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A Politics of Nudity: Photographs of the 'Naked Mru' of Bangladesh

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This article uses photographs to explore the meanings of nudity in a district of Bangladesh. Throughout the colonial and postcolonial periods, photography was a major tool here in the framing of a confrontation between local and external cultural styles. In this confrontation, nudity was used as a visual marker of specific, but contradictory, local characteristics. It stood variously for primitivity, underdevelopment, indecency and indigeneity. In the dominant discourses, one group in particular, the Mru, was singled out to represent these characteristics.

Photographs of the Mru reveal a politics of nudity which is illustrated here by exploring three themes: enforced authenticity, enforced decency, and folklorization. The article links these photographs with wider discussions about romantic views of the exotic, about Orientalist representations—not just by Northerners but also by Southern nationalist elites and post-colonial intellectuals—, about development, and about minority rights. It is argued that the case of this district, the Chittagong Hill Tracts, is particularly instructive because here a politics of nudity can be seen to have underpinned deeply intrusive policies of development, oppression, expulsion and war.

Visual History in South Asia

Studying history can be done in many ways, and all of them produce a partial and coloured result. In Asia, as elsewhere, history writing has leaned heavily on written sources, and the inherent biases have

¹ E-mail: vanschendel@psw.uva.nl. This paper is based partly on several chapters of Van Schendel, Mey and Dewan, 2000. I thank my co-authors and the copyright holders of the photographs for allowing me to use this material, and an anonymous referee for valuable suggestions.

been towards the views of those who manned the state, the literate classes, and the press.

Historians of Asia have always subjected their material to critical scrutiny in order to limit these biases. Some of them have even tried to 'read between the lines', to ferret out hidden meanings and discourses. This search for other views of history can be helped by using non-written sources. Not trained to deal with these, many historians view non-written sources with suspicion. Nevertheless, these can and should be subjected to critical scrutiny, just as in the case of written material.

Non-written sources of information on Asian history come in many shapes and voices. They may engage any of the researcher's senses, or indeed any combination of them. In interpreting the historical contents of music, songs, stories and other 'oral' sources, the researcher's ears become a primary research tool, whereas pictorial art, sculpture and photography may provide clues to his or her eyes. In the case of drama, dance, food, or fabrics several senses are brought into play at the same time. Non-written sources allow the historian to use a wider range of sensory information about the past but they also require her or him to develop new ways of assessing the quality of the information which they provide.

This article is based largely on a single type of non-written source, photographs. Described as a 'strange, confined space' (Price, 1994), the photograph and the description (caption, title, text) that sometimes go with it have deeply influenced our understanding of the modern world. The use of photographs by historians of South Asia is nothing new—in many historical studies photographs are included to support the written text. Such photographs allow the reader to connect mental images generated by texts with visual ones. Usually, these photographs are employed as illustrations, clearly subordinate to the text and not subjected to explicit source criticism.

There is also a range of books on historical photography in South Asia. Most of these focus on the splendour of South Asian photography in the colonial period, and some attempt a rigorous criticism of photographs as sources of historical information. These publications tend to concentrate on the work of professional photographers located in colonial urban centres, and the themes which appealed to them and their mainly upper-class clientele. They contain a wealth of information on political and social relations, on aesthetic conventions, on audiences, and on depositories of photographic output.

They also do no more than scratch the surface of the available body of evidence. As photography took root in South Asia and photo-

graphic equipment became cheaper, photography came within reach of larger groups of people, reached more peripheral regions of the subcontinent, and found new themes. In publications of historical photography the unit of interest, and the criterion of selection, has usually been the oeuvre of an individual artist or studio, the conventions of 'colonial' photography, constructions of the 'Other', or the lifestyle of the ruling classes. These studies commonly impose a 'national' or even larger framework: photographs showing localities and events in different parts of the subcontinent are presented as instances of 'Indian photography', or as representing 'Orientalist' constructions of colonial societies (e.g. Worswick and Embree (eds), 1976; Worswick (ed.), 1980; Gutman, 1982; Desmond, 1982; Allen, 1979; Allen and Dwivedi, 1984; Beaton, 1945–46; Edwards, 1992). Recent work, which emphasizes the 'social life' of photographs and the social practices in which photography is embedded or gets entangled, continues to rely heavily on urban professional photography and a national frame of reference (Pinney, 1997).

Although these studies owe more to the disciplines of anthropology and art history than to that of history, they form an excellent foundation for a broader visual history of South Asia. Visual history starts by taking photographs and other visual images seriously as historical evidence regarding 'the emergence of visual discourses around composition and subject matter, and the specific visual codes adopted in different parts of the . . . world' (Hartmann, Silvester and Hayes (eds), 1998, 2). A major challenge for visual historians is to contextualize visual evidence, to explain how various visual discourses emerged from specific political, economic and social relations, and to show how these discourses contributed to maintaining or changing these relations (cf. Levine, 1989). To this end, it is necessary for historians of South Asia to develop novel ways of combining visual and non-visual historical sources.²

Photography in the Chittagong hills

In this article we consider photographs of the Chittagong Hill Tracts in what is now the borderland between Bangladesh, Burma and India

² Since historians of South Asia often use photographs as self-evident 'quotations' supporting an argument based primarily on textual references, and practitioners of visual studies tend to do the reverse, possibly the most fruitful way of developing an innovative visual history of the subcontinent is to think in terms of teams of specialists of visual and non-visual sources in South Asia working together.



Figure 1. The Chittagong Hill Tracts.

(Figure 1). Photography started here shortly after the hills were occupied by the British and annexed to their colony of British India in 1860.³ Photographically speaking, the Chittagong Hill Tracts remained highly peripheral till the 1960s, and it was not until the 1970s that local professional photographers began to make their mark. The colonial photographic record is patchy. None of the famous professional photographers of British India were active here, there were few resident Europeans, and the local ruling class was extremely small. The local 'camera density' must have been infinit-

³ For some background, see Van Schendel, 1992; Van Schendel, Mey and Dewan, 2000. Although I categorize the Chittagong Hill Tracts as part of 'South Asia' throughout this paper, there are perhaps as many reasons to think of it as part of 'Southeast Asia'.

esimal. Moreover, the district attracted few anthropologists, archaeologists, or tourists. Not surprisingly, photography never developed into an art form here and hardly any photographs of the Chittagong Hill Tracts can be found in the great depositories of colonial photography.⁴ Most of the photographs on which this article is based have been collected from private collections in Asia and Europe.

But photographs of the Chittagong Hill Tracts are interesting not only because they allow us to explore the world of the snapshot, the themes of non-professional photography, or the representation of certain non-elite social categories. They are of particular interest because they make it possible to document visually the enormous social changes which followed decolonization in this region. So far, analytic studies of South Asian photography have shown a marked tendency to focus on either colonial or post-colonial photography—with the colonial period being by far the most popular.⁵ Few attempts have been made to consider the two periods together, whether in order to examine the relationship between decolonization and visual representation, to study how photography was employed in novel ways by the newly independent states, or to document social trends which spanned the divide.⁶ In this article, decolonization is an important moment. It marks a sudden shift in political relations in the Chittagong hills, resulting in the resurgence of a way of understanding nudity which had been in abeyance during the late-colonial period.

⁴ Unlike the Nagas of Northeast India, who 'came to exemplify an exotic society', the Andaman Islanders, or the Bhutanese aristocracy, the inhabitants of the Chittagong Hill Tracts were not extensively studied or photographed by colonial travellers and anthropologists. Nor were collections of cultural artefacts from the Chittagong Hill Tracts deposited in colonial museums or research institutes. The only surviving historical collection consists of the remnants of the one gathered by Riebeck, a dealer in ethnographic objects. Cf. Jacobs *et al.*, 1990; Edwards (ed.), 1992; Aris, 1994; Riebeck, 1885.

⁵ Pinney, one of the few to take on both periods, juxtaposes photographic representations of body and face in colonial India and contemporary portraiture in a central Indian town. His focus is on 'key moments' in Indian photographic practice and on themes such as official anxiety about the identity of colonial subjects, ethical ideals and the aesthetics of popular visual culture. He is less concerned with chronological sequentiality or with using photographic images 'historically' by linking them consistently to ongoing processes of economic, political and social change across the two periods (Pinney, 1997).

⁶ See Rycroft, 2000, for an exploration of the colonial and postcolonial life history and multivalency of a single photograph.

The Theme of Nudity

In their pictorial representations of the people of the Chittagong hills, outsiders have often stressed nudity. They were struck by the fact that many hill people wore few clothes and they considered this to signify primitivity, closeness to nature, indecency and sexual titillation. The (almost) naked bodies of Chittagong hill people first became objects of scientific study in 1882 when Emil Riebeck travelled in the Chittagong hills at the request of Adolf Bastian, founding father of German anthropology and director of the Ethnographic Museum in Berlin. Riebeck, following Bastian's theories, wanted to identify common human traits in different cultures. Analysis of anthropometric data was expected to yield insights into the constitution and distribution of 'races'. By reducing 'primitive' people to their bodily essence he hoped to find out what made them so different from the Western observer. To this end, Riebeck could not simply take photographs of people as he met them in the Chittagong hills: he had to prepare them for the Western scientific eye by having them almost undressed, lined up in an orderly manner and deprived of any social context. There was no need to identify these individuals beyond their 'tribal' label (plate 1).

This approach soon gave way to two others. With the establishment of 'Pax Britannica', an administrative mood took over and near-



Plate 1. 'Lushai' (Riebeck, 1885)⁷



Plate 2. 'Khyengs standing in the verandah of their house' (Hutchinson, 1906)

naked people were displayed in a more matter-of-fact manner. Hutchinson published a photograph captioned 'Khyengs standing in the verandah of their house' without further comments (plate 2). He was, however, not always uncritical of local dress styles: 'No particular attention is shown by them to the demands of decency in the matter of clothing' (Hutchinson, 1906, 132).

Meanwhile, changes in anthropological theory led visitors to the Chittagong hills to photograph the local people in a different, functionalist way. Instead of undressing them in order to display and measure their bodies, as Riebeck had done, later visitors photographed them in order to make a cultural point: to show the authenticity and use of ornaments and clothes, or to demonstrate how people wore their hair. In the late colonial period, therefore, nakedness appears to have had no particular significance for photographers; for them it simply belonged to the 'way of life' of people

⁷ Captions in quotation marks are the original captions accompanying the photographs.

in the hills.⁸ As time went by, the topic became much less prominent in writings and photography.

It resurfaced, however, with changing power relations after 1947. From 1860 to 1947, the British had ruled the Chittagong Hill Tracts separately (ultimately as an 'excluded area'); the hills had been largely out of bounds to people from surrounding areas. In 1947, British India broke into pieces as it decolonized. The Chittagong Hill Tracts were assigned to Pakistan and formed a district of the province of East Pakistan from 1947 to 1971. In 1971 that province broke away from Pakistan to become the independent state of Bangladesh.

In 1947 Bengali and West Pakistani officials took over the administration of the hills, and with their presence a new confrontation developed between local and Islamic notions of decency. The Chittagong Hill Tracts formed an anomaly in Pakistan, a state based on the Muslim right to self-determination. In 1947, Muslims made up less than two percent of the population of the Chittagong hills. Moreover, although Pakistan harboured other groups which it identified as 'tribal' (e.g. the Pakhthuns or Pathans in West Pakistan), these shared the Islamic moral code. Only on the fringes of East Pakistan could one find peoples whose lifestyle put them firmly beyond the code of decency prescribed by Islam.

The notion of 'primitivity', which had become discredited and obsolete in anthropological discourse and had slipped from late-colonial parlance, now reappeared in Pakistani popular literature as a concept to explain the hill people's way of life. They were seen as uncivilized, ruled by 'superstitions' rather than real religious beliefs, without history, and, in the words of Abdus Sattar, a prolific and widely sold author on the subject, 'of deep interest to any one who wants to discover man in his raw form' (Sattar, 1971, 4). Sattar, at pains to underscore the 'primitivity' of the hill people, used nakedness as a symbol to shock his largely Muslim readership. For example, he made the wild claim that the Shendu of the Chittagong hills: 'remain barely covered. Men wear loin-cloth and women do no more than hide the private parts of their body. But in the dense forest it is not unlikely to find entirely unclothed Shendus adults.' (Sattar, 1971, 269)⁹

⁸ See Van Schendel, Mey and Dewan, 2000, 99–106.

⁹ Complete nudity has never been reliably reported. In 1798 Francis Buchanan met some Kuki ('Lang-ga') inhabitants of the Chittagong hills: 'To cover their nakedness they held in their hands small pieces of Cloth, that surrounded their waists: but this, I was told, was on account of their having come among strangers

In 1971 the Subdivisional Officer of Bandarban Subdivision similarly used nakedness as a symbol of abhorrence when he explained to Wolfgang Mey, a European anthropologist, why the Chittagong Hill Tracts were closed to foreigners: 'There are wild elephants, and the natives go almost naked. We cannot guarantee the security of tourists.' During the same year Claus-Dieter Brauns, a photographer, spent some time with the Mru in the southern hills.

Then the thing happened which I had always feared: policemen came in order to take me from the village. In Lama a West Pakistani security officer awaited me. He appeared to be well informed about my photographic activities and indicated that it was forbidden to do mission work in the mountains and to take pictures of 'unclothed natives.' The only thing which might be permitted, he said, was the taking of group pictures at the bazaar. I showed him a few black-and-white photographs, which were immediately burned. (Brauns and Löffler, 1990, 21)

In other words, primitivity was re-invented in the Pakistan period, and nakedness and superstition were two of its basic aspects. Sometimes nakedness was mildly ridiculed; the caption of plate 3 was 'Tippera youth in full dress' (but notice the cloth at his feet).

In Pakistan, nakedness had to be treated with circumspection: photographs of topless women never appeared on the covers of books but as illustrations of primitivity in the text. This eye-catching symbol was naked proof of the need to civilize and clothe these people, or—to use a term which emerged during this period and would spread like water-hyacinth through the literature on East Pakistan/Bangladesh—the need to 'develop' them. As A.B. Rajput put it: with the present pace of development in East Pakistan, the tribesmen are bound to benefit in the not too distant future . . . It will, of course, be of interest to watch how the tribal folk react to a revolutionary change in their outlook when the development projects in various fields offer them better opportunities for living and mixing freely with comparatively more advanced people belonging to the same land. (Rajput, 1962, 19)

In the mid-nineteenth century, nakedness had been a symbol of wildness; a century later it had become a symbol of underdevelopment.

What the 'unclothed natives' meanwhile thought of all this remains unrecorded. They did not have cameras. But the gaze of the Mru man in plate 4 speaks volumes. To him it was the nudity of the Western visitor, and not his own, which was a sight to behold.

for at home both sexes go absolutely naked' (Buchanan, in Van Schendel (ed.), 1992, 93).



Plate 3. 'Tippera youth in full dress' (Diettrich, 1960)

Mru as the Most Naked

The Chittagong hills, an area in southeastern Bangladesh of about 300 by 50 km, are inhabited by 13 ethnic groups which differ in language, religious beliefs, lifestyle and size. One of these groups is known as the Mru. Because of warlike conditions in the Chittagong Hill Tracts from the mid-1970s to the late 1990s, no exact population figures are available but it is likely that there are over 30,000



Plate 4. Mru couple and European visitor (Seifert, 1963)

Mru in the hills. Smaller groups of Mru live across the border in Burma (Myanmar).¹⁰

In Bangladesh, the double yardstick of nakedness and 'superstition' has been applied to portray the people of the Chittagong hills as primitive, wild and underdeveloped. There are no Muslims among them (although state-assisted transmigration of Bengali since the 1970s has brought many Muslim settlers into the hills) and Islamic dress codes are not followed. And among the hill people, the Mru, who have their own community religion and wear few clothes, have come to be seen as the most primitive. It is not only Westerners and Bengali who have read the nakedness of the Mru as a sign of primitivity; Chittagong hill people belonging to other groups have done so too. Among the Marma (a Buddhist group), it is common to classify the Mru as less civilized.

Marma . . . distance themselves from the naked Mru, the Mru woman with her nude body and short, slit loincloth, the Mru basketmaker and weaver,

¹⁰ The following groups have inhabited the Chittagong Hill Tracts for a long time (in order of estimated size): Chakma, Marma, Tripura, Mru, Taungchengya, Rieng/Brong, Bawm, Pangkhua, Khyeng, Sak, Lushai/Mizo, Khumi. The few resident Bengali have been joined by transmigrants arriving since the late 1970s; together they now form the largest ethnic group in the Chittagong hills.

... the mountain Mru, without religion (from the Marma point of view), without monks or script. Marma would like to feel closer to the Bengali and cut themselves loose from these 'savages' whom they despise. (Bernot, 1967, II, 749; my translation)

A Marma student taking photographs of a Mru mother and her child added the caption that Mru women always go around bare-breasted and that they have no shame (plate 5).

The Mru have become a symbol of the primitive other, and photography has played a central role in this. The outside world knows the Mru almost exclusively through photographs. The Mru do not write, they do not speak in public media, they do not project themselves



Plate 5. 'Mro tribe. Mother and child. They always line up bearly. Shame is not fact for their' (A. Mong Akhyai, 1990s)

beyond their region. And yet, the Mru woman clad only in a short black skirt and the Mru man with flowers and coins in his long hair have become instantly recognizable to people throughout Bangladesh as the stereotype of the 'primitive tribal'. These images build on a lively photographic tradition which seeks to represent the naked Mru as the epitome of the exotic.

Photographing the Mru

The essence of this tradition is best illustrated by Claus-Dieter Brauns, by far the most influential and accomplished photographer of the Mru. In the introduction to the book based on these photographs, his ideas and intentions are explained.

'Motivated by a deep longing to break out of the pressures of technological society and to return to nature by experiencing "the unbridled freedom of primitive people"', he came upon the Mru in 1963. They appeared to him 'to represent a tribal culture still closely tied to nature.' Over the years he returned several times and made some 6,000 slides. 'They are not intended to be purely scientific and functional documentary photographs, but rather seek at the same time to convey feelings—including all of those exotic and romantic sentiments which the Mru can awaken in occidental people.' (Brauns & Löffler, 1990, 19, 21)

Brauns' photographs are the culmination of a tradition which began with the first known photograph of a Mru, taken by T.H. Lewin in 1867 (plate 6), followed by a trickle of photographs in the first half of the 20th century (e.g. J.P. Mills), and a veritable stream in the second half of that century. The theme of nakedness is at the core of this tradition.

In Brauns' idyllic evocations, the nudity of Mru people is an emblem of their noble freedom, naturalness, vitality and exotic beauty. As a soft light bounces off their light-brown skin, the girl playing a bamboo flute (plate 7) or the man threshing paddy (plate 8) are absorbed in their activities and seem enveloped in an aura of harmony and well-being.

In Brauns' photographs, Mru show themselves with generosity and ease. There appears to be a bond of trust and an absence of tension. This is very unusual in photographs of the Mru, most of which indicate a power struggle between photographer and photographed. I shall discuss three battlegrounds: *authenticity*, *decency* and *folklorization*.

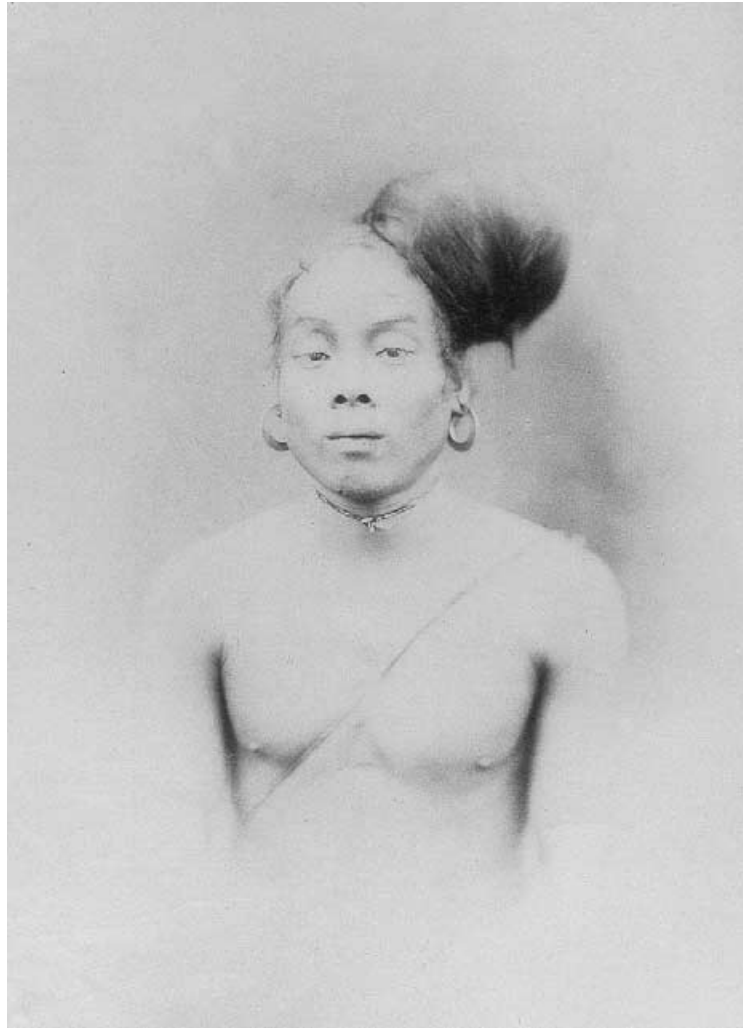
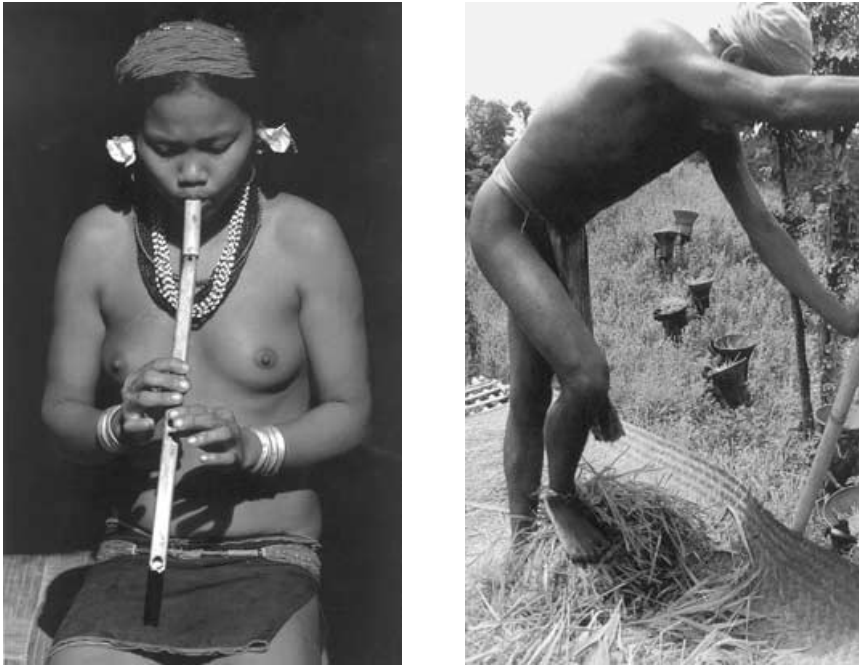


Plate 6. 'Young man of Mro or Mrung tribe' (Lewin, 1867)

Enforced Authenticity

In some cases the photographer's challenge was to take pictures of Mru which were in accordance with his/her idea of authentic Mru nakedness. For example, in 1963 some European visitors armed with cameras encountered a group of Mru women on a road. One of the visitors felt that she had to 'prepare' these women for the photo-



Plates 7 and 8. Mru (Brauns, 1971)

graph, imposing her own aesthetic conventions on them (plate 9). The result (plate 10) was a photograph of three embarrassed and angry Mru women (note toes curled up in annoyance), quite different from the Brauns photographs.

The struggle over authenticity comes out even more clearly in what happened next. The visitors wished to take pictures of authentic, i.e. naked, Mru. After 1947, however, Mru women had gradually taken to wearing white or coloured cotton wraps when they moved outside their villages (see below), and these women were wearing them too. The visitors now prevailed upon these women to take off their wraps, all the while snapping away at them. The women complied, visibly annoyed and uncomfortable but too intimidated to refuse. They looked down and away from the camera, clutching their wraps, feeling shy and unhappy (plates 11–13).

The search for Mru authenticity among Western photographers was closely bound up with nakedness. A German anthropologist observing a ceremonial dance at a Mru village in 1956 expressed this well when he wrote in his diary:



Plates 9 and 10. Making a 'tribal portrait' (Seifert, 1963)



Plates 11–13. Mru villagers and Western visitors (Seifert, 1963)

They wear their prettiest skirts with beautiful coloured embroidery on the back and now, during the feast, they also have covered the upper part of their bodies with a dark cloth. But now and then a marvellously shaped, solid breast flashes out, a provocative fruit of love for the eyes of the playing men. 'Komola,' orange, is what Bengali euphorically call girls and, really, these are the finest specimens which would drive 99 out of 100 European women green with envy . . . I also squat down and stare at this strange and wild sight, carried away by the soul-stirring pounding of the melody, by the dance of these Children of Nature in the flaring glow of the fire. Oh, I think, it has been well worth coming here from so far for this one night; this is still the real, authentic life, this is still very close to the primal stage of mankind. (Kauffmann, March 21, 1956; my translation)

This quotation also indicates how a concern about authentic nakedness dovetailed into sexual excitement. It would seem likely that the naked breast was more 'provocative' for the visiting anthropologist than for the Mru men who saw exposed breasts around them all the time and who were in the middle of a religious event.

Norms of Propriety

Concerns with nakedness were also at the centre of another battleground between Mru and outsiders of which we have a visual record: the clash between norms of propriety. For Mru adults, propriety required the covering of the genitals (and in the case of women the buttocks by means of a short slit skirt known as *wan-klai*), carefully grooming the hair, and adorning the body with various ornaments.¹¹ This idea of propriety was shared by only a few other groups in the Chittagong Hill Tracts (but certainly not all, e.g. the Marma and Chakma), and it stood in stark contrast to the ideas of most contemporary Europeans and Bengali.

As we have seen, many Europeans in the Chittagong hills gradually accepted that Mru and others held to their own norms of propriety, even though these differed widely from their own. Although European missionaries made efforts to clothe the naked in the Chittagong hills as part of the process of civilizing and Christianizing them, they were unsuccessful with the Mru who remained faithful to their own religion.¹²

¹¹ The earliest description of their dress style was provided by Francis Buchanan in 1798; see Van Schendel (ed.), 1992, 63–4, 70.

¹² Only quite recently a few Mru converted to Christianity and a more covered existence (see below).

The clash between Bengali and Mru norms was more intense and more recent. Of course, Bengali from the adjacent plains had been visiting the Chittagong hills for a long time, but between 1860 and 1947 their presence was severely restricted. Some Bengali shopkeepers lived in hill townships, and there were seasonal visitors, e.g. peddlers and agricultural labourers. But these Bengali stayed in the hill valleys and had very little contact with the Mru who lived in the higher hills and whose market contacts were restricted. After 1947, the situation changed dramatically. Bengali became the new masters of the Chittagong hills, first under the tutelage of West Pakistani overlords, and from 1971 directly. The disastrous confrontation of hill people and Bengali which followed is well documented.¹³ It is usually analysed in terms of political economy, national security and human rights violations, but it cannot be understood and resolved without an understanding of its cultural underpinnings. It may seem frivolous to discuss notions of propriety in the face of extensive militarization, massacres and rape, streams of refugees to India and beyond, and a general state of terror in the Chittagong Hill Tracts, but I would argue that such notions are at the heart of the matter.

The gulf between Mru and Bengali notions of propriety is enormous. For Mru, the naked body is part of everyday public life but for most Bengali, and especially the Muslim majority among them, public nakedness is despicable. Islamic, upper-caste Hindu and Victorian English norms of propriety have combined to prescribe a strict dressing code among Bengali. Even the poorest male workers will make sure that they are covered at least from the waist to the knees during heavy work, and to the ankles at all other times. Better-off men will not be seen without a shirt or T-shirt covering their upper body. For Bengali women, rules are much stricter. They dress in a *sari* or *panjabi suit* (*kameez-salwar*) which covers the entire body and often the top and back of the head. The invisibility of the female body is an important marker of status and propriety among most Bengali, and a woman showing too much of her body is easily reputed to be loose or mad. In the Bengali moral universe, public nudity can only be a sign of loose morals, extreme poverty, insanity, or primitivity.

Bengali in the Chittagong Hill Tracts were not inclined to adapt to local ways. In this they were more rigid than many Europeans who

¹³ Cf. Chittagong Hill Tracts Commission, 1991–2000; Bhaumik *et al.*, 1997; Amnesty International, 2000.



Plates 14–15. European visitors posing with Mru, and taking a bath in the nude (Seifert, 1963)

would sometimes adapt their dress, and even risk some exposure of their naked body. For example, in the 1870s:

Both Mr. Power & Lieut^t Gordon when they go out in the District (and they do this for more than 6 months in the year) wear a waistcloth (made of silk), a coat & nothing else—not even shoes or socks. Not only do they do this but they eat with their fingers & in every other respect live with the natives as if belonging to them. You must not think that Mr. Power & Lt. Gordon are [a] rough sort of men, they are quite the reverse, both of them being of very good families & very fond of civilized society; it is simply the attractive character of the people that makes all who come in contact with them conform to their ways. Captⁿ Lewin who was Power's predecessor adopted the same habits & so does everyone who lives in the Hill Tracts. I need hardly say that once your feet get hardened it is far more pleasant to be without shoes & socks than to have them on. You can then cross streams and ascend steep hills with[out] difficulty or delay and a wash when you reach your resting place puts you all right & clean. (Kisch Papers, June 9, 1875)

And in the 1960s, European visitors' partial nudity usually contrasted sharply with the full dress of their Bengali companions (plates 14–16).¹⁴

¹⁴ But note the turban-less man standing in the background in Plate 14, who may be a Bengali.



Plate 16. European visitor posing with Mru and Bengali (Seifert, 1963)

With more Bengali in the hills, Mru felt increasingly uncomfortable whenever they were among outsiders. Mru women began wearing white or coloured wraps, bought at the market, 'to protect us from the eyes of the Bengali.' What they meant by this is indicated by plates 17–20. These photographs were made by a European who, with his Muslim Bengali guide, visited a Mru village feast in 1976. Plate 17 shows some village women having fun during an interval between dancing. Then the Bengali man ordered them to remove their breast cloths. A short argument ensued between the women; some complied and some did not, and the festive mood was gone (plate 18). The Bengali man then asked the European to take a photograph of himself and a topless Mru woman (plate 19) and later ordered 20 extra copies to show around. That night he indulged in rice beer and tried his best to conquer one of the Mru women (plate 20). He exhibited the ethnocentric behaviour that made the Mru fear Bengali visitors. For him the Mru village was obviously a place which he judged by his own standards; where women went around bare-breasted, they could not be anything but wanton. Hence the code of decency by which he lived at home was not operative and he could indulge in what were sins under that code—watch scantily dressed dancing women, have them photographed as sex objects,



Plates 17–20. Mru feast and intervention (Belitz, 1976)

drink alcohol and perhaps engage in some extramarital sex—without fear of retribution.

Not only Mru women but Mru men, too, took to covering their bodies more, especially when they visited places where there were many Bengali: markets, fairs, towns. This was a way of protecting themselves against ridicule, taunts and censure (plate 21).

In the last quarter of the twentieth century, a period of religious renewal for the Mru, some of them became Christians. This choice was reflected in their dress. Adults of both sexes now covered their upper bodies even at home (plate 22), and for a formal portrait they wore full-body costumes (plate 23).¹⁵ These photographs document not so much a power struggle between photographer and Mru as between ascendant Bengali culture and Mru. They show how the

¹⁵ This new dress owed more to Burmese/Marma fashions than to Bengali ones. Note especially the *thanaka* (bark face cosmetic) which the women combined with the *bindu* (forehead dot), their Burmese-style *lungyi* (sarongs) and blouses, and the Burmese way in which the man on the right in plate 23 tied his *lungyi*. For more information on traditional Mru dress and its highly sophisticated embroidery, see Brauns and Löffler, 1986/1990; for explorations of the roles and meanings of clothing in social action as revealed in photographs, see Tarlo, 1996, and Schulte Nordholt (ed.), 1997.



Plate 21. 'Mro tribesmen attending the mela [fair] with rather more clothes than usual', Bandarban (Taylor, 1968)

notion of nakedness as a sign of primitivity and indecency invaded the world of the Mru and how they attempted to adapt to an imposed decency by covering themselves while retaining a style of their own.

Folklorization

The third battleground was the exploitation of the Mru for tourism. As the Chittagong Hill Tracts were mostly off-limits for foreign tourists, their tourism potential remained largely untapped but two forms of tourism did develop. One was the official visit. After the completion of the Kaptai hydroelectric project in 1960 (a large dam across the main river of the Chittagong hills creating a huge reservoir flooding about 40 percent of the region's valley lands and dislocating about 100,000 people), high state officials and foreign dignitaries were often taken to see this marvel of modernity. A visit to Kaptai always included a command performance by a dance troupe to entertain officials and their guests. It was important that the dancers should not offend the feelings of propriety of their audience.



Plate 22. 'Modern Christian Baptist Mru' near Lama, Chittagong Hill Tracts (Belitz, 1990)



Plate 23. 'Christian Baptist Mru, dressed up for a picture' (Belitz, 1986)

In a dance performance, usually half a dozen unmarried girls and a dozen or so instrument players participate . . . The dancers put on jingling anklets of aluminium to keep time and produce a musical effect by their foot-work. The dress remains the usual wrap of dark-blue home-spun, except on occasions when they have to give a performance before outsiders. The girls then are asked to drape their bodies with shawls or sheets of cloth in which they naturally feel quite awkward. (Rajput, 1965, 12)

For example, when the President of Pakistan visited Kaptai in 1969, a Mru group performed for him. In a real feast, Mru men blow mouth organs facing a row of dancing women. During this occasion (plate 24), however, the women danced in front of the men, facing the public. They were dressed in clothes provided by the authorities. The men wore a kind of sarong instead of their loin-cloth, a black T-shirt and a fancy turban. The women were dressed in ankle-long skirts and red jackets. This get-up made Mru dancers acceptable to their largely Muslim audience. It also defined Mru dress as indecent, imposed an invented 'tribal costume', and transformed a vibrant cultural expression into a cheerless piece of folklore.

The second form of tourism was the weekend trip by Western expatriates living in the big cities of Bangladesh (East Pakistan). A popular destination was Chimbuk hill where there was a rest house near a Mru village. 'If a dance is requested, the Mru of Chimbuk are likely to comply for a fee. Their hearts are generally not in it.' (Rashid, 1969, 73) (plate 25)

It was not until the late 1960s that the Department of Tourism began to produce tourist leaflets in which the Mru (invariably misspelled Murang, Mrow, etc) and other hill people are described largely in terms of their physical appearance:

Physically they are a short-statured but well proportioned race. Their features are distinctly Asiatic with high Cheekbon[e]s, small almond eyes and jet-black hair. The menfolk are mostly beardless. The women are generally pretty and possess good figures. The usual male dress consists of a loin cloth while the women wear the sarong. These slender, bronze-hued people form a picturesque race. (*Pakistan*, 1968)

Ever since, the Department of Tourism has used Mru in particular ('famous for their music and dance') to attract tourists, most of whom would then be refused an entry permit by another ministry. The exploitation of the Mru for tourism led to a curious fusion of the 'authentic' and the 'decent'. Packaged in racial terms ('almond eyes', 'picturesque race', 'good figures') and clearly gendered, female nudity was touted to male customers. 'Merely lazing in the dappled



Plate 24. Mru dance group performing during the Pakistan President's visit to Kaptai (Sigl, 1969)

shade to watch the tribal girls dance' was supposed to be the foremost attraction of the Chittagong Hill Tracts, and leaflets routinely contained photographs captioned 'a tribal belle', or 'a tribal damsel' (e.g. *Bangladesh*, 1974; 1983). It was safe for officials in charge of tourism to present female nudity as part of an authentic tradition of people who 'dwell as did their ancestors in centuries past, untouched by time and progress' (*Pakistan*, 1968). But they had to be careful not to stress the pleasures of voyeurism too much; tourists' fantasies could be excited but should not clash openly with dominant norms of propriety. Hence Mru female nudity was usually foregrounded, but in acceptably subdued form, as in plate 26, which shows a suspi-



Plate 25. Photographing Mru dancers at Chimbuk (Taylor, 1968)

cious-looking Mru woman, with covered breasts but ultra-short dress, from a 1997 tourist leaflet.

Three Views of Nudity

We have no photographs taken by Mru people themselves. The photographs underlying this article are images created by others who have represented Mru in various ways which share a fascination for their (relative) nakedness. I have argued that in these photographs Mru nakedness served as a marker of a number of contradictory cultural traits: closeness to nature, authenticity, primitivity, wildness, indecency, and underdevelopment. But these photographs are of broader interest than just as representations of a particular group of people in a particular corner of the world—in itself an important enough venture. They allow us entry into three crucial debates on the nature of human society and the directions it must take.

First, the Mru have been singled out by photographers such as Brauns to stand for 'man living in peace with nature', people who still live in 'unbridled freedom' and have escaped 'the pressures of technological society'. In this projection, Mru are among the few

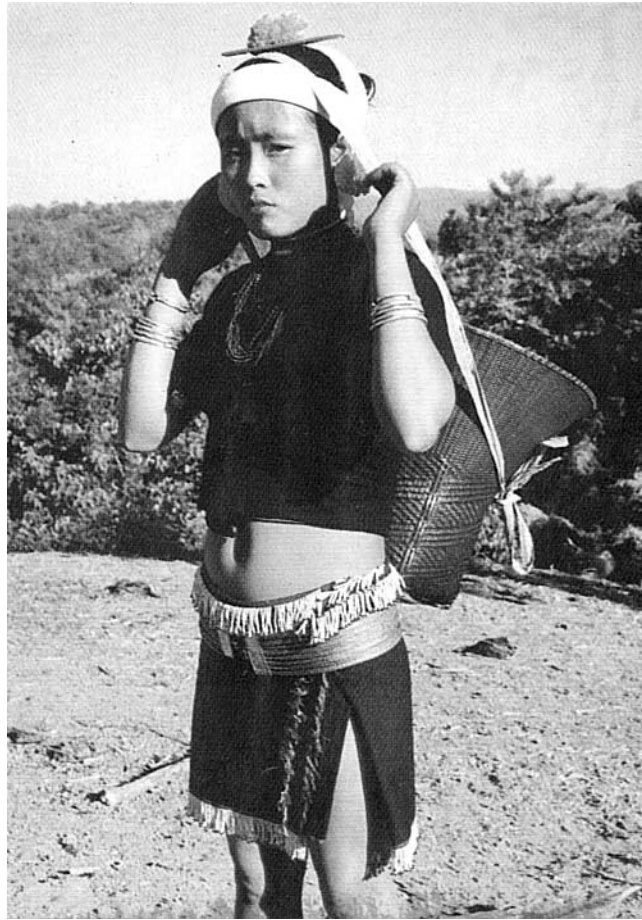


Plate 26. 'Mrow woman in traditional costume, Bandarban' (*Bangladesh*, 1997)

peoples in the world to have made it to the twenty-first century in the role of Rousseau-esque Noble Savages. The Mru stand for the Unspoilt Other, the lucky few whom History forgot. In this view, their nudity is the hallmark of their nobility; they should be protected.

Second, and related to this image, Mru have been projected in the literature on Bangladesh as the country's most primitive inhabitants. From the point of view of writers such as Abdus Sattar, they are still beyond the pale of proper civilization and religion, and their nudity is an outward sign of this. In a society which has been under a development regime for over a century, Mru are seen as the least

developed and the most backward. Far from being Noble Savages, they are the ultimate sinners against the creed of development. Their fault has been that they have not joined the 'mainstream' of social progress, and therefore others (i.e. civilized Bengali guardians backed up by foreign donors) must propel them into the bright light of development, civilization and decency. In this view, Mru nudity is the hallmark of their backwardness; they should be elevated.

And third, photographs of the Mru show that the debate on Orientalism has only just begun. Whereas Western discourses on the Orient have been the subject of much recent research, the multiplicity of voices and views from the non-Western world have not been rigorously related to these discourses. In the case of the Mru, it is clear that they have become pawns in other people's arguments (including mine in this article). What should receive much more attention is how the former authority of European Orientalist exegesis of the non-West is in the process of being replaced by certain non-Western voices only—e.g. those of national ruling elites, or 'post-colonial' intellectuals—which claim to speak for the non-West but drown out a multitude of other voices. Photographs of the Mru show how for them decolonization has meant a change from imperial neglect to post-colonial irruption. These issues link debates in the Chittagong hills with the worldwide discussion on indigenous peoples and their relationship with their respective states. In this discussion, Mru nudity is a hallmark of indigeneity; and Mru should claim their economic and cultural rights.

The internal war which raged in the Chittagong Hill Tracts between 1975 and 1997, and the less violent confrontation continuing there today, result from policies which drew their inspiration from all three debates. For example, Bangladesh armed forces and bureaucrats have portrayed themselves as development workers being thwarted by backward tribals, guerrilleros have represented themselves as indigenous warriors struggling for basic rights, and campaigners have played upon the theme of noble savages acting as guardians of a pristine forest environment.

Mru and the Chittagong Hill Tracts War

The position of Mru in this conflict is revealing. At first, most of them supported the local insurgents fighting the Bangladesh armed forces and Bengali settlers. But later they turned against them or

kept aloof. It could be argued that it was the connotations of their 'nakedness' which led to this position. Previous policy interventions had largely passed them by since whatever 'development' had been attempted in the Chittagong hills had been directed at the more 'advanced' (and more extensively clothed) groups such as Chakma and Marma, and it was members of these groups who had benefited as well as suffered the adverse consequences. Development interventions thus led to different experiences for various groups in the Chittagong Hill Tracts. The 'backward Mru' were largely ignored.

Second, state-supported and military-sponsored settlement of poor Bengali cultivators from the plains from the late 1970s also affected some groups more than others. These settlers did not dislodge Mru in large numbers because most Mru lived on the steep high hills where Bengali wet-rice cultivators did not know how to make a living. By contrast, these transmigrants coveted the relatively level land in the hill valleys and dislodged the groups living there—e.g. Chakma, Marma, Tripura and Taungchangya. As a result, there were many valley dwellers and relatively few Mru among the tens of thousands of internally displaced people as well as refugees to India.

And finally, the leaders of the guerrilla movement did not make a great effort to involve Mru, possibly because Mru were not very numerous, but very likely also because of the image of 'Mru nakedness' with which the leaders of the movement did not want to be associated. The notion of primitivity conveyed by Mru nakedness did not sit easily with the modernist nationalist movement which they sought to sustain. But there was more. The guerrilla fighters, mostly Chakma who had had no previous contact with Mru, also misread Mru nakedness as a sign of backwardness and sexual looseness. They looked down upon these 'primitives', thereby squandering their initial support.¹⁶

¹⁶ According to Mru accounts, at first most Mru supported the uprising. Some young Mru joined the guerrilla force (*Shanti Bahini*), and Mru villagers provided food and shelter to the rebels. But then the rebels began to lord it over them, showing the Mru no respect and demanding cattle and half the crops. One day they raped a Mru woman whom they had called to husk paddy for them. The enraged villagers then attacked the nearby guerrilla camp, killing some men, and the rebels retaliated by attacking the Mru village. That is how the conflict started. It spread to other villages and for three years Mru fought against the rebels with locally made guns. It was then that they turned to the Bangladesh armed forces and asked for help and money. They received training in military tactics but no guns. Known as the *Mru Bahini*, they were given salaries, albeit irregularly. (Chittagong Hill Tracts Commission (2000)).

In short, the meanings which outsiders—development officials and insurgents alike—attached to Mru nudity contributed to the exceptional and isolated political position in which the Mru found themselves during the armed conflict in the Chittagong Hill Tracts. It is important to realize that these outsiders had little previous knowledge of the Mru except through photographic images highlighting Mru nudity.

The Politics of Nudity

From the very beginning of photography in the Chittagong hills, images of the Mru have been entangled in discourses of discrimination and othering. Visible nakedness has made the Mru icons of the non-modern, to be variously preserved, elevated, developed, exploited, or wiped out. The motives and perspectives of those who created photographic images of the Mru were often innocuous. But the images themselves have been used by powerful outsiders to legitimate policies which were based on cultural arrogance and insensitivity and which led to intense conflict and oppression. These policies have targeted not only the Mru but all groups in the Chittagong hills because for many in the outside world Mru nudity came to symbolize the entire region's civilizational and moral station. Today, when the Mru actually cover their bodies more than ever before, their powerful Others cling to the notion of nudity as the essence of Mru identity and the badge of their disqualification as fully-fledged citizens.

Thus, the photographic capture and overexposure of Mru nudity contributed to a politics of nudity which lies beneath the surface of the manifest politics of irruption, development and resistance in the Chittagong hills. The current politico-military-development tangle in the region cannot be resolved without a serious education of those who hold power over the Chittagong hills—regionally, nationally, and in the worldwide donor establishment now poised to make a killing in the region—about the meaning of nakedness in the discourses of discrimination in which we are all immersed.¹⁷

In the study of history, visual images can be powerful tools, particularly in cases where other historical sources are relatively scarce.

¹⁷ For a more general discussion on race and gender in the production and consumption of photographs of 'non-Western nudity', see Lutz and Collins, 1993, 172–8.

But precisely because of their immediate impact, visual images need to be carefully contextualized. In this paper, I have drawn out a single aspect and read it in terms of the power relations in which the Mru became entangled during the colonial and postcolonial periods. I could have focused on another aspect than nudity but I felt that this aspect best explained the link between disempowerment and changes in Mru lifestyles. Ironically and inescapably, this choice places me in a long tradition of overexposing the theme of nudity in the photographic record on the Mru. But it is perhaps inevitable that in order to analyse a bias one has to highlight it, however transitorily.

Nobody—the Mru themselves, the photographers whose images have been reproduced here, nor I—can control the ways in which others may view these images.¹⁸ The reading I have suggested is no more than preliminary. Studying photographs is about the complexities of visual communication: it should involve the image and the evidence it provides, the culture behind-the-camera, and the cultures of viewers from different times and places.¹⁹ History-writing is always a work in progress, and this is particularly so when we rely heavily on visual images with their wide range of potentially valid readings. The next step in refining the visual history of the Mru is to explore how Mru understood and contextualized these photographs at the time they were created, and what Mru make of these photographs today.

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¹⁸ Lutz and Collins (1993, 187–216) propose to consider photographs as intersections of several ‘gazes’: the photographer’s gaze, the magazine (editor)’s gaze, the magazine reader’s gaze, the non-Western subject’s gaze, the direct Western gaze, the refracted gaze of the Other, and the academic spectator’s gaze.

¹⁹ Richard Chalfen, 1994.

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Photo Credits

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Harry Belitz	17-20, 22, 23
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Sigismond Diettrich	3
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Emil Riebeck	1
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