From Oral Tale to Graphic Novel: Re-animating the Tiger-Soul

An Exegesis

Alila and the Gift of the Tiger-Soul

A Graphic Novel Script

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CHAPTER 3

CREATING A NAGA NARRATIVE

> *Who is speaking to whom, about what, for what purposes, and under what circumstances?*
>
> Renato Rosaldo, *Culture and Truth: the Remaking of Social Analysis*, 1989

Marginal Experience Narratives

As a Naga woman from the Ao tribe, I must confess to a deep concern regarding the stories through which the Indian media, history textbooks, political analysts, national security agencies, anthropologists, tourist brochures, Christian pamphleteering and separatist propaganda continue to represent us. These narratives, burdened, as I see them, with bias, obsolete stereotypes, political and cultural misrepresentations and religious double standards, cannot be the only ones that history will offer future generations of Nagas. There does not seem to be enough authentic diversity in the representations. True, our ancestors were once savage, naked head hunters. Our tourism capital lies chiefly in re-enactments of harvest festivals, war

dances, and the marketing of our distinctive textiles, jewellery, weapons, pottery work and woodcarvings. Some Naga rebel leaders do live in comfortable exile while financing their operations through extortion, drug smuggling and shady political transactions. Far too many Nagas spend the best years of their lives chasing that annual spectre – passing the exams for the civil and administrative services of government at state and central levels. These are, at best, public narratives of an obsolete past, a troubled history and a contemporary sense of despair, tedium and angst.

In addition, while recent texts like Tom Farrell's 2004 *An American in Nagaland* (Barszcz 2005) and Frans Welman's *Enter The Forbidden Land* (2005) appear to capitalize on the image of an exotic and savage tribal culture or a politically-oppressed indigenous minority, one cannot subscribe to the belief that Naga culture can be so easily embalmed within these descriptors. There must be new stories to counter and critique the persistence of this one-sided pattern of representation, and its maintenance of negative, redundant stereotypes. That is why, in this search for stories, some form of delicate balance must come into play. Where current resources for Naga history and culture are concerned, there is some literature that is worthy of critical reading, and others that can only be deemed as erroneous or pure self-serving propaganda.

In *Half Human Half Animal*, a 2003 text about world-wide shapeshifter tales, Jamie Hall understandably confuses the Indian term 'nag' for 'snake' with the Nagas, and by referencing thirteenth-century Chinese traveller tales, and myths from ancient Siam and the Khmer region, puts forward the folkloristic conjecture that 'Nagaland was founded by a marriage between a human ruler and the daughter of Phraya Naak, a great supernatural snake' (Hall 2003: 158). From the *Nagalim* section on angelfire.com, there is the following extract, quoted verbatim:

> A legend goes on to say that a family comes out of the "trough". They were called the Naga family. History says the Naga family came from southern China of Yunnam province enrouted to the adjoining island world routed back

> to Chiangmei and then moved to upper Myanmar and settled at Samsok after crossing Chingwin river, later settled at Makhel and spread to the present habitats. This family group is known as the “NAGAs”. The Nagas are a mongolian racial group. They are generally well built, tall, slim, reddish in complexion. But the physical features cannot describe or tell us in detail who are the Nagas unless you know them by it’s [sic] moral character, belief and culture. The trees are known by it’s [sic] fruit so are the Nagas, they are also known by their culture, social system, way of life and high moral character. The Nagas are a distinct and one of the finest race [sic]. They are simple, sincere, honest, industrious, humorous, cheerful, courteous, straight forward, truthful. They are free and open society [sic]. No family pays tax to other, no landlord harass the labours [sic], no tenant pays rent. Theft, murder, cheating are unknown. (Nagalim, n.d.)

What these minor instances bring into being is the unlikely ‘folkloricised’ Naga – kin to snake-shapeshifters or simple rural folk living in a romantic, pastoral time capsule. Despite the visible, ongoing evolution of twenty-first century Naga culture, national and occasionally international media reports continue to focus on either the insurgency or a frozen tribal culture that exists mainly outside the ‘real world’, or on purpose-built heritage sites. It is disturbingly easy to restructure a minority people’s traditional history and culture without their awareness or even consent. In the case of the Naga people, it is both their characteristic social insularity, and the political drama of the insurgency that enable others to continue relying on false, outdated or partially incorrect data.

Baruah has pointed out that ‘[t]he resultant isolation of Northeast Indian scholarship from global intellectual currents is a little known but significant cost of official India’s security obsession’ (Baruah 2005). And Christoph von Furer-Haimendorf laments how

> [f]oreign scholars were debarred from Nagaland and among Indian anthropologists there were none who devoted themselves to the task of re-studying such tribes as Angamis or Aos, and of extending anthropological research

> to those tribes that had remained virtually unknown even in
> the days of the British Raj. (in Ganguli 1984: vii)

Thus, the monographs published by British civil servants and military officers between 1832 and 1947 (Reid 1983 edn; Woodthorpe 1876 in Jacobs 1998; Hutton 2003 edn.), the ethnographic studies undertaken by Western enthusiasts and Christian missionaries (Bower 1950; Elwin 1961; Clark 1978), the multi-viewed writings of Naga politicians (Sema 1986), and the Cambridge Experimental Videodisc Project on the Nagas that ushered in the 1989 volume *The Nagas* (Jacobs 1998) remain the major historically-valuable accounts of colonial-era Naga culture. Subsequent post-colonial studies in academia have tended towards socio-cultural surveys of the so-far so-good variety (Ganguli 1984, 1993; Sema 1986), stray theses or random journal articles on obscure aspects of Naga culture (Das 1985, Gray 1977, Janowski 1984, Joshi 1985-6, Marwah and Srivastava 1987, and West 1984 in Jacobs 1998; Zou 2005), and linguistic studies (Baruah 2001, Boruah 1993; Coupe 2003).

In recent years however, a small number of contemporary Naga thinkers have begun producing learned commentaries on the Naga situation. Chief among them is a former school-mate of mine, Dolly Kikon, whose articles on the Hornbill Festival, India's education policy in Nagaland, and various aspects of armed conflict and gender issues within a Naga context, and whose involvement in organisations like the North East Peoples Initiative for Peace, Justice and Demilitarisation (Das et al 2007: 54) are suggestive of the growing intellectual and political self-awareness among Naga Generation Xers. That awareness has further been encouraged by the existence of active organisations such as the Naga Peoples Movement for Human Rights (NPMHR), and the Morung Foundation for Indigenous Rights and Just Peace.

However, seeping out of the bulk of contemporary Naga narratives are such terms as: *active insurgency status*, *terrorist elements*, *shadow Naga governments*, *secessionist revolts*, *militarized zones*, *bombings and ambushes*, *protest rallies*,

bandhs[21], *counter-insurgency operations*, *rival rebel factions*, *Christian freedom fighters*, *ceasefires*, *peace talks*, *stalled negotiations*, *ceasefire extensions*, and so on. These powerful terms form the elements of a one-sided body of contemporary knowledge that has occluded the personal, everyday realities of average Naga life.

To borrow an oft-quoted statement:

> When someone with the authority of a teacher, say, describes the world and you are not in it, there is a moment of psychic disequilibrium, as if you looked into a mirror and saw nothing. (Rich in Knaller 1999: 99)

Perhaps this statement explains the general lack of academic application in History and Social Sciences that I have observed and experienced in many Nagaland school classrooms. Directing adolescents' attention towards their native histories is challenging enough, but force-feeding a minority group the history of a major cultural group, and telling them that this is *their* history (in the face of contradictory evidence) is an act whose repercussions we are only just beginning to understand. When the only lesson that these impressionable children learn is another culture's dominant perceptions and stereotypes about them, the 'mirror' is a frightening object indeed. Take, for example, the depiction of ancient Mayan civilization in the recent film, *Apocalypto* (Gibson 2007). Beyond the unrelenting flow of blood and gore, we are witnesses to the play of extreme Mayan stereotypes – peaceful village folk *versus* decadent city slickers – images that create tensions between a rather implausible view of Mayan history and contemporary Mayan realities. The *Hollywood movie* interpretation of ancient Mayan history is certainly a dazzling one, when juxtaposed with the current situation facing this century's Mayans. Watanabe reports how the Mayans' search for an 'essentialist' pan-Maya identity continues within the larger context of an Indian/Ladino cultural hegemony, and how '[t]hey remain overshadowed in the public imagination…by their ancestors of more than 1000 years ago who built

[21] A general strike, with the temporary shutting down of offices, schools and shops, and prevention of all public vehicular traffic, usually in response to local ethnic, communal or military conflicts.

cities in the rain forests of southern Mexico and Guatemala and then abandoned them, never to return' (Watanabe 1994: 25). The stereotype is a powerful tool in the hands of the media, the politician and the everyday bigot. It prevents many from taking a closer look at the construct, the façade, the thing that it claims to be or is imagined to be.

Therefore, this begs the question for the Naga situation – where are the contemporary personal narratives? Where are the creatively-imagined responses to the more often-reported public historical and political events? Could it be that, at this stage of our political and cultural development, the political expression *is* the personal expression? As Deleuze and Guattari pronounced, albeit in another context, 'the cramped space' of minor literature 'forces each individual intrigue to connect immediately with politics' (Deleuze and Guattari 1986: 17). The minor writer is negotiating her way, not on the linear tightrope of an individual concern, but on a complex web where stepping on a single strand sends ripples of affect through to all other strands. Thus, 'the [public] political domain [contaminates] every statement' (Deleuze and Guattari 1986: 17).

A 2000 publication, by Naga activist Kaka Iralu, called *Nagaland and India: The Blood and the Tears*, subtitled *A Historical account of the 52 years Indo-Naga war, and the story of those who were never allowed to tell it* (n.a. 2007) is an example of the un-contrived, simple (in a literary sense) and heavily politically-based writings that focus on the Naga problem. As one of the original members of the then-Naga National Council (NNC), Iralu continues to work towards the dream of an independent *Nagalim*, and understandably, his perspectives on the Naga situation must be carefully digested. But, at the risk of appearing unforgivably elitist, there is evidence of a gradual refinement of literary sensibilities among writers from Nagaland. One of the more recent Naga texts that creatively address the everyday realities of ordinary Nagas is Temsula Ao's 2006 short story collection *These Hills Called Home: Stories From A War Zone*. In this collection, we are drawn to consider the lives of tribal women potters, the particular social/tribal consequences of bearing illegitimate children, an

old man's memories of his youth as a Naga freedom fighter, loyalty and betrayal among a band of young Naga insurgents and the experiences of a Naga army contractor. What Ao has achieved with her book is a persuasive narrative of the personal, human lives of the faceless thousands that live under the shadow of the Naga insurgency and the Indian Army. The book is thus a reminder to contemporary Nagas of the 'tremendous responsibility to sift through the collective experience and make sense of the impact left by the struggle… [and to ensure] that the memories of the turbulent years have served us well' (Ao 2006: x-xi).

I highlight the significance of this text (and to some degree, the 2000 Iralu text) with the contention that it links to a larger body of what Shari Stone-Mediatore calls 'marginal experience narratives'. Stone-Mediatore's argument is that these narratives

> contribute to political thinking and political life precisely in their function as "stories"… as experience-rooted but creatively reproduced narrative texts whose meaning is realized in their interpretation by specific communities. (Stone-Mediatore 2003: 5)

The story-like construction of such narratives seeks to subvert the rhetoric of objective reporting, by infusing public facts with the urgencies of personal experiences, confirming Ashcroft's 'energetic interpolation' in post-colonial creative writing that sets up 'sites for the intervention of transformative perspectives…' (Ashcroft 2001: 55). Thus foregoing the 'standard narrative categories and genre boundaries to respond to seemingly uncategorizable, contradictory experiences' (Stone-Mediatore 2003: 7) in favour of innovative, open-minded ways of narrating the world, has been a strategic move not only for Western writers, but also for writers writing from the political and cultural margins. These writers, variously identified as *third world*, *women*, *other*, *minor*, *migrant*, *alien*, and *indigenous*, have turned to a kind of creative, 'experience-oriented' discourse that supplements/questions the complacent rhetoric of historical and allegedly factual knowledge. Here, Stone-Mediatore acknowledges the value brought to critical and political thought by the ways writers choose to tell their stories.

Through memoir, personal testimony, literary prose, open letter, essay or marginal experience history, she tells us that we are kept ‘mindful of the myriad, often untheorized significances of historical dramas while [affirming] our role as actors and interpreters in the unfolding of those dramas’ (Stone-Mediatore 2003: 45).

Rosaldo seems to have anticipated Stone-Mediatore’s creatively written *marginal experience narratives* with the following observation:

> It is no accident that a marginal genre, such as the short story, should become a site for political innovation and cultural creativity. Literary theorist Mary Louise Pratt has argued, for example, that the short-story cycle’s formal marginality (as compared with the novel) makes it a particularly likely arena for experimentation, for the development of alternative moral visions, and for the introduction of women and teenagers as central protagonists. (Rosaldo 1989: 161)

While such writing begins with the desire to take control over one’s own representation, it is also about recognizing along the way that creative narratives of all kinds are informed by, and in turn inform, social, political and cultural relationships on all levels. The social realism of African literature, for instance, comes from this same recognition. Niles (1999: 56) speaks of ‘the African poet’s traditional role as social critic, not just speaker of praise’, a comment that echoes Ngugi wa Thiong’o’s argument in the following quote:

> Literature results from conscious acts of men in society. At the level of the individual artist, the very act of writing implies a social relationship: one is writing about somebody for somebody. At the collective level, literature, as a product of men’s intellectual and imaginative activity embodies, in words and images, the tensions, conflicts, contradictions, at the heart of a community’s being and process of becoming. It is a reflection on the aesthetic and imaginative planes, of a community’s wrestling with its total environment to produce the basic means of life, food, clothing, shelter, and in the process creating and recreating

> itself in history. (Ngugi wa Thiong'o in Kehinde 2004/5: 225-226)

In the case of my PhD submission here, the product of the individual artist is an attempt at a less one-sided, more inclusive portrayal of a tribal community (though the focus is mainly on the Nagas of Nagaland) that nonetheless faces a long journey of political and cultural evolution ahead. While the exegesis serves as an independent commentary on the real-time processes of this evolution, the fictional narrative can be read, partly, as an auto-ethnographic, speculative text on a peoples' vision of its *imagined* destiny as a multi-tribal nation. Thus it is important to note the distinctive nature of the interaction between stories from the world's political, social and cultural margins and the crossbred narrative form of the *graphic novel.*

The Graphic Novel

While the script for the graphic novel will be explored in the final chapter, the following two sections focus on the Indian and Western incarnations of the comic book industry, explore the graphic novel as an evolving literary genre, and discuss some of the storytelling opportunities created by this challenging narrative medium.

In a personal context, my intellectual upbringing was influenced both by an Indo-centric education and Western popular culture. Thus I found myself in an interesting situation when I entered Australian academia. Positioned as a mature-age international student from a region virtually unknown to most native Australians, it was logical for people to assume that I possessed a reasonable amount of knowledge about my own culture. The reality is that I am more familiar with India's history and folktales. I do not remember reading about the Nagas or their folktales in the history or literature textbooks in school and in college. I barely speak and understand the three major Ao-Naga dialects, Chungli, Mongsen and Changki. My grasp of the Hindi language is only marginally better. My childhood reading appears like a haphazard list for a

bizarre Pop Culture course: *Amar Chitra Kathas*[22], British schoolgirl/romance comics, *Commando* war comics, Italian *fotonovelas*[23], *Tintin* and *Asterix* albums, American comic books, Louis L'amour cowboy novels, sci-fi, fantasy and Victorian fiction. The only Ao-Naga story I knew then was the one my mother told me when I was between six and nine years old: an historical tale about Akangla, a wise woman from Warumong Village who helped the village of Longkhum defeat the warriors and fierce hunting dogs of Nokrang Village (Ao 1999: 155-157). Of course, the specifics of that tale only revealed themselves more than twenty years since I first heard it. The fact that I now need to reaffirm my cultural roots within a Western academic context says much about the degree of this wilful cultural and intellectual alienation. Thus, I have found myself exploiting the English language and a popular culture medium to tell my people's stories.

To the best of my knowledge, there are no published comic book/graphic novel adaptations of Naga folktales and stories – not to mention publications relating to the majority of the other members of India's Scheduled Tribes. This oversight is significant when one considers that in the 1970s, the *Amar Chitra Katha* and *Pancharatna*[24] comic book series of Indian myths, epics, histories and folktales were published 'to counteract the impact of Western culture on *those children* [italics added] who read nothing but imported comics and books' (Mannur, Rao and Sircar 2000). While the primary motives behind the Indian myths series were of a pedagogic and patriotic nature, recent evaluations (Mannur, Rao and Sircar 2000) tend to expose a latent Hindu-centric, upper class, patriarchal, gender-biased stance in texts and illustrations. As reader-friendly documents of India's classical heritage and ancient histories, these comics, at the risk of denying the true heterogeneous nature of India, seem to have presented a dangerously homogenized picture of Indian culture. In a further twist of irony, India Book House (the long-established publisher of the series) recently launched its *The Tinkle Collection of World Folktales*, based on folkloric

[22] Literally, 'amar' – immortal, 'chitra' – picture, 'katha' – stories.
[23] A comic book variant in which romantic stories are told, not through drawings, but through captioned photographs. (See Flora 1980: 524).
[24] Literally, 'pancha' – five, 'ratna' – gems.

material from countries like Japan, Russia, Germany and the British Isles. The advertisement for the collection coaxes the reader to 'Open the windows of the world. Absorb the richness of cultures far and near'. Perhaps the statement would carry more weight if the publishing house had considered the folktales of nearby Indian tribal cultures.

An interesting case in point to illustrate what is possible comes from another exoticized yet marginalized culture – the *Peace Party* comic book series, created and published by Rob Schmidt of Blue Corn Comics (currently available from http://www.bluecorncomics.com/contents.htm). This series deals with Native American culture and features Native American superheroes. What drives *Peace Party* is a conspicuous need to avoid the routine stereotyping of *noble savage* or *angry drunk from the rez*. Instead, it portrays (admittedly in grandiose superhero style) the contemporary realities of being Native American by focusing on the multiplicity of perspectives and stories inherent in the culture.

Yet for the moment, it may be safe to assume that comic-book adaptations of folktales from the mainly tribal communities of India appear to be a low priority for the Indian comic-book industry. There are many reasons that explain such under-representation of India's culturally marginal communities. To cite the Nagas as example, the same geographical and social isolation from mainland Indians that was reinforced by the British and later the Indian rulers continues to operate in terms of such popular modes of mass cultural knowledge production and distribution. The Hindu majority are naturally accustomed to reading materials that portray their cultures, beliefs, dreams and fantasies. Hence the popularity and success of Bahadur, who was perhaps the first home-grown modern Indian hero (of the *Bahadur* series from another major comic-book publisher, Indrajal Comics, now defunct), and whom Rao describes (in Lent 2001: 47) as 'a vigilante in the tradition of the Phantom and

Mandrake…' helping the police fight *dacoits*[25]. In his adventurous yet law-abiding character, and in his traditional yet modern sensibilities as depicted by his saffron-coloured Indian shirt and Western-style blue jeans, he represented the ideal young Indian man of the late 70s and early 80s. What added to his popularity was that he wore no mask, harboured no secret identity and displayed no super-powers – his strength and courage were real and natural.

Moreover, the productions of the Delhi-based comic-book publishing company, Diamond Comics (presently the major player in the industry) focus on Indian 'urban, middle-class family situations' (Rao in Lent 2001: 54). One of the most recognisable characters from the Diamond Comics stable is 'Chacha (Uncle) Chaudhary… an avuncular, turban wearing hero, sporting a giant handlebar mustache, who is accompanied by a gigantic alien sidekick from Jupiter called Sabu' (Rao in Lent 2001: 55). According to Maneesh Kumar, the son of one of the co-founders of Diamond Comics, Chacha Chaudhary 'was a mass kind of character… [a]n old man full of wisdom… [t]hat is in a village…' and a figure who appealed to the rural reading public (Rao in Lent 2001: 55-56). One can almost discern traces of Goscinny and Uderzo's mismatched, yet inseparable duo, the diminutive Asterix and the menhir-wielding Obelix, in the characters of Chacha Chaudhary and Sabu.

In reviewing the current situation of the Indian comic-book industry, Rao notes the thematic expansion in the productions of smaller comic-book companies like Raj Comics and Manoj Comics – strange medieval fantasies, gory horror tales, and westernized superhero adventures. They represent an element of the much-maligned 'pulp fiction' culture that caters to the 'lower end' of the reading public, such as migrant workers or the rural 'neo-literate' lower class. This is perhaps one reason why writers and illustrators of Indian comics have been hesitant to market themselves as such in a world where entrenched notions of class and status still hold sway, and why working in comics is viewed as a 'stepping stone' to better work opportunities in

[25] In Hindi, the word refers to 'armed bandits'.

advertising or magazine illustration (Rao in Lent 2001: 58-62). Nevertheless, the popularity of these themes and characters indicates somewhat that there is little or no public interest in comics based on characters and themes from India's tribal/aboriginal communities. Rao mentions a comic called *Sudden Muanga* (which narrates the adventures of a Mizo cowboy called Sudden Muanga) produced by a Northeastern tribal community known as the Mizos, which she considers 'a refreshing reminder of the diversity… of …other publications…that have not been exposed to a national audience' (Rao in Lent 2001: 61).

A remarkable way in which cartoons and comic books have been addressing issues pertinent to North-eastern and other minority Indian communities can be found in the work of an organisation called World Comics India (WCI). This 'is a conglomeration of artists, media persons, social activists and grassroots people…formed in June 2002… to formulate a social movement that identifies comics as a powerful tool to perpetuate social change' (World Comics India, 2004). The comics produced are simple, black and white, four panel narratives that shine a spotlight on social issues like alcoholism and female infanticide, the environment, politics and culture. The language in the comics varies from region to region, English for states like Nagaland, Assamese for Assam and so on. They are created for the neo-literate and illiterate social groups of these regions, with the aim of stimulating them to ask questions about these *taboo* topics, to raise their self-awareness, and to motivate positive change in their lives and in their communities. It is a challenging agenda but judging from the number of workshops and exhibitions held so far, the WCI is gradually spreading the word.

However, India's first graphic novel, Sarnath Bannerjee's *Corridor* (2004) – written in English – is perhaps significant for the continued cultural re-evaluation of the comic-book form, and its thematic potential, by the Indian reading public. Yet a disclaimer must be inserted here: India's reading public generally, though not absolutely, consume comics, books and magazines published in their own regional

languages, and not all of them *read* or *write* (as opposed to *speak*) the English language as fluently as they do their mother tongues. Therefore a publication like *Corridor*, until it is disseminated into the multitudes of languages in India, will reach only a small section of upper and middle-class English-educated Indians, again not all of whom would embrace the concept of the graphic novel, perhaps because it *appears* too similar to the pulpy comic books read by their children.

This now leads me to the question of the graphic novel and the discourses it has generated in the West. In simple terms, the graphic novel can be understood initially as a 'grown-up' relation to the comic book, though it is stylistically a younger, more recent development of the traditional word-image narrative form. The term 'graphic novel' itself has been disputed by nit-pickers, 'over-used by the media' (Duc 2005) and dismissed by comics creators who don't 'need another couple of words to make me feel like I'm doing something worthwhile' (Sacco in Duc 2005). Thus, a more complex definition is needed since the elements that distinguish a graphic novel from a comic book can be arguably subjective. In this light, Sabin's (1993: 235-236) loosely categorized list of three types of graphic novel is useful as a starting point towards defining the genre.

Sabin's first type is 'a one-shot book-form publication involving a continuous comics narrative, of a scope that is longer than a normal comic... [and] published without prior serialisation…' (Sabin 1993: 235). Contemporary examples of works that sit within this category, though not without some jostling, are the following: the fotonovela-like hallucinatory noirish thriller *I, Paparazzi* (2001) by writer Pat McGreal, photographer Stephen John Phillips and digital artist Steven Parke; the coming-of-age memoir *Blankets* (2003) by Craig Thompson; Daniel Quinn's fantasy of *The Man Who Grew Young* (2001) and Max Alan Collins' Irish American 30s gangster saga *Road To Perdition* (2002).

The second type Sabin describes 'as a pre-serialised work, which… appears in sections in an anthology comic before being collected into a volume'. He compares this with 'bit-part novel publishing in the last century [here, the nineteenth century], as exemplified by the work of Charles Dickens' (Sabin 1993: 235). As I understand it, examples of the second type are probably the most familiar: the weekly, monthly or bi-monthly issues of superhero cliff-hanger narratives like traditional favourites *Superman*, *Batman*, *Spiderman* and the adventures of the various superhero leagues, the Asian *manga*[26] and *manhua*[27] instalments, and the more recent original titles such as *Planetary*, *Strangers in Paradise*, *Promethea*, the compelling *Sandman* series [whose creator Neil Gaiman fittingly chose to conclude after the death of the title character], *100 Bullets*, and the extremely thoughtful *Concrete* books, to name only a few.

Sabin then identifies the third kind of graphic novel as 'a section of a comics continuity' which 'can be a collection of four or six or twelve or however many instalments in a single volume, with the added provision that the creator has consciously worked towards the longer framework' (Sabin 1993: 236). Here, we can cite as example again, the single magazine issues of the *Sandman* series that were later collected and re-published as the eleven volumes that make up *The Sandman Library*.

Despite the apparent novelty and increasing popularity of the graphic novel form, Sabin points out that 'graphic novels were in existence long before the term itself was coined' (Sabin 1993: 236). Will Eisner's 1978 *A Contract With God* may well be the first American graphic novel, as we understand the term today. The term only took on a new meaning in the midst of the hype surrounding the 'superhero revisionist stories' (Sabin 1996: 162) of the late 1980s, which were: *Batman: The Dark Knight Returns*

[26] Japanese comics often possessing a linear storyline that extends to several volumes (See Frequently Used terms, 2006).
[27] A Chinese term commonly used in Hong Kong to mean 'cartoons' or 'comics' (See Hong, 2002).

(1986) by Frank Miller, and *Watchmen* (1986) by Alan Moore and Dave Gibbons. Public relations departments gave publishers the idea of selling

> adult comics to a wider public by giving them another name: specifically, by associating them with novels, and disassociating them from comics. They hoped that, even though the actual stories were about superheroes, people would buy them on the grounds that they represented a "new wave" in literature. (Sabin 1996: 165)

But in Europe, the graphic novel in its album-form comic incarnation was already established and popular with the reading public – for example, Herge's *Tintin* comics, and Goscinny and Uderzo's *Asterix* series. Also, 'comics as a distinct discipline was institutionally introduced by the Institut d'Art et d'Archeologie [in Paris] as early as 1972 and a special subject, "L'Histoire et L'Esthetique de la bande dessinée," has been taught by one of the leading figures in comics analysis, Francis Lacassin' (Bongco 2000: 13).

While the European response to the 'new wave' could be seen as suitably *underwhelmed*, in the US, Sabin notes that the hype was working. Graphic novels (in their various lengths and volumes) were turning up in public libraries and respectable bookstores. Literary reviews were popularising the names and comics of writers and artists whose previous readerships, which had consisted largely of serious comic-book fans and young children, most of whom were of the male sex, were now expanding to include women readers and the prose-reading purists. Moreover, Sabin observes that

> [t]his was a cue for mainstream book publishers to enter the fray. In time, Penguin, Gollancz, Mandarin, Boxtree and many others launched graphic novel lines. As well as using comics creators, some publishers tried to adapt the novels of popular authors into graphic form (as happened in the case of Clive Barker and James Herbert), while others even attempted to commission graphic novels from authors such as Doris Lessing. (Sabin 1996: 165)

Judging from the mainstream public and literary interest thus generated, it would appear that graphic novels now 'exist in their own right as a definable category of comic…' (Sabin 1993: 248). But the form still grapples with an identity crisis of sorts. To the general observer, the graphic novel may be nothing more than an upwardly mobile member of the comic book fraternity, more a dark horse than a sure shot where serious 'book-culture' status is concerned. In the US, its predecessors, the comic book and the newspaper cartoon strip, were once considered the purveyors of all things slapstick, lowbrow, childish, immature, sensationalistic, rude, violent and immoral (see Wertham 1954; and Fulce in Williams 1994), although in Europe, Latin America and Asia, BD or *bande dessinee*[28], *fotonovelas*, and *manga* respectively, cater to the reading tastes of both young and adult consumers. In these regions, the comic book in all its incarnations is, more often than not, a conventional and popular narrative medium for all ages, and not a childish legacy to be spurned.

Over the years there have been signs that attitudes are mellowing. There is now a steadily-growing body of critical work on the comic book form that treats the subject matter as seriously as critics do the novel, short story or fine arts forms. Paul Gravett's wonderful *Graphic Novels: Stories to Change Your Life* (2005) is fast becoming a classic introduction to the exemplary potential of the graphic novel. For comic book pundits like Eisner (1990), McCloud (1994) and Lent (2001), the comic book and its graphic novel offshoot have always proven worthy of critical study. To illustrate with a brief example, Eisner's preliminary efforts to formulate a language out of this word-image juxtaposition has been expanded upon in works such as McCloud's *Understanding Comics* (1994), which is credited by Varnum and Gibbons (2001: xiii) as prompting 'more scholarly discussion on comics than any other book in the English language.' Kuhlman (2004) describes McCloud as 'the semiotician of the comics industry… [responsible for inventing] codes and categories for various facets of comics…' such as 'parallel constructions, "in which words and pictures seem to follow very different courses without intersecting" and "montage" where words are

[28] Literally, 'designed strips' (See Sherzer 1980: 403, f/n1).

treated as integral parts of the picture"… (Kuhlman, 2004). In *Illustrating Asia* (2001), Lent presents the scholarly works of many native and Western commentators on the historical, social, and political elements in the comic books/cartoons/picture books produced by diverse Asian cultures.

Innovative texts like Neil Gaiman's *The Sandman* series, Chris Ware's *Jimmy Corrigan* and *Quimby the Mouse* (as well as Baru's BD-manga hybrid *L'Autoroute du soleil*, Dominique Goblet's mixed-media influenced comics, Raúl Fernández Calleja and Felipe H. Cava's *Berlin 1931* and others [in Nevins, Beaty and Gravett 2004]) serve to confirm the view that the medium represents an important evolution in a hybrid word-image tradition that spans, among others, cave art, body decoration, Celtiberian *tesserae hospitales*[29] and *stelai*[30], hieroglyphs, the Bayeaux Tapestry, illuminated manuscripts, the wordless woodcut narratives of Masereel and Ward, the Classics Illustrated, and post WWII Britain's *picture digests*.

Already, Baetens speaks of

> the great diversity of the range in the various *continental* [italics added] traditions (for instance underground "comix", and feminist comics, high-art graphic novels, critical superheroes-fiction) whose separation is nowadays increasingly difficult to maintain. (Baetens 2001: 7)

This narrative medium is gradually moving from the periphery to the centre of genuine academic enquiry. The analytical concerns have ranged from the ideological (Baetens 2001; Barker 1989; Juno 1997; Schmitt 1992; Williams 1994), the aesthetic (Abbot 1986; Carrier 2000; Harvey 1996), the cultural (Inge 1990; Reitberger and Fuchs 1972; Silberman and Dyroff 1986), and the historical (Sabin, 1993, 1996; Weiner 2003; Witek 1989). As part of this general movement, the National Association of

[29] Hospitality and trade pacts usually written on small bronze tablets in second century BC-second century AD central Spain (See Rose 2003: 172).
[30] Discoid limestone funerary monuments (ibid: 166).

Comics Art Educators or NACAE in the United States of America has been established with these objectives: to promote comics acceptance within art and educational institutions, [to counsel and assist] schools in developing comic art programs, [and to offer] curriculum support for teachers (NACAE n.d.).

The following seminal texts – Art Spiegelman's *Maus* volumes, Joe Sacco's *The Fixer*, *Safe Area Goradze* and *Palestine*, Marjane Satrapi's *Persepolis* volumes, Miné Okubo's *Citizen 13660* (Kelso 2004) and Ryan Inzana's *Johnny Jihad* – have demonstrated the flexibility of the medium to embrace themes and perspectives that are distinctly non-super heroic and more socio-realistic. These works narrate personal experiences rooted in politically volatile contexts, such as the Holocaust, the Bosnian conflict, the Israeli-Palestinian standoff, Iran's 1979 Islamic revolution, WWII internment camps for Japanese-Americans, and the current spectre of terrorist training camps, respectively. Though influenced to some degree by the alternative/ underground 'commix' sensibilities of the 60s and 70s in America, these texts (excepting Okubo's) seem to occupy a slippery, left-of-the-middle place in the creative productions of the late twentieth and early twenty-first century popular culture. Just as their protagonists repeat that epistemological struggle to grasp their created and imposed selves in the midst of larger political upheavals, so too these texts struggle to reconcile the sometimes divergent and contradictory urgencies of autobiography, biography, journalism, comics, and political critique.

Kristian Williams (2005) notes a similar cross-disciplinarity in the works of an increasing number of writers, artists and journalists who, while not necessarily from the comic-book world, have used the comic book form to respond creatively to current events. For example, he cites the 1989 *Brought to Light*, which was the Brabner/Yeates-Moore/Sienkiewicz response to the 1984 bombing (allegedly supported by the CIA) of a press conference in La Penca, Nicaragua. The first half of the piece is a straightforward, plain-language narration of the events; the other half is 'a fable-like retelling of CIA history, narrated by a lonely, alcoholic eagle' (Williams

2005: 52). This ‘topsy-turvy book’, as dubbed by one of its co-creators, exemplifies the sharp division between the ‘inherent subjectivity of comics and the newsroom’s dispassionate prose’, a division that problematizes ‘the debate over what journalism should be in the twenty-first century’ (Williams 2005: 52).

The general drift towards cross-disciplinarity is perhaps one of the consequences of what Nericcio calls the ‘infection of image within the bodies of words…’ (Nericcio 1995). Therefore, he suggests that if

> …image saturation is…impacting upon the intellectual/ social boundaries which have heretofore defined the literatures, then it seems urgent to note that the medium of graphic narrative [by which he means specifically comic books and graphic novels] is where local, identifiable acts of resistance to the corporate/network status quo may be observed. (Nericcio 1995)

Nericcio identifies such ‘acts of resistance’ in the works of Gilbert Hernandez and Jaime Hernandez (together known as Los Bros Hernandez), stating that they ‘routinely question issues of representation indigenous to their medium…’ (1995). In Gilbert Hernandez’s ‘An American In Palomar’ (a short story in the collection *Palomar: the heartbreak soup stories*, 2003) we are exposed to the ‘imperialistic desires implicit in journalistic photography’ (Nericcio, 1995) through the figure of an American gringo photographer. Regarding Jaime Hernandez’s ‘How to Kill a…By Isabel Ruebens’ (in *Love and Rockets Book 1*, 1985), Nericcio sees this short story as ‘a meditation on identity and self-reflexivity worthy of Cervantes, Borges or Pynchon’ (Nericcio, 1995). By discussing the works of the Hernandez brothers as both resistance and as symptomatic of the infiltration of Literature by the Image, Nericcio pinpoints the fact that we are living in an age where Image is all-pervasive, exercising a dubious power to mould perception and truth even greater than the written word. One can better understand why, in 1995, he urges ‘the critical community to confront the innovative space of graphic narrative: to understand it both as epitome of and reaction against an age obsessed with “moving” pictures’ (Nericcio 1995).

Thus to close this section, as we have seen, the deceptively simple narrative form of word and picture is being stretched and altered to carry a myriad stories told in equally myriad styles and perspectives. In the process, Duc, while calling the graphic novel 'a significant cultural event of our times', reminds us that

> [t]he whole new art movement is in its early days still and the current debate amongst the media, the publishing industry and comic creators – whether or not to promote it as different from the past production of comics – attests to its growing presence outside the sole field of comics. (Duc 2005)

Figure removed, please consult print copy of the thesis held in Griffith University Library

Figure 23 Scans of selected comic book covers and pages, illustrating thematic and artistic diversity.

Figure removed, please consult print copy of the thesis held in Griffith University Library

Figure 24 These selected images exemplify the atypical, indigenous characters and themes in comics from other cultures.

Oral Folklore and Visual Storytelling: odd couple or seamless synthesis?

In the earlier sections, I have noted the public, political bases of my fictional narrative. Yet they are not the only dynamics that have influenced its telling. If the visual and stylistic dimensions to the tale are to be found in its 'graphic novelisation' (which will be discussed in the later pages), then the contextual basis is the folklore of the Ao-Nagas, a repository of tales, myths, legends, and ancient beliefs: what is traditionally referred to as *Tarnunger Otsu* – literally, tales of the pre-historic Aos (Walunir 2003: 84).

In the early, naïve days of this project, the guiding philosophy was the basic need to re-introduce an appreciation of Naga folklore into the contemporary Naga imagination. That re-introduction was to materialize in the form of scripted folktales suitable for illustration in a comic-book format, much like the Indian folktales and legends in the *Amar Chitra Katha* series. Accordingly, I formed a rudimentary proposal that involved comparing the situation of Naga folklore with the plight of the endangered tiger species of Asia, and how pop culture formats like the comic book could provide a 'habitat' for ancient stories just as the provision of physical habitats and sanctuaries ensured the protection and continuation of a threatened animal species. That comparison came about through my discovery of, and ruminations on, an ancient Naga folktale myth: that of the tiger-soul. It was a series of initial, serendipitous insights that could not be sustained as the research developed and I began to re-evaluate the foundations of the project.

Despite the fundamental changes this project has undergone, the basic philosophy remains the same: it is still encouraged and shaped by the desire to retell Ao-Naga folktales, thereby preserving their relevance as tribal heritage and marker of identity for a culture slowly edging its way into a globalised community. It is however a modest, limited effort in terms of global initiatives to preserve 'cultural expressions' (Nas 2002: 139). The preservation of cultural folklore and property has become more

than an academic concern; it has become a politically urgent and complex topic on a global scale, leading to the establishment of listings such as the UNESCO World Intangible Cultural Heritage (Nas 2002: 139). Such cultural folklore, property and so on can be brought under the banner of Indigenous Knowledge, a broad classificatory system that includes not only the 'performances, mythology, rituals, and handicrafts' of a particular local people in society, but also their 'accumulated knowledge and philosophy of life acquired…from observing the practical effects of the activities of their daily life in tune with nature' (Anonymous 2005: 2).

But more than being just a pedagogic enterprise of salvage and education, this project further seeks to push the narrative capabilities of selected materials from the *Tarnunger Otsu* into a dimension they have not visited before, specifically the realm of visual narrative. As far as can be ascertained, there is no precedent for this in the present Naga literary culture. This is a significant issue because Ao-Naga customary laws prohibit substantial alterations in the oral literature of the tribe, whether it is of primary, secondary or tertiary origin. Thus a visual-based adaptation of traditional tales may be subject to a thoughtful and suspicious examination by the tribe's knowledge-keepers. The concerns would perhaps range from simple points of correctly spelt names of people and places to more tricky issues of authenticity in illustrating the ancient Naga world and its people, the cultural implications in the choice of materials used and the manner of that usage, or the unknown responses from readers unaccustomed to 'new' treatments of *their* traditional materials. A personal email from Dr Temsula Ao (2005) highlights one positive reaction to those concerns, in her remark:

> Your exposition about the evolution of "comic" makes sense to me and I think that our folktales can be adapted to this genre not merely as some kind of propaganda for the west but as genuine literary exercises. (Private email correspondence)

Some of what follows is referenced from an unpublished 2003 Master of Philosophy dissertation – *Narrative Responses of Ao Community: A Semiotic and Interpretative Study of 'Tarnunger Otsu'* (2003), by Walunir – that applies semiotics to the study of Ao-Naga folklore. This document has been an invaluable help in illuminating my understanding of this aspect of the exegesis, partly because it is written in English, thus providing access to elusive, supplementary material, which is more often than not written in the Ao-Naga dialects. But there is a caveat: this dissertation is improperly referenced, contains repeated sentences and contains many grammatical and spelling errors. However, given that it provides a convenient access to materials in an inaccessible dialect, I have decided to continue using it, with care.

As is generally the case in other oral traditions, a significant portion (that is, the Secondary Tradition) of the Ao-Naga oral tradition consists of folktales, or the *Tarnunger Otsu*. Walunir (2003: 24) classifies the *Tarnunger Otsu* into three broad categories: 'Supernatural tales, Human tales, Animal Tales'. Mills (2003: 307) states that the Ao-Nagas do not have travellers' tales, and 'historical tales other than those purporting to relate the fortunes of some particular village are also uncommon' (Mills 2003: 310). But he also identifies a group of tales inspired by 'the habits of animals and birds…', another class of tales 'concerned with the supposed derivations of the names of villages…', and other tales which he considers 'miscellaneous…, some…with endless variations and of enormous length' (Mills 2003: 311, 314, 317). Ao (1999) divides Ao-Naga folklore into two broad categories, myths and tales. Defining myth as 'those narratives which relate to the very origin of creation and the being of man and the universe around him and are…invested with mystery…sacred and timeless' (Ao 1999: 98), she includes in this category a creation myth, and *how* and *why* stories, which are 'generally accepted by the folk as "truestories"' (Ao 1999: 98). As for the other category, tales, she considers them 'narratives…[that contain] chronologically subsequent observations of man about life in general and about the life of nature around him' (Ao 1999: 98). In this category, we find not only animal tales and supernatural tales, but also transformation tales and some heroine-oriented tales. These are the 'falsestories…inventions of man's mind [created] in order to entertain, educate and

elucidate' (Ao 1999: 98). As a sub-category of the supernatural tales, we may distinguish what Bendangangshi (1998: 163) calls 'tales of miracle performers in Ao Naga history'. These tales relate the extraordinary exploits of ordinary human beings, such as Changpijanglangba who outwitted the creator god, Lijaba; Longkongla who ruthlessly avenged her son's murder; Ongangla who was a seer and a healer; Dipusang who had power over all the creatures of the jungles, rivers and skies; and Imjati whose ability to breathe out fire was so awesome that he could force the *tsungrems* to restore his dead wife. Finally there was Nokzenba, who could transform himself into all kinds of insects or little creatures, but he accidentally lost his ability to the ancient Ahoms, and so he was the last of his kind among the Ao-Nagas (Bendangangshi 1998: 163-169).

Out of these four sources, only two, Ao and Walunir, make mention of the fact that customary law forbids substantial alterations of the myths and tales. As Ao tells us, the tradition-keepers maintain an intractable attitude to the original materials, banning all attempts to introduce variations to the tales, and as Walunir (2003: 11) adds, 'One who transgresses or questions the validity of the oral accounts is imposed penalties and fines.'

A certain degree of sympathy is not out of place here. Ao-Naga identity, its sense of self, history and origin is completely reliant on a precarious but jealously guarded oral tradition. Like the other Naga tribes, a significant majority of the Ao-Nagas would not (if they consider the idea long enough) recognise themselves or their ancestors in the myths, tales and histories of Hindu-Muslim India. Not many Nagas would call themselves genuine Indian patriots. The Naga insurgency is simply the public, bloody eruption of, and response to, that lack of deep-seated, psychological recognition. So one can understand the near fanatical, reactionary defence against people who would suggest that the myth of Lungterok is a fantasy, and that, instead of emerging from six stones, our ancestors migrated from anywhere between Mongolia and South-east Asia. My own use of the tiger-soul myth, which is part of the ancient belief system, is

perhaps safe from this kind of censure because I suggest that this myth is not implicated in the politics of identity and recognition. As a parallel observation, comic book publishers seem to exhibit the same protective stance towards their most popular characters, like Batman, Superman, Wonder Woman, The Flash, or Green Lantern, allowing only minor, secondary, cosmetic alterations to the characters, costumes, origin tales and even their fictional chronology of events. Even if a dramatic variation is introduced that appears to permanently change the destiny of a major superhero (such as when Peter Parker discovers that he's not the original Peter Parker, and that the Spiderman persona is derived from a series of cloned Spidermen), it does not last very long or it fails miserably. Comic book fans can be a traditional group, in their own way, and react with outrage at seemingly unnecessary changes; besides, the publishers have a stake in exploiting a traditional image for franchising and merchandising purposes.

However, to highlight another potentially touchy issue, Walunir speaks of 'the socially accepted spaces' (2003: n.p. Ch. 4, ¶ 10) for the performance of the *Tarnunger Otsu*. These are, in order of importance, the *arju* or *ariju*, festival times, the workplace, and as Walunir calls it, *bed*, by which he means the private space of home, where the mother tells a bedtime story to the child. As we learned in Chapter 1, the *arju* is the formal, institutional space for the transmission of the *Tarnunger Otsu* by the elders to the young boys. At festival times, the histories of great men would be narrated. For the Aos, the workplace would obviously be in their farmlands, where songs and stories were traded informally by men and women during the sowing and harvesting times. These were the usual, accepted venues for the performance of folklore.

But a graphic novel script, with its anticipated use of illustrations, may be another matter. In my work, the spirit of an oral tradition is being modified for a completely different format, or performance space. Not only is a fictional story being told about Ao-Naga culture, but also three traditional tales have been reproduced with certain amendments, and the myth of the tiger-soul has undergone several elaborations towards the end of the narrative. So there are changes to the conventional emphases of

the specific tales, whether it is the abhorrence of cannibalism, a father's neglect of a son, or society's fear of powerful women. In the script, those messages become subservient to the central narrative, with its focus on individuals seeking traditional stories for their personal reasons. The demands of this performance space include those of a visual nature, comprising not just a photograph or a black and white sketch, but a projected series of sequential images.

Thus it is necessary to clarify the concepts offered in this section's title – 'oral folklore' and 'visual storytelling'. By referring to the particular cultural concerns attached to my project and the published works of established comic book writers, let us consider just how far we can explore this junction of oral folklore and the comic book format. Banks and Wein have observed that the convergence of traditional tales and the comic book shows itself in a variety of modes:

> …from wholesale reproductions to imaginative variations and alterations of well-known folk narratives, from the subtle inclusion of motifs, references, and particularly, folk beliefs, in story-lines and characterizations, to the blatant reintroduction of stock folkloric characters. (Banks and Wein 1998)

Their analysis of this convergence focuses on the comic book writers' reliance on what they call 'a modified version of the older academic theory of archetypes, the personification of stock elements, and an understanding of the collective unconsciousness of the collective unconscious' (Banks and Wein 1998). As illustration, they refer to 'the characterization of the Swamp Thing as the Green Man of folklore, …"the trickster" in relation to John Constantine, …and the central role of the Hecatae in *Sandman*' (Banks and Wein 1998). This modification of material based on folklore motifs, Jungian archetypes, the works of Frazer, Lang and Campbell, religious imagery and even concepts from the so-called divinatory arts of tarot and astrology, they state, allows the writer and reader both to safely explore 'the interconnection of the real and the unreal, the mythic and the factual, the worldly and the otherworldly…' (Banks and Wein 1998). Of course, Marvel Comics has had a

long-standing contract with Norse mythology, in the figure of Thor, and in recent years, Marvel writers have added the figures of Hercules and Ares to their stable of 'myth-oriented books' (Tramountanas 2005). Although in comparison to the *Swamp Thing/Constantine/Sandman* example, where folklore and mythical symbols are subject to complex, even post-modern interpretations, the narratives from this Marvel line may hold a greater appeal for readers who prefer their adapted myths the same way they view the Norse and Greek gods – powerful figures whose dramatic, emotional lives keep them enthralled, not intellectually bemused. But that these two kinds of works exist and indeed thrive in the comic book world is indicative of the continuing allure and attraction of folklore, myth and fable.

This particular thematic impulse, a la Banks and Wein, lies at the heart of my graphic novel script, *Alila and the Gift of the Tiger-Soul*. In its modified use of the tiger-soul motif for the central narrative, in its story-in-story recitation of three Ao-Naga transformation folktales, and in the variations of the hero (Ravi)/heroine (Asenla) quest, the script presents both a 'wholesale reproduction' and 'imaginative alteration' of specific folktale motifs and indigenous cultural symbols.

At another, perhaps more holistic level, we can regard the narrative itself as an ambitious attempt to grapple with the mythological and factual elements of Naga culture. The 'mythological' involves not only the obvious myth of the tiger-soul, but also what Campbell (1976: 5) calls 'a mythological canon' which he describes as 'an organization of symbols, ineffable in import, by which the energies of aspiration are evoked and gathered toward a focus.'

When that rationale is applied to what we have learned so far about Naga society and culture, and as they are articulated in the script, we can perhaps identify two canons of so-called local myth that have influenced the community, in real-life and in its fictional incarnation. One of these canons is that of Protestant Baptist Christianity, here manifested in Naga culture through its stark crucifixes, hard wooden benches, and

revival meetings spit-full of salvation through Jesus. Naturally, for many religious Nagas, their belief is real, not mythological in the sense of their religion being classified as a collection of grandiose, imaginative stories. But that canon also operates under the shadow of another complicated concept – an imagined, pre-historic homeland known as *Nagalim* where independent Naga culture can develop to its fullest potential. The actualization of *Nagalim* depends on a real-life appropriation of Naga-dominated territories in India and Myanmar. Consequently, religion and territorial politics work together to create a combined myth, as exemplified in the rebel motto, *Nagalim for Christ.* This religious overtone to an independence struggle has endowed near-legendary status on men like the late A. Phizo, and present rebel leaders Muivah, Khaplang and Swu – powerful old men who dream and preach and pray and attend peace talks and arm their soldiers.

In my script, these canons are expressed in subtle manifestations, in the political aspirations of former Baptist preacher, Nochet Ao and his employment of a private militia that includes both former child insurgents and former Myanmar Naga tribesmen, and in the indirect references to the Naga struggle in Ravi's field notes, and scattered dialogue between various other characters.

As a result, the conceptual play of 'myth' in the narrative is not entirely straightforward, or folkloric in the traditionally accepted sense. 'The idea,' say Banks and Wein, 'is not to consciously follow or obey a set pattern…' by which they mean writers should discard 'a conscious use of academically "identified" archetypes…' in favour of '…the development of characterizations that fit our past and unconscious definition of archetypes' (Banks and Wein 1998). That latter feature can be noted in comic book narratives that reference folklore motifs and theories, and also perhaps in texts that have adapted classical oral narratives, historical events or well-known fairy-tales into a comic book, or comic books that were subsequently turned into movies. (Examples include Will Eisner's *The Princess and the Frog* (2000), *The Last Knight: An Introduction to Don Quixote* (2000), *Moby Dick* (2001), *Sundiata: A Legend of*

Africa (2003), and Frank Miller's 1999 *The Complete Works: 300.)* To cite another celebrated instance, Eric Shanower's ongoing comic book series *Age of Bronze*, based partly on the Trojan War in Homer's *Iliad*, is a painstakingly researched, intricately detailed and illustrated *retelling* of the tragedies, intrigues, relationships and battles of the Trojan cycle. His work was such a good enough retelling that it won Shanower the 2001 *Will Eisner Award for Best Writer/Artist* – a category of awards named for the late cartoonist Will Eisner; often considered the Oscars of the comics industry, *The Will Eisner Comic Industry Awards* was established in 1987 and is an annual event held at the Comic-Con International, San Diego (See The Eisner Awards FAQ, 2007). In recreating this chronicle for a twenty-first century audience, Shanower has eliminated 'genealogies of the characters and repetitions of speeches…and the supernatural elements' and focused on the 'traditional story' which is 'full of sex, violence, greed, drama, betrayal, conflict…' (Hoerdemann 2007). This progressive retelling is balanced and framed by Shanower's 'fine-lined style in black and white drawings evoking woodcuts and classical paintings' (Hoerdemann 2007). In addition, according to Petruso, despite instances of what he calls 'archaeological license', he commends Shanower's great care in

> …depicting the design, construction and rigging of ancient Mediterranean vessels. His Mycenaean chariots are faithful renderings of chariots depicted on both vases and frescoes. Agamemnon is drawn with face, moustache and beard that are clearly modeled on the most famous gold death mask from Grave Circle A. The great king is shown pouring a libation into the depression in the floor adjacent to his throne. (Petruso 2001)

In a follow-up review of the second volume of *Age of Bronze*, Petruso notes that with the '[r]adical transformations of ancient works from one medium to another…the audience of each age gets the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* it deserves, in the medium it invents' (Petruso 2006).

Expanding further on that last thought, we perceive with some dismay that India's *Amar Chitra Katha* (or *ACK*) comic book series is a far cry, in terms of style, artwork,

dialogue, layout and agendas, from the sophistication, subtlety and complexity of the original source materials, such as the epics the Mahabharata and the Ramayana. Begun in the 1970s by Anant Pai, India's version of Marvel Comics' Stan Lee, the *ACK* series was Pai's solution 'for parents [of children ignorant of their culture and history] to accomplish the task of cultural education with little effort '(Rao in Lent 2001: 43). Without question, the *ACK* series was a 'wholesale reproduction' of Indian myth and history, a venture that also unfortunately reproduced and perpetuated ancient biases against women, minorities and other religions and races, not to mention the 'uncritical' renderings of the caste system. Wryly, Rao tells us: '[t]he fact that the source could be reinterpreted for contemporary thought had not occurred to' the writers (in Lent 2001: 46).

A few dramatic changes in such adaptations have recently come to light. In 1992, the anime community welcomed *The Prince of Light: The Legend of Ramayana*, a collaboration between director Yugo Sako and producer Krishna Shan. According to its website,

> Combining the Japanese School of Animation, MANGA, with the ministry of the Indian School of Animation, Ravi Varma, the lyrical qualities of Disney's musical, *The Prince of Light* is a true Fusion style of animation, mixing the art, romance, music and stunning visual power of the East and West. (The Prince of Light 2000)

As a result of this fusion, one commentator points out that the two principal characters,

> Rama and Lakshmana look rather like Samurai warriors, and the action sequences are graced by swordfights based on the Japanese kenjutsu tradition, but the characters deliver their speeches in a style reminiscent of the acting tradition in Indian folk theater, though with a certain Manga twist. (Roy 2004)

However, the most dramatic change to the Ramayana epic can be seen in *Ramayan 3392 A.D.* (formerly *Ramayan Reborn*) – Virgin Comics' 2006 offering from its Indian *Shakti* stable. (The online version of the comic is at http://www.virgincomics.com/ramayan.html) In the foreword, available in digital form at the Newsarama website, self-help guru Deepak Chopra and film director Shekhar Kapur, the authors of this futuristic, post-apocalyptic tale of the Ramayana assure us that it is

> …not a re-telling…but a symbolic representation of similar mythical symbols that are meant to be understood in the contextual framework of a cross-cultural post-modern, multi-ethnic, global society. From time to time, new mythologies spark the imagination of the collective unconsciousness and lay the ground for the telling of a story that has such impact that it influences the behaviour, the values, and the codes of morality of an entire civilization. (Newsarama 2006)

With its obvious parallels of plot and characters to *The Lord of the Rings* narrative, and even perhaps the *Star Wars* movies, *Ramayan 3392 A.D.* has displaced this epic tale from its traditional, cultural roots and stripped it down to a lean, mean super-hero fable that echoes the styles and sensibilities of conventional Western productions. Glossy, digitally refined artwork, yet ordinary panel layouts and run of the mill dialogue ensure that the transformation is complete. Nevertheless, it is an ambitious series that, along with other similar comics like *Devi*, *Ganesha* and *The Sadhu*, attempts to do for twenty-first century India's burgeoning comics industry what *manga* has done for Japan, and what the late *ACK* series struggled to nourish in its final years.

It might be worthwhile to insert here an observation about how the marketing of *these* comics have been guided predominantly, not by the traditional ideals of cultural or pedagogic values, but by a sanguine analysis of the global entertainment market, which Virgin Comics estimates will include some '550 million kids under the age of 20 in the next 10 years in India alone' (About Us 2007). Fuelled by this image of the

potential comic book reader as a modern capitalist consumer, the re-invention of the 'rich, indigenous narratives of Asia' and the creation of original 'character properties' is only the first step in their subsequent development into 'film, television, animation, gaming, wireless content, online, merchandise and more' (About Us 2007).

Many, if not all, aspiring comic book writers and artists dream of precisely this happy sequence of developments for their products, but few have cultivated such a love-hate relationship with this aspect of the comic book industry as has the idiosyncratic British writer, Alan Moore. As writer-creator of *Watchmen* (1986), the revamped *Swamp Thing* of issues 21 to 64 (1987), *From Hell* (1999), the *Promethea* books (1999-2005), *The League of Extraordinary Gentleman* series (2002-2007) and *V for Vendetta* (1988) among others, Moore has watched his works travel from the underground and marginalized channels into the mainstream comics and film markets. In the process, the market has transformed *him* into a 'commodified cult icon' (Whitson 2006). So, even as he attacks DC Comics' *Vertigo* line as his 'bastard child', removes 'his name from the credits to the movie version of *V for Vendetta*', and revolts 'against…the formal conventions of the comic book' through his 'experimentation with panel and narrative conventions' (Whitson 2006), ironically, Moore's name continues to guarantee comics consumer interest and sales. But in this increasingly globalised era of modern entertainment and consumerism, where the video-gaming industry has already supplanted comic books in terms of sales and popularity (due in part to a game's addictive form of pseudo-narrative interactivity, the sense of hard-fought achievement and reward, and for online games, the strange allure and comfort of one's physical isolation in the midst of a somewhat faceless, virtual public space), I infer that, as storytelling formats go, this non-interactive, sequential narrative form known as the comic book may become relevant for an increasingly adult readership, the majority of whom perhaps view the twenty-first century gaming phenomenon as a foreign country where the rules and lingo shift at random. If that is the case, then the comparatively predictable world of comics and graphic novels needs to encourage, and continue with, the infusion of innovative, mature writing with innovative, mature art that appeals to the (one hopes) mature, discerning reader.

As a final case in point, and in contrast to the artistic vision behind *Ramayan 3392 A.D.*, Patrick Atangan blazes a different path both artistically and thematically in terms of adapting traditional tales. His works show a preference for illustrating the volumes of his Asian folktale series, *Songs of Our Ancestors*, in the style of the 'relics or artifacts from that culture' (Contino 2005). Thus, in 2002's *The Yellow Jar*, Atangan presents two Japanese morality tales in 'the ukiyo-e style, or images of the floating world…' (Ohlsen 2003) which are reminiscent of traditional Japanese woodblock prints. *The Silk Tapestry* (2004) depicts three Chinese fables about artistic vision in the style of Chinese scroll paintings. The art in *Tree of Love* (2005) (based on two similar Indian folktales) is influenced by 'the style of Rajput and Mughal paintings' and the book is drawn 'as a sequence of polyptychs…paintings where a sequence of events is depicted as a single landscape' (Atangan in Contino 2005). What is more, he has written 'the entire piece in rhyming verse' (Contino 2005).

This diverse treatment of the themes and images of folklore harks back to some of the ideas proposed by the late Will Eisner in his pioneering works *Comics & Sequential Art* (1986) and *Graphic Storytelling* (1990). Eisner was committed to the idea of comics as literature. He saw it as a medium for telling not just funny jokes or superhero adventures but also personal memoirs, folklore, autobiography, and adaptations of classic tales. Thus, in her examination of Eisner's contribution to graphic narrative, de Vos identifies several key concepts that reinforce the connection between oral storytelling and the comic book format. Speaking from the perspective of oral storytelling performances, de Vos suggests that the comic book is

> …probably the closest literary genre to the oral art of telling a story. Both the comic book and the oral tale depend on dialogue and tone of voice, body language and gestures, and timing for an effective experience for the audience. … [T]hese…forms require the audience to actively participate in the understanding of the story; the…audience…decode[s] the words and silences, the body language and the voice [to imagine]…the characters, the stage and the action…of the tale. … [T]he reader [of the

> comic book] must speculate on what happens in the gutters (the space between the panels) [and]…read the visual cues to interpret the story…. (de Vos 2001)

Further, de Vos states that the use of stereotypes is common in both folklore and in comic books, because 'there is not a great deal of time or space available to develop a character in comparison to a film or a novel' (de Vos 2001).

de Vos's next concept is the initial 'understanding between the teller and the listener, or reader' (2001) that something comprehensible is told, and that the audience must be able to comprehend the telling. While the oral storyteller must therefore work hard to achieve this, it is the reader of the comic book who must 'understand things like implied time, space, motion, sound and emotions. In order to do this, the reader must not only draw on visceral reactions but also make use of an accumulation of experience as well as reasoning' (Eisner in de Vos 2001).

In comics, a character's hand and body gestures, and significant poses, can be dramatic substitutes for dialogue, and create a more vivid experience in one's reading of the images. Similarly, in an oral telling, 'gestures are effective because they translate more directly into specific and powerful images in the listener's mind…' (de Vos 2001). However, in an oral telling, many of the images are conveyed through speech, body language and non-verbal cues. A comic relies on speech balloons, fonts, textual marks like exclamation points and brackets, lettering styles and stylized rendering of sound effects to do the same.

Lastly, de Vos (2001) equates Eisner's reliance on a prologue to 'quickly introduce' the protagonist with the standard recital of a 'brief anecdote' at the opening of an oral tale. This is used either to make

> …the story relevant to the audience or [provide] an explanation of something within the tale…and [to create] the transition from the world of the listener to the world of

> the story. The told story…also employs a closing, which aids in the transition from the world of the story back into the listener's real realm. (de Vos 2001)

In the case of a comic book, such closings occur 'by turning the page or closing the book' (de Vos 2001).