian settlement-ashram was similar to that of many Hindu homes in western

India at the time, and it was here that he met his lifelong friend Shamrao Hivale who introduced him to Indian ways.



Figure 4. Dogin from the Apatani tribe learns how to make animation models, 2013.

Elwin's first meeting with Mahatma Gandhi on a visit to the Sabarmati ashram near Ahmedabad, at the conference of the Inter-Religious Fellowship in 1928, had a profound and lasting impact on his outlook on life. Elwin continued to visit the ashram and he became committed to supporting Indian Independence from British colonial rule: he had encountered few Europeans in India at the time, and many of his friends back in England had shared a liberal attitude; it was only later that Elwin experienced the disapproval of British officials. The impetus to adapt the tribal stories for the audio visual medium also provides a platform to address the long-term effects of colonialism and to challenge the dominance of the commercial animation industry that excludes indigenous perspectives.

The time spent at Gandhi's ashram influenced Elwin's decision to resign from the Christian Sangh, and his choice to work independently with Hivale for the social welfare of the Gonds. Underscoring his diversion from missionary activities, Elwin (1998: 59) wrote: 'we would not aim at any kind of conversion. Our ashram would be open to people of any faith or none'. This was a radical approach that ultimately led to estrangement from the powerful institution of the Church of England. In the case of the animated films, the narratives that were selected give insight on the local belief systems over attempting to integrate any outside religious agenda.

Elwin's active support for Indian Independence came to the notice of officials and on a visit to England, he learnt that his passport would not be validated for travel back to India unless he promised to have no further political involvement. This critical turning point spurred him on to spend the next 27 years living amongst the poorest - the tribal people that he became devoted to, consistently working for their benefit, and at the same time becoming the most prolific author of ethnographic publications on the Indian tribes.

To this day, Elwin still attracts contrasting reactions of approval and criticism. His work traverses both the fictional and the ethnographic genres: poetry and novels on the one hand, and non-fiction publications on the other. By itself, this has raised disapproval from his critics, as suggested by Subba and Som's (2005) assessment of his writing as somewhere between ethnography and fiction.



Figure 5. Young animator Kirat experiments with Gond art to create animation puppets, 2015

A review of Elwin's work leads us to his approach, in comparison to that of his peers. From the start Elwin (1998: 141) acknowledged his lack of formal training as an anthropologist, outlining that 'the science of God led me to the science of human beings'. The dearth of anthropological training resurfaces in the criticism of his ethnographic work, where it has been accused of insubstantial theory and lacking methodical clarity (Subba and Som 2005). Ramachandra Guha (2000) argued that the method of participant observation for collecting data used by Bronislow Malinowski gave Elwin's research scientific sanction. Yet the tension that existed between Elwin and the academic establishment is also reflected in Elwin's comment (1998: 141) that 'it is unfortunate that nowadays what I may call the technical anthropologists look down on the humanist anthropologists, though I must admit that the latter fully return the compliment.'

The objective, short-term outsider vantage point, when limited by the dominant ideological perspective of Western imperialism, has produced research that indigenous

people have rejected as distortions of their reality (Castellano 2004). According to Michael Hart (2010), a culturally sensitive approach that holistic, dependent upon relationships and connections and focuses on the process over the outcome carries more weight. Therefore, methods that connect with communities in humanizing ways and demystify knowledge are more compatible with negotiating trust for indigenous research. Elwin believed that the truth emerges through trust, and this required “long term residence, personal contact and knowledge of the local idiom” (Elwin 1942, cited by Mishra 1971). On the other hand, participatory research, where participation takes place at all stages, tends to receive a positive reception from tribal communities. For Elwin (1998: 142)

Anthropology did not mean ‘field work’; it meant my whole life. My method was to settle down among the people, live with them, share their life as far as an outsider could, and generally do several books together.

Elwin’s emersion in Gond village life was an unconventional approach for an Oxford educated scholar in the late colonial period, and during the subsequent period of negotiation for Independence from British rule. His early claim of collaboration with the community is emulated by the participatory film-making practice of the production of the *Tales of the Tribes* collection of animated films that invites the voices of the participants and storytellers in the adaptation process; however, time constraints and other logistics has limited Elwin’s long-term commitment in this case.

Elwin’s principle critic was G.S. Ghurye (1893-1983) who is credited as the founding father of sociology in India. Ghurye was an imposing antagonist: he had earned his PhD from Cambridge University and like Elwin, his illustrious career is testified by the publication of numerous papers and books (see *Caste and Race in India* (1932), *The Aborigines-“so-called”-and their Future* (1943), *The Scheduled Tribes of India* (1963)). He also supervised 80 dissertations and several of his students went on to become established names in Indian anthropology (see Dr Uttamrao Jadav, M.N Srinivas, A.R. Desai to name a few). However, in contrast to Elwin, Gurye had only three days of field research experience (Singha 2005); in *Scholar Gypsy* (1946), a book that was written specifically to defend Elwin’s position at the height of the criticism directed at his approach, Hivale raises the question of how the lack of any contact with tribal people had affected Gurye’s ability to recognise anything positive in tribal life.

Elwin’s ethnographic work conveys a personal vision that contrasts the academic standpoint of the formal, impersonal and the unemotional. What stands out is Elwin’s overarching love and respect for the tribal people, epitomized by his choice to live with them and to share their lot. The appreciation was mutual as the observations recorded by people that knew Elwin well convey a picture of the esteem and love that he inspired: for example, he was widely and affectionately known in the villages of Mandla District as ‘Bara Bhai’ (‘elder brother’ in the local dialect of Hindi) and Edwin Smith (cited by

Hivale 1948: 261) observed that there was 'no standoffish, but an atmosphere of perfect trust and friendliness between them [the Gonds]'.

In essence the two scholars, Elwin and Gurye continue to be associated with the contrasting attitudes to approaching the tribal populations of India: that of isolationism and assimilation respectively. Isolation for tribal groups as protection against exploitation by the dominant population was favoured by some British anthropologists, including Hutton (1931). However, this policy of separation was also criticized as anti-nationalist by a particular group of Indian anthropologists including Gurye (1943).

The presumption that isolating tribes was primarily in the interest of scientific study was misconstrued as Elwin defended his decision for recommending temporary isolation so that the tribes could follow their own customs, and he further communicated his deep concern towards the destruction of the special qualities of these peoples that would be inevitable if assimilation were to take place too rapidly. Once again defending Elwin, Hivale (1946) draws parallels with the criticism of Elwin as an isolationist and the accusations that were levied against Mahatma Gandhi of keeping Indian villagers backward that arose from his overt criticism of modern medicine and industrialism.

Edward Said (1978) has discussed, how Western identity was established and reaffirmed by direct contrast to descriptions of the 'Oriental' as mysterious and backward, and how such representations justified invasion, exploitation and reform by Europe, and further validated the Christian missionary impulse to convert and save the primitive tribes.

Descriptions of primitive backwardness had become embedded as the true picture. Said also showed that texts are enmeshed in circumstance, time, place and society. This can be linked to the perceptions that Elwin's tribal representations delivered the colonial stereotype of the 'Noble Savage' that were construed from the romanticized descriptions by him. However, in his defence, Elwin also described crime, dirt and poverty: therefore, the picture that he produced was not exclusively idealized but was informed by ethnographic fieldwork.

N.K. Bose (1941) indicates that the colonial attitudes of Orientalism that identified Indian civilization with Hinduism and Sanskrit, and the subsequent description of tribal cultures as primitive were upheld by the Hindu nationalists who succeeded the British colonials. This premise informed Gurye's recommendation for the assimilation of the tribes within the Hindu fold in the interest of cultural unity and nation building. But as the tribes were not readily accommodated by the caste system (Mahasweta Devi, cited by Loomba 1998) and were subsequently located on the bottom rung of the Indian social hierarchy, this indicates why his ideas on national integration were unacceptable to them.

The debate on the two contrasting ideological positions - that of isolation and assimilation - continues to have significance for the restrictions that are imposed on visitors to the tribal inhabited areas in Northeast India (Northeast Today 2015) that has brought challenges for working on the film project in the Northeast region. Hindu nationalist claims that religious differences have contributed to the sense of alienation in

the Northeast (Shourie 1994; Bauman 2013; Sahoo 2013) led me to consider the potential for local cultural representations using the medium of animation, to re-address this experience.

Elwin and Gurye both recognised that the major problems of the tribals were no different from those of poor rural people in general. Elwin's (1960) recommendation for large investments on roads demonstrates his support for the integration of these communities with the rest of India. His influence suffuses the *Panch Shila* policy for tribal development that was outlined by the first Prime Minister, Jawaharlal Nehru, affirming development for indigenous people according to their own genius; that their traditional arts and culture were to be encouraged; that tribal rights to land and forests were to be respected and that training would be provided for their own administration and development. Hence, Elwin's concept of the "tribal bias" was essentially a commitment to recognising and respecting their customs. He wrote (1998: 245): '...we must talk their language, and not only the language that is expressed in words but the deeper language of the heart.'

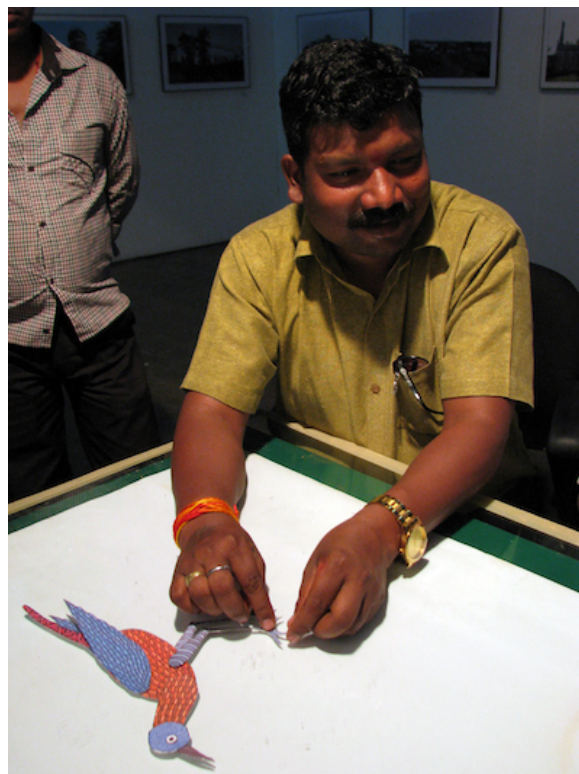


Figure 6. Dilip Shyam is a Gond artist who is trying animation of his cut-out animation character for the first time, 2015.

In contrast to research that aspires to objective distance between the researcher and informant, Elwin's active approach towards knowledge creation for social benefit in the interests of the group captures the sense of responsibility that is the foundation of indigenous research methodologies (Smith 1999). Hart's (2010) discussion on Graham's

(2002) concept of the relational worldview further shows how the indigenous outlook is directed towards spirituality and the needs of the community over self-interest. From a specific Naga context, Charles Chaise (1999:77) ventures that the 'Willingness to understand each other, feel sympathy for one another, and to be magnanimous, at least at the level of gestures...are important.' The appreciation of sentiment by indigenous people worldwide arguably illuminates the attraction of Christian welfare that echoed the social responsibility of indigenous societies. Elwin (1998:142) observed how his exposure to tribal folktales and myths made him sensitive to the fears and anxieties of those he studied. His interest in poetry led him to recognise the importance poetry also had for the tribal people of Central India, and during this period, he compiled translations of Baiga, Pardhan and Gond poems in several volumes including *Songs of the Forest* (1935) and *Folk-Songs of the Maikal Hills* (1944). I therefore propose that for Elwin, his religious background, his love of poetry and literature and as well as his exposure to Hindu philosophy promoted sensitivity towards the spiritual beliefs and storytelling traditions of the people he studied.

There are more credentials to support Elwin as the candidate to present the *Tales of the Tribes* series of short films. Notwithstanding the controversies that have been briefly outlined, Elwin's recognition of the power of development and change, over a policy of mere preservation, is communicated in his own words (1960: 259): 'I am not one of those who would keep tribal art 'as it is.... Our approach to everything in life must be creative and dynamic.' Relating back to the current project, I suggest that ethical research on adapting traditional stories for new media in partnership with young people from the indigenous groups would have met with his approval.

Discussions recorded with groups of animation workshop participants in Northeast India presented two reasons to adapt indigenous storytelling for the medium of animation. As the oral traditions are immanently threatened by the advancing popularity of mass media entertainment that now reaches the more isolated areas, the first reason that emerged was to sustain the stories for young people.

Elwin boldly advised that the non-tribes needed education as much as the tribals themselves. Hivale (1946: 205) recounts Elwin's belief that 'the primitive has a real message for our sophisticated modern world which is once again threatened with disintegration as a result of its passion for possessions and its lack of love'. His intention to make the tribal people known to increase affection and respect from the rest of the country matches the second reason that our workshop participants presented for adapting their traditional stories for animated films: to raise awareness of the value of their cultures in wider society, with the long term aim of contributing to reduce the discrimination reported by young indigenous people in India.

One of my concluding reasons for choosing Elwin (over any other, native-born Indian 'hero') is that I find his sincerity appealing and appreciate how he also came from England and developed a passionate admiration for India's great tribal cultures. A glimpse at the recollections recorded about Elwin's personality presents him as a compelling character

for depiction in a medium that supports the originality of strong and interesting characters (Burgerman 2015). His autobiography, *The Tribal World of Verrier Elwin* that reveals that he was charming and personable; brilliant, valiant and principled, also communicates his acute perception and sense of humour. His anecdote about the attention that he attracted at Gandhi's ashram is an example, or the frank admission about his dislike of lecturing (1998: 248) that left him feeling 'nervous beforehand and disgusted with myself afterwards' establish him as sincere, fallible and approachable.

His commentaries also reveal his reflective nature. For example, he recollected the hospitality of the villagers in NEFA that meant he sometimes had to take lunch in half a dozen houses (1998: 125), was qualified by him that on reaching the point where people want to reciprocate rather than always being on the receiving end, signified a big step forward.

Recognising his own reputation for eccentricity, Elwin explained that his odd habits were actually practical: walking barefoot saved him a lot of money and simplicity of dress was more suited to the conditions and climate in which he lived. His way of life with the Gonds could arguably be regarded as eccentric: for instance, he often he did not speak a word of English for several weeks at a time, yet he concludes that loneliness and introversion meant he that was able to spend more time on writing and research. He also pointed out how his long term residencies of mud and thatch were practical as they could be easily modified, or even relocated. D.F. Karaka (cited by Hivale 1946: 206) expands the character description for the presenter:

There are only three faults in Elwin: (i) He has no commercial sense; (ii) He is far too modest about his achievements (iii) He has too much patience with people far below his intellect.

These traits and the gestures of unconventionality paint an idiosyncratic character for interesting animation. Karaka also observed that 'he is in many ways more Indian than many Indians. He is more than just an orientalist western gentleman. Elwin has got India under his skin and in his blood'. Indeed, Elwin's integration with Indian village life remarkable, and the commitment to his adopted home was sealed by his decision to take Indian nationality in 1954. Yet his British origins also provide a cross-cultural link that resonates with the contemporary globalized experience. The expanse of research on the cultures, art and storytelling of Central India, and specifically amongst the Gonds, followed by his relocation to the Northeast in later life, establishes another significant link - between the indigenous populations in these two separate regions of the subcontinent that are represented in the films. Elwin was also known to be relaxed and comfortable in the company of children and as little is known of Elwin's work today outside Indian anthropology, the hope is that his new role as the presenter of the *Tales of the Tribes* will introduce his work and philosophy to younger audiences.

In the *Tales of the Tribes* series, the reanimated Elwin character begins his journey in a forest setting illustrated by Pardhan Gond artists from the same region where he lived

for so long. This sample series of short films can only provide a brief introduction to him and the dialogues for the animation script for his role as the presenter reveal fragmentary details. For example, his familiarity with indigenous mythologies enables him to contextualize the stories with snippets of subtext to the short films.

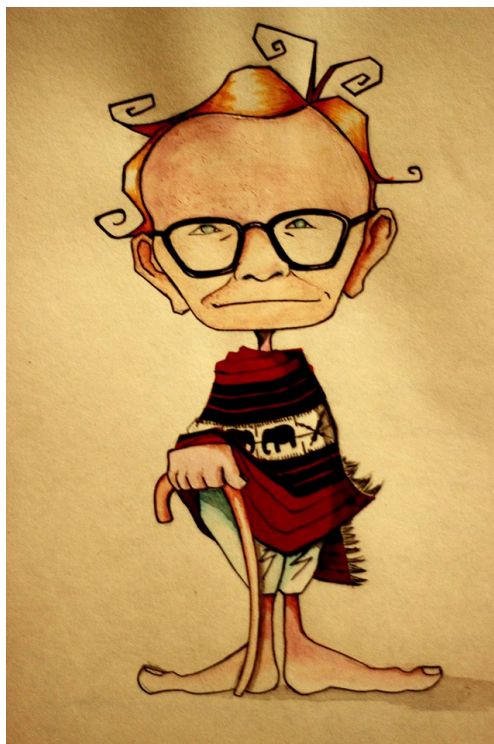


Figure 7. The character design of Verrier Elwin as the presenter, by Arak Sangma.

The visual design of Elwin as presenter of the *Tales of the Tribes* by a young Garo artist, Arak Sangma (incidentally a great nephew of Dr Elwin), depicts him barefooted and dressed in local attire (see Figure 7). The design of the Elwin character may yet be further refined in response to suggestions that he should be depicted as an older man, to valorise the traditional role of elders as story-tellers.

The animated sequences created through a combination of handmade artwork and computer technology, are expected to be completed with local support in Meghalaya, where he lived his last days. This engagement for the last phase of the production that brings the five separate short films into the wider narrative is a reminder that Shillong was the administrative centre of the region for the Government at that time. The storytelling competition replicates the format of the earlier series, down to the Trophy that is offered for the story that gains the most votes from audiences. To enable the collecting of votes, the films must first be dubbed into several local languages (those of the communities that are represented), in addition to Hindi and English, so that they can be screened and discussed by young audiences as a starting point for introducing new tools for indigenous self-representation and to sustain the oral narratives. 🗣️

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