



## IN PURSUIT OF PREHISTORIC AND TRIBAL ART

*Mohammed Ali\**

**Abstract** - In pursuit of prehistoric and tribal art

Our modest task in this conference is to trace as best we can the tribal art of the peoples of Asia, regarded for a long time as the oldest continent and possessing mankind's most authentic record, his art. Sandstorms did not penetrate into subterranean caves. And there, in these inaccessible places, careful hands concealed the precious memorials of the past. Fragments of lost civilisations did survive. We will find that the Buddhist artists for several centuries were prohibited from representing Buddha in human form.

History is defined as the biography of a nation. The scientific approach to national history necessitates the exploration of archaeological sources. The tribal people of Bangladesh have their own cultural tradition which is quite different from modern society. But with the modernisation of society they are changing their lives very quickly. So far about 19 various tribal peoples have been identified in Bangladesh. They have their own culture, languages and religions. In order to preserve these tribal traditions the Bangladesh government has established many tribal museums in the country, among which the largest is the ethnological museum in the port city of Chittagong. There is also one in the hilly region of Rangamati, Birisiri (Mymensingh).

**Riassunto** - Alla scoperta dell'arte preistorica e tribale

Il nostro modesto compito in questa conferenza è di illustrare al meglio l'arte tribale dei popoli dall'Asia. L'Asia è stata considerata per molto tempo il più vecchio dei continenti, custode delle memorie più autentiche dell'uomo: la sua arte. Le tempeste di sabbia non penetrarono nelle grotte sotterranee dove, in luoghi inaccessibili, mani attente nascosero le preziose memorie del passato, frammenti di civiltà perdute che sopravvissero anche agli artisti buddisti ai quali per diversi secoli fu proibita la rappresentazione di Buddha in forma umana.

La storia può considerarsi come la biografia di una nazione, l'approccio scientifico alla storia nazionale necessita di una esplorazione delle fonti archeologiche. Le popolazioni tribali del Bangladesh hanno una propria tradizione culturale, che sta cambiando molto rapidamente, molto diversa dalla società moderna. Finora sono stati identificati in Bangladesh circa 19 diversi gruppi tribali, con una propria cultura, lingua e religione. Il governo del Bangladesh, al fine di preservare queste tradizioni tribali, ha inaugurato molti musei etnografici nel paese, tra i quali il più grande è il museo etnologico nella città portuale di Chittagong, un altro di elevato interesse è situato nella regione collinare di Rangamati, Birisiri (Mymensingh).

**Résumé** - À la recherche de l'art préhistorique et tribal.

Le but de cette intervention est celui de tracer au mieux possible l'art tribal des peuples de l'Asie, qui a été considérée depuis longtemps comme le continent le plus ancien. Les traces plus authentiques laissées par l'humanité sont son art. Le sable des tempêtes n'a pas pénétré les cavernes souterraines, et ici, dans ces lieux inaccessibles, des mains attentives ont celé les précieuses mémoires du temps passé. Des fragments de civilisations qui n'existent plus aujourd'hui ont survécu. Nous allons découvrir qu'il était interdit depuis des siècles pour les artistes bouddhistes de représenter le Bouddha sous forme humaine. L'histoire se définit comme la biographie d'une nation. Une approche scientifique aux histoires nationales a besoin d'une exploration des sources archéologiques. Les peuples tribaux du Bangladesh ont leur tradition culturelle qui se diffère considérablement de la société moderne. Mais la modernisation de la société a changé rapidement leur vie. Au moment, 19 différents peuples tribaux ont été identifiés au Bangladesh. Ils ont leur propres cultures, langues et religions. Au fin de préserver ces traditions tribales, le gouvernement du Bangladesh a constitué plusieurs musées tribaux dans le pays. Parmi eux, le plus grands sont l'Ethnological Museum de Chittagong, celui du district de Rangamati, de Birisiri (Mymensingh), etc.

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Our modest task in this conference is to trace as best we can the tribal art of the peoples of Asia, regarded for a long time as the oldest continent. Mankind's most authentic record is his art. Like Tom Thumb the wise little boy of the fairy-tale who threw pebbles to mark his path for those who

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\* Mohammed Ali  
Regional Director [RETD], Department of Archaeology Government of Bangladesh, Bangladesh  
e-mail mohammed.milubd@gmail.com



would follow him later, so man of history and prehistory marked his path with the works of his art. Cataclysms struck, sweeping peoples together with their civilizations off the earth. But not all perished. Floods did not reach the mountaintops. Sandstorms did not penetrate into subterranean caves. And there, in these inaccessible places, careful hands concealed the precious memorials of the past. Fragments of lost civilizations did survive. The sands of the deserts and the deep layers of the earth preserved them jealously in their recesses. If we look back to the history of Asian art particularly in the subcontinent, we will find that the Buddhist artists for several centuries were prohibited from representing Buddha in human form. But gradually the desire to see the image of their beloved teacher gained the upper hand. By the first century of our era representations of Gautama Buddha and Buddhist saints in the guise of human beings began to appear.

We know that the existence in Asia of a Greco-Buddhist tradition and a school of art is usually connected with the campaigns -and conquests of Alexander the Great (334-327 BC), although the road to India had been known by merchants and adventurers long before the conquests of Alexander.

Greco-Buddhist art shows less of purely decorative elements characteristic of the pictorial representations of the orient and more interest in the experience of human life.

The excavations in Taxila, Peshawar and Hadda of Pakistan yielded rich material for the study of Greco-Buddhist art. The centre of Greco-Buddhist art was in the northwestern province of Andhra, which occupied parts of the Punjab and Afghanistan. The influence of the Andhra School spread widely in Turkistan, China and Japan.

Parallel with the Andhra school, another influential school of art existed in Mathura on the southern tip of the Kushana empire. It flourished from the second century BC to the sixth century AD. It was based on popular national non-Muslim tradition as represented by the art of Sanchi and Amaravati. Bound to it was the art of the Gupta dynasty (320 AD), one of the most brilliant epochs in the history and art of India.

To this epoch belong most of the frescoes of the cave-temples of Ajanta, which revealed clearly and tangibly to the Western world the surprising heights attained by Indian painting. We must bear in mind that probably the painting in this extremely moist region of Bangladesh was not a great success. So, if we want to know anything about the art history of the subcontinent, we have to depend on the art history of India, Pakistan, Sri-Lanka, Japan and other Asian countries.

Contemporary literature shows that painting was associated with virtually every phase of life. Frescoes covered the walls of temples and houses; manuscripts abounded in miniatures. The art of painting was as widespread as writing, if not more so. It represented a natural and convenient vehicle for the expression and transmission of thought.

Miniatures of the 11th and 12th centuries of our era, which have survived to present times as illustrations to texts of Buddhist manuscripts, were found in Bengal. Of earlier miniatures nothing has been found as yet. However, according to ancient Indian literary evidence, the art of miniature painting, like that of mural painting, has existed in India since the dim past.

The chronicles of Indian art of the Mogul period contain many European names. The Frenchman Austin de Bordeaus, who served for a while at the court of Shah Jahan, probably participated in decorating the famous mausoleum of Taj Mahal.

It is rather astonishing that the modern school of art in India should have come into existence in Bengal, the province that adhered most conservatively to the ancient traditions. Popular rites and customs, with roots in the distant past, were preserved intact here through the course of the ages, and its folk art in particular is very rich. Folk art represents a deep mine for studying the origin of the art of a place, as it is transmitted through the ages almost unchanged.

The general condition of most collections in Asia indicates that the responsibility for conservation is neither properly appreciated nor suitably carried out. The observant critic might even see beautiful stone sculptures and carvings being used by visitors and sometimes by museum staff as replacements for seats in the garden. Equally widespread is the accumulation of dust on wooden objects, paintings, ethnographical pieces and other types of tribal materials.

Bangladesh archaeology believes that history is defined as a biography of a nation. The scientific approach to national history necessitates the exploration of archeological sources. People are very much aware of the importance of protecting and preserving the intangible cultural heritage, in which Bangladesh can really feel proud. The tribal people of Bangladesh have their own cultural tradition which is quite different from modern society. But with the modernization of society they are changing their lives very quickly. So far about 19 tribal peoples have been

identified in Bangladesh. They have their own culture, languages and religions. In order to preserve these tribal traditions the Bangladesh government has established many tribal museums in the country, among which the largest is the ethnological museum in the port city of Chittagong, and there is another in the hilly region of Rangamati, Birsiri (Mymensingh). In this museum almost all the tribal objects of the hill peoples of Bangladesh are represented by various dioramas, with objects in daily use and pictures.

However, I strongly believe that all judgements about values attributed to cultural properties as well as the credibility of related information sources may differ from culture to culture and even within the same culture. It is thus not possible to base the judgment of values and authenticity on fixed criteria. On the contrary, the respect due to all cultures requires that heritage properties must be considered and judged within the cultural context. Last, I must say that as a whole the national intangible cultural heritage is in such a state of neglect that if remedial action is not taken quickly, the value of the collections will diminish greatly in the coming years.



*Fig. 1 Ceremony of the killing of cow*



*Fig. 2 Ornaments used by the tribal peoples*



*Fig. 3 Tribal dance*



*Fig. 4 Tribal household utensils in use from ages*



*Fig. 5 Tribal music instruments using from the remote past*



*Fig. 6 Tribal ornaments*



*Fig. 7 Tribal people*



*Fig. 8 Weaving by the local tribal people*