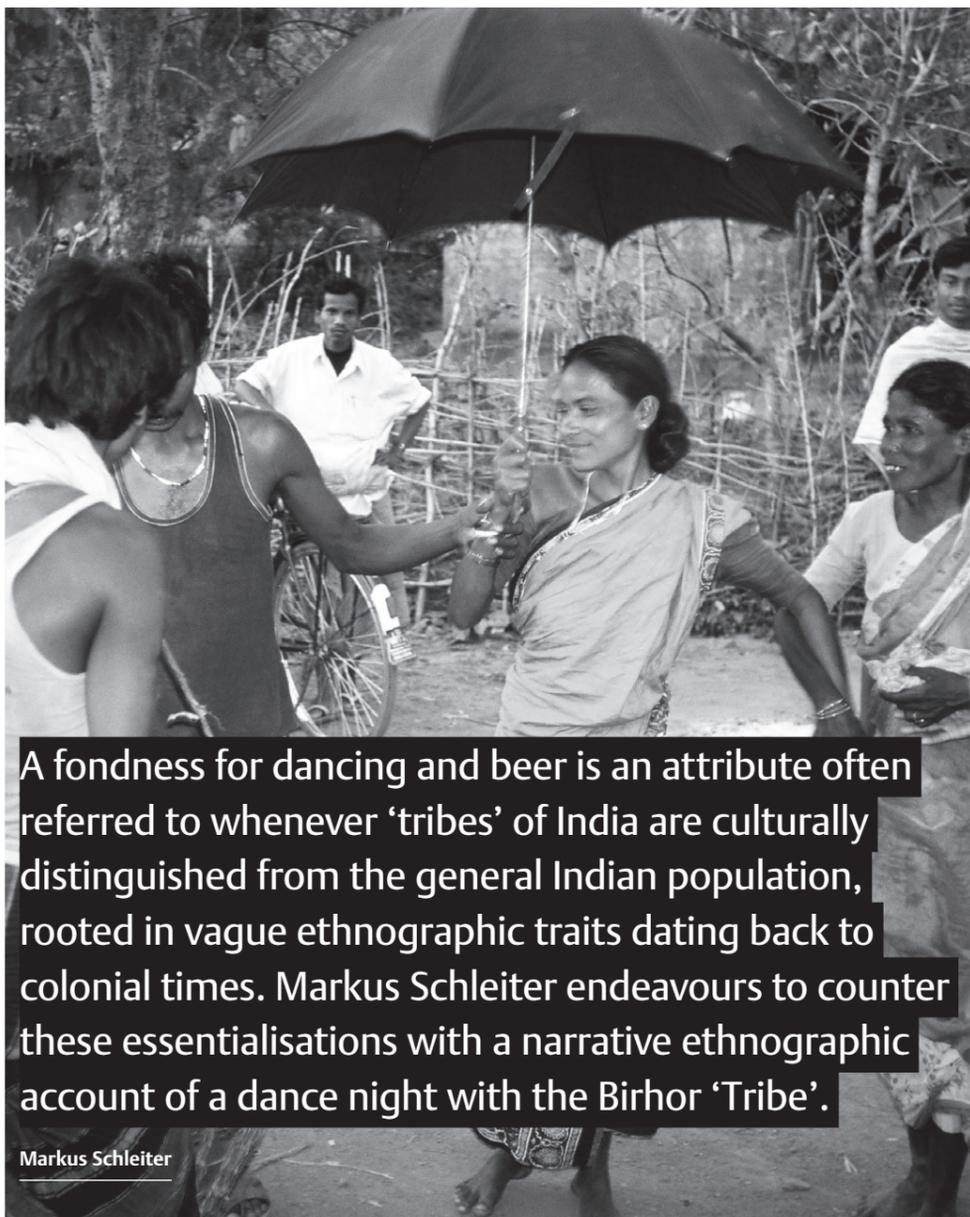


Dances with an Indian 'tribe'



A fondness for dancing and beer is an attribute often referred to whenever 'tribes' of India are culturally distinguished from the general Indian population, rooted in vague ethnographic traits dating back to colonial times. Markus Schleiter endeavours to counter these essentialisations with a narrative ethnographic account of a dance night with the Birhor 'Tribe'.

Markus Schleiter

I BEGIN WITH A CAVEAT: The example of the Birhor dance night is meant to focus on transgressions of cultural ideas, but it still requires an awake and intrigued readership, as dancing and drinking remain a firm part of the proceedings! It starts with Lugu Murmu, an inhabitant of the settlement, confirming generalisations about Birhor culture: "From the beginning we Birhor dance every week at our dancing place."

The joy can be seen in Lugu's face as he talks to Shyam and me about the evening to come. Shyam is a friend of mine and lives two hours from here. Lugu continues his description: "We Birhor work hard and go to the forest. That's why we drink and dance every week from Tuesday onwards. Today we will dance all night! Come on, let's go and have rice-beer"

We are ambling through the settlement, passing small houses, all of equal size. Most of the houses are in a tumble-down condition, covered by a rusty corrugated sheet roof. The Indian government built them 13 years ago. Almost all of the 70 inhabitants are sitting around outside of their houses, which are piled up on two sandy roads. A girl is calling me in a loud voice: "Shall we dance?" I answer, as it was taught to me: "We will dance!" A few metres ahead, a creaky voice emanates from within a group of old women: "Do learn our language, we will not be able to understand you otherwise. Who else will listen to you, apart from us?"

Today was market-day in Jashipur, a small town in the Indian state of Orissa, situated on National Highway 6 from Kolkata to Mumbai. Many of the Birhor walked 10 kilometres to the market place in order to sell their products. The settlement itself is sited in the midst of rice-fields, verdant following the rainy season. Lugu is around 25 years of age. He is married and father to a daughter and a son. He lives from the 'traditional' occupation of the Birhor, which is crafting ropes from a bark. In the coming two days he will not work. Today his wife has sold all his ropes, and bought rice and vegetables for the week.

Dance night

Gradually it becomes dark, only the moon illuminates the village. Crickets are chirping around us in the night. It is one of those rare moments when academics can forget about postmodernity and enjoy the 'life in the woods-feeling'. Many people are sitting in front of their houses and are singing or talking to each other loudly. More and more people are gathering at the dance square, where the two routes of this settlement intermingle. Some visitors from the neighbouring villages have joined the occasion.

Photography courtesy of the author.

The young men of the Santal, in particular, enjoy the Birhor's dance nights. Furthermore, the young women of another Birhor settlement, 30 kilometres away, have been invited this time. Gobora, a good friend of mine here, is leaving us: "I am suffering from headaches. I will go to bed early, so I will be fine tomorrow." I have never seen him dancing. At this moment five girls, standing up together, start to sing a song in a high pitch: "Too much mud, too much water on the way, Young woman, I will come with you, Ask your mother, ask your father, Young woman, I will come with you".

Some of the young men assemble in a group and repeat the verse of the song they just heard. After that the girls begin a new verse, which is again repeated by the boys. Lugu explains to me: "This is a Birhor song. Will you dance now?" Adivasi, this is his name, picks up his hand drum and gives the beat. Slowly he paces up and down the dance square. All the dancers join their hands behind their backs and move in a long bent row. Lugu joins me in-between two young girls – for the most part men and women alternate in the row – and I fail in my attempts to try to imitate the rhythms and steps. Nevertheless, everybody seems to be happy that the guest is dancing with them. The song ends a few minutes later. Lugu turns to me: "Now, we will sing a new song. That's again a Birhor song."

Anthropological enquiries

The next morning, Shyam and I decide to write down the Birhor songs we heard. "Gobora, do you know the lyrics of Birhor songs?" "I don't know them, you could ask Lugu or Ranjen." Armed with a pencil and a notebook, we search for them. "Ranjen, we want to write down song lyrics. Could you help us." "Just now I have to get a drink. Give me a few rupees for a rice-beer. Only then will I be able to sing."

So we negotiate the fee of ten rupees and Ranjen goes to fetch two bottles of rice-beer. A small boy approaches us. I ask him for his name. "My name is Officer." Astonished, I turn to Lugu and Shyam. "It's really his name. He was born at the moment when the officer in charge of the settlements' development was here." From afar we hear engine noises. Three well-dressed men are arriving on two motorbikes. The eldest could be 50 years old, the other two are around 25. The former introduces himself to me as an anthropologist from the state capital Bhubaneswar. He has come here to survey a governmental literacy programme. I feel relieved that he arrived at the moment I began, with my pencil and notebook in my hand – which is befitting for a serious anthropologist – to write down Birhor culture. My only fear is that Ranjen will return with the rice-beer. Drinking alcohol is held in utter contempt at Indian universities. However, there is no need to worry. Ranjen comes back without the beer. The anthropologist from Bhubaneswar is now placing himself in front of some inhabitants of the settlements. He holds a small, colourful booklet in his hand. It is a new writing course for rural Orissa. The man talks in a loud voice for some time, while looking straight towards the mountains. His arms are moving in a determined way. The few people sitting around do not give the impression that they are directing any attention to the talk; nobody feels the



urge to interrupt him. He concludes by asking if anybody has seen the booklet before. It should be available throughout Orissa. Nobody knows about it. When the anthropologists have left, an hour later, I tell Ranjen that I was worried about the beer bottles. He grins to me: "Don't worry, I heard the motorbikes. I kept the beer further back." Quickly he retrieves the bottles and the work can start. We ask Ranjen and Lugu to tell us the lyrics of Birhor songs. "I do not know any Birhor songs." "But Lugu, yesterday you sang a lot of such Birhor songs, you told us." "No, those were songs of the Santal. I said that only because we Birhor danced to them yesterday. The Birhor have always moved from place to place, so, we have always learned the songs of the other tribes." "Ranjen", now confused, I continued to ask, "this means you do not sing your own songs?" "No, I don't know any Birhor songs, either. There are a lot of visitors here. We sometimes learn their songs."

There are no Birhor songs, I ponder. Nobody knows a Birhor song. But, why worry? In regard to cultural theory it is even more inspiring to write on a tribe without a tradition of its own songs. Perfect. I ask Shyam if he knows the Santal songs we heard yesterday.

"There is no doubt that the language of the songs is Santali, but we don't sing our songs like that. Santal songs are poetic, but here they repeat only a few lines. They sing very inaccurately."

It took one and a half years before somebody would sing 'traditional' Birhor songs to me. These songs included words of the Ho and Birhor languages.

"These are our old songs, we have always sung them", explains an old woman to me. "From where do you know them?" "From where do you know your songs? Our parents and grand parents sang them for us."



How do you write about an Indian 'tribe'?

In ethnographic writing on the Birhor 'tribe' from 1888 their dances are mentioned as part of their tradition. However, in contrast to my account, most ethnographers – for example, through describing culture persistently in the third person – created the impression that their culture is unchanging. As such, the Birhor were depicted as relics of a 'timeless' premodernity and, as a consequence, are regarded as unable to cope with the present. State officials blame the failure of development measurements, as well as the Birhors' poverty, on their cultural inability. Instead, my account shows culture as transgressable and in process and, moreover, breaks with representations of members of a 'tribe' being subordinated to officials. Admittedly, however, while one could think about abandoning the category 'tribe' as a whole, I continue to depict the Birhor as a distinguishable group. In doing so, I might even be accused of bringing 'tribal' representations into vogue and to a postmodern audience. Given also that 'tribal' difference is an affirmative category – one which Birhor people partially benefit from – the above celebrations of fragmented and (un)cultural songs are suggested as a state-of-the-art attempt to transfer 'tribal' ideas into the nearby future.

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Notes

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In memory of Lugu Murmu (35), who was admitted to Jashipur Hospital with suspected malaria and tuberculosis on 24th October 2008 and died there in the early hours of the following morning.



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