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‘Welsh and Khasi Cultural Dialogues’: Mapping Methods of Performance

(Slide 1: research team names)

[They say you should never start with an apology – but I feel I need to own up in relation to the title of my paper, or at least to one word within it – which is ‘mapping’. I have to confess I was thinking in terms of functionality - I want to address the way in which we use creative arts practice in order to explore a particular facet of Welsh and Khasi history. Having come to understand more about the nature of the ways in which borders have been drawn and re-drawn in the north east of India and the implications of colonial cartography for cultural identity, I don’t think that mapping is the appropriate word.]

(Slide 2: Khasi Hills) In this paper, I wish to reflect on the possibilities of performance, and creative arts practice more broadly, and the paradigms used by its practitioners, ones that privilege collaborative and interdisciplinary working methods, for the way in which we may present multiple standpoints and experiences relating to the Welsh and Khasi relationship, and specifically, the value of interdisciplinary practice-as-research for exploring the way in which postcolonial identities are formed.

Colonial history, as historian Andrew Porter points out, has been 'shaped by the encounters of different peoples within the framework of Empire' (Porter, 1999, p.19). Both Welsh and Khasi people have responded to different forms of colonialism, have become complicit with Empire, and have sought to define themselves anew as

distinct cultures against prevailing colonial pressures. And at a particular point in history the Khasi and the Welsh have done this in relation to each other.

Though the imperialist context within which this cultural contact took place implies very specific power relations, the Welsh-Khasi cultural contact cannot be fully understood or appreciated through the stark lens of coloniser-colonized relations alone. As anthropologist Peter van der Veer warns us, there are pitfalls implicit in imagining that there is a time-lag in which ‘blueprints of a finished nation-state are exported to less-evolved societies via colonialism’, because this may lead to misunderstanding ‘the processual and differential nature of nation-state formation’, as well as overlooking the fact that the people of both Britain and India are implicitly involved in imagining different kinds of ‘nation’ communities. (van der Veer, 2001, pp.31-2). Whilst the expansion of British power and the creation of a national culture in Britain are commonly perceived to be unconnected there is evidence that culture in both Britain and India developed in relation to a shared experience: van der Veer states that ‘in the same period that Britain was colonizing India, England was colonizing Great Britain, trying to unify what was not yet (and will only partially be) the united kingdom’ (van der Veer, 31). At a time (19th C) when both the Welsh and the Khasi peoples were involved in re-inventing their sense of identity in relation to events taking place in the world systematic attempts to establish the supremacy of English as a colonial language had already been established in Thomas Babington Macaulay’s ‘Minute’ on Indian Education, (written in 1835), which set out the British policy for educating the Indian population in English. This was a colonial framework for education (and part of the processes of colonisation therefore) that came to be

adopted in relation to minority language in Britain (Gwyneth Tyson Roberts 1998, 58).

Historian Aled Jones has shown that the missionary enterprise in Victorian Wales was bound up in identity issues and ‘undertaken in order to transform the Welsh into a literate and educated society that met current aspirations to social and moral notions of liberal ‘respectability’; which was a response to the deeply affecting indictment of Welsh morality in the Blue Books of 1847, which had a profound impact on the way in which the Welsh viewed themselves in relation to the world (Jones, 2005, 158-9). It is an example of the complex workings of colonial power systems, and the processes of interpellation that they instil, that the language of this report, written in order to subdue the Welsh, is prevalent in the Welsh missionaries language as they sought to convert and ‘civilize’ the communities of the northeast of India in the mid 19th C.

One of our central questions resides on the fact that both the Welsh and the Khasi peoples have belonged to communities that have been placed in a peripheral equation in relation to broader categories such as the British Empire and the Indian nation. Is it possible to ascertain whether this situation facilitated the intercultural relationship and advanced the cultural exchange beyond that of a missionary agenda? Does the development of distinct cultural and intercultural activities in both Wales and the Khasi hills challenge the commonly held assumption that the metropole is the centre of cultural production and the periphery merely acting in response with a derivative culture? Or are these intercultural activities a consequence of cultural expression made against broader national categories such as Britain and India?

Constituted as a cultural dialogue between us both, as Welsh and Indian researchers and artists, our project uses performance and film as well as intermedial iterations involving both forms, including installations and exhibitions, to represent a dialogic response to our historical relationship. In this way we are responding to the cultural influences on us both, whilst continuing the intercultural relationship through our own interactions.

We seek to show the ways in which intercultural contact complicates the understanding of colonial history, and it is our hope that the nuances and complexities of this are made known and experienced through interdisciplinary creative arts practice in the present. This is practice as research, a process of collaborative making that constitutes a way of thinking through, or what author and artist Paul Carter refers to as 'material thinking' (Carter, 2004).

(Slide 3: map of Khasi Hills) Before reflecting in greater detail on practice as a method of research, a few words on the specific context:

The Welsh-Khasi intercultural relationship is rooted in the missionary contact established in the mid-nineteenth century by the Welsh Calvinistic Methodist mission in the Khasi hills, and the cultural processes that are a consequence of this interaction. This mission begins in 1840 following the formation of the Welsh Calvinistic Methodists missionary society in Liverpool, with the first missionary Thomas Jones (1810-1849), and Ann Jones (1812-1845), his wife, undertaking the long voyage to India and arriving in Cherrapunji (now Sohra), in 1841. Referred to as the founding father of the Khasi alphabet and literature, Thomas Jones is renowned for codifying

the Khasi language into a written script based on Welsh language orthography, and for starting to translate the Bible into Khasi, a task completed by others by 1891. (Slide 4: Thomas Jones School of Mission) For safeguarding their language by establishing its written form, and thereby strengthening a profound sense of national identity, Jones acquired the status of religious and secular hero among the Khasi people. This act of translation is of momentous significance to the Khasis; not only is it the moment when oral culture becomes enscribed, facilitating a different form of social and cultural interaction, but the act has mythical implications. (Slide 5: School of Mission Sign, close-up) In one of their originary myths, the Khasis tell of the great flood in which many died. Of those who survived a Khasi and a stranger both gathered the books of their peoples and attempted to carry them across the waters. The stranger placed his books on his head, and was able to swim to safety with the books intact. The Khasi however, was too short, and his books were lost. In one version, he places the books in his mouth, and swallows them, and from thence onwards must carry his knowledge inside himself. Thomas Jones was not only a stranger, but in terms of Khasi legend, brought back the book/s. (Slide 6: Thomas Jones Chapel)

Between the time of Thomas Jones (died in 1849) and the establishment of the mission church and school in Nongsawlia, Cherrapunji, the mission movement established further communities (of churches, schools, colleges, hospitals and medical services) in the Khasi Hills, then further afield in Sylhet and the plains of Assam (in what is now Bangladesh), and following this, in Lushai, Cachar, and eventually Mizoram, forming the three waves of the Welsh missionary movement in the north east, between 1841 and 1969. This movement had a profound affect on the tribal

cultures in this area (an area that, prior to the establishment of British India, was not considered to be part of India at all). It remained for the British a so-called 'backward tract' and was never fully integrated into its administration. Today, the state of Meghalaya is governed by a legislative assembly as an autonomous state, and 50 of its 65 assembly seats are for members of scheduled tribes. While this is a tribal area, 30% practice Ka Niam Khasi, the indigenous faith, and 85% of the Khasi population are Christian - and the majority of these are Presbyterian.

(Slide 7: *Y Cenhadwr*, missionary magazine cover, 1922, drawings of Indian people)

Following India's independence foreign missionaries were required to leave the country over a period of time and the last Welsh missionaries returned home in 1969. Between 1841 and 1969, they had undertaken extensive cultural production based on exchange with the Khasi people, leaving behind a diverse and scattered body of literature and performance in both the Khasi Hills and Wales (Slide 8: Daily Programme for Missionary Exhibition, Memorial Hall, Aberaeron, 1925), including letters, hymns and folksongs, pamphlets, writings in denominational magazines, diaries, travel films and writing, a vast body of photographic material, as well as creative writing, poetry, plays and pageants. The national anthem of the Khasi people was, until recently, sung to the tune of the Welsh national anthem; some notable Welsh hymns are in fact appropriated/borrowed Indian folk tunes (James, 1995/6); and folk stories from either culture have taken form in both Khasi and Welsh languages.

(slide 9: photo of actors, Caernarfon Castle Missionary Pageant, 1929) The effects of this relationship also took hold in Wales, especially as the Mission movement sought

to raise funds, and to declare the increasing success of the missionary project, and congregations were eager to celebrate their role in a worldly enterprise. It is worth emphasising the scale and success of these colonial performances. The elaborate missionary pageants staged, for instance, in Caernarfon Castle (in 1929) and in Liverpool in 1931, had casts of hundreds (350), all actors from local chapels. Called *Pasiant y Newyddion Da / The Pageant of Glad Tidings* and written by Cynan (Albert Evans-Jones), it depicted the coming of the Holy Grail to Wales and the spread of Christianity worldwide, portraying the contemporary mission endeavour as a continuation of this narrative. (slide 10: exhibition programme, showing ‘Demonstration: Khasi Demon Worship. Egg-breaking and watching for omens. Rev. Robert Jones’) The widespread presence of the dramatic movement in Wales since the 1880s had enabled a repertoire of staging practices and of performers, coming together here for spectacular romantic pageants, as well as shorter ‘entertainments’ put on as part of the programme of events for the highly theatrical ‘colonial exhibitions’ (that included dramatic presentations of ‘Indian’ traditions, films, and plays such as *A Brahminian Marriage* or *Priodas Fohametanaidd*, reenactments of Khasi customs as well as exhibitions of Khasi artefacts). This widespread sociocultural movement (the Welsh dramatic movement) provided the perfect structure within which to perform and sustain the narrative of the mission and gives us a telling glimpse at the way in which the colonial implications of this relationship were reflected in Welsh society of the time. (slide 11: missionary exhibition plan, bird’s eye view) The colonial exhibitions travelled extensively and had the added attraction of presentations by missionaries who had returned from the field on ‘furlough’. (slide 12: Colonial Missionary Exhibition, Aberystwyth University Hall, 1927) These were lavish fundraising events; some included, for instance, (see slide) a

‘tea garden’ experience, where tables and chairs were placed in tiers before the frame of the main stage, under the shadow of a backdrop of the Taj Mahal. Visitors could literally perform their support of the missionary and colonial endeavour, by drinking tea on stage in a particularly loaded image. (slide 13: Colonial Exhibition Bala, 1922, participants group photo, women in saris etc.) Photographs from these exhibitions display the extent to which participants were eager to perform and immerse themselves in a representation of the exotic other, either as performers taking part in daily drama performances or as part of the exhibitionary complex at play.

(slide 14: double slide of books: *Hiraeth and the Poetry of Soso Tham* and *Gwalia in Khasia* next to each other) Cultural production based on this historical relationship did not come to an end with the closure of the mission. It took form in travel writing and poetry, for instance in the work of Welsh poet Nigel Jenkins (1995), and Khasi poet Desmond Kharmawphlang amongst others. Welsh concepts emerge in Khasi literature and writing, [for instance, in one of the major works on the Khasi national poet Soso Tham (1873-1940), written by Kynpham Sing Nongkynrih, called *Hiraeth and the Poetry of Soso Tham* (2012).] (slide 15: *Shad Suk Mynsiem*, in the hall preparing) Today, in the Khasi village of Mawlyngbna, during the spring *Shad Suk Mynsiem* (Happy Heart dance) festival, two days of drama take place in the community hall, which is located close to the Presbyterian Church. (slide 16: empty shot of community hall Mawlyngbna) The festival is a travelling event organised by *Ka Seng Khasi* (the Khasi Society) and performed by the villagers of each location. The three day festival begins with the indigenous dance, revived during the early 20thC. (slide 17: photo of stage) The remainder of the festival involves dramatic presentation performed on an undoubtedly European stage (slide 18: backdrop), with

numerous side wings, an ornate backdrop depicting a traditional Khasi village (slide 19: stage wings), and numerous falling curtains along the depth of the stage. *Ka Seng Khasi*, established in 1899 in order to defend Khasi indigenous culture against colonial influences (slide 20: *Ka Seng Khasi* banner/lettering above stage), has been responsible for driving the cultural renaissance in Khasi language, literature and society through the 20thC, and introduced theatre as part of a conscious nationalist movement. Vehemently opposed to the Presbyterian mission's depiction of *Ka Niam Khasi*, the indigenous religion, portrayed by early British ethnographers as well as early missionaries as an animistic and primitive belief system, members of *Ka Seng Khasi*, the majority of them educated by the West, revived or re-invented such festivals as events in which to celebrate indigenous culture.

(slide 21: Nongsawlia Presbyterian sign, broken) The impact of religious belief on cultural exchange is central to our project, but is far from straightforward. Whilst there is clear evidence of early missionaries participating in the imperial approach to 'civilising' local communities, of colonial governments supporting missionary enterprise, and of substantial resistance to the mission itself - the relation between religion and empire was ambiguous. Opposition to Nonconformist missionaries was strong, by the East India company, initially, and then by early British administration, and in many instances the Christian churches/settlements were hubs that instigated or supported 'local resistance and opposition to colonial rule' (Porter, 223). At the very least the relationships instigated by missionary impact are exceedingly complex. According to historian Andrew Porter, 'no stark dichotomy between "colonizer" and "colonized" conveys either the range of local responses to Britain's missionary presence or the extent of missionary adaptation to local cultures.' (Porter, 239). Welsh

missionary responses to Khasi indigenous faith practices were responsible for dramatic paradoxes of feeling amongst the Khasi community, and for the emergence of Khasi native revivalism. Much of Khasi society has assimilated Christianity alongside its own indigenous belief system, and yet the missionary impetus was resisted in part, provoking an indigenous nationalist movement for self-assertion. This aspect is complicated further by the fact that religion, within the Welsh CM Mission movement, was bound to issues of national character (language, literature, race, notions of civilization etc.), and this is particularly evident in relation to the Welsh mission where linguistic nationalism and Nonconformity were inextricably linked. The relationship between the legacy of mission, the Presbyterian Church of India and the Khasi cultural movement is still a highly complex area to negotiate.

(slide 22: picture of Thomas Jones, wall, Sohra school) So, how might creative practice facilitate the understanding of the history and implications of colonial exchange? In using creative arts practice, through which we aim to offer an experiential encounter relating to the Welsh-Khasi intercultural contact, we are using an approach that sits within a growing body of scholarship, one that uses art making as a research method offering complex and competing cultural epistemologies.

We are working in a collaborative process where thinking is performed through the processes of creative practice. This involves the utilisation of making creative outputs, with both the processes involved in making and the final products themselves becoming a vehicle for thought. In this way creative artefacts do not behave as final outputs that enact research for one audience alone, but rather, inhabit a social space in which they are received and discussed by a range of different communities. This is a

research context in which it is possible for the dissemination to reach different audiences, while also embodying the complexities and nuances of the research itself. Paul Carter describes 'material thinking' as what happens when the artist asks the simple but far-reaching questions 'What matters? What is the material of thought? To ask these questions is to embark on an intellectual adventure peculiar to the making process.' (Carter, xi) He proceeds to divulge how this process enables us to think differently about our situation as humans, what he calls: 'demonstrating the role works of art can play in the ethical project of *becoming* (collectively and individually) *oneself in a particular place*.' (Carter, xii) This is not solipsistic - according to Carter understanding how identities form and how relationships with others are invented (and can be reinvented) is essential knowledge for societies to be able to sustain themselves. 'Societies - and most obviously colonising white settler societies - are mytho-poetic inventions. Their myths of immaculate origins and unnegotiable destinies are historical inventions, and one function of the artist is to show, by rematerializing these metaphysical myths in the creative process, how more sustainable artificial myths can come into circulation, displacing those that are no longer sustainable and brokering a new relationship with degraded environments, displaced others and (their spiritual corollary) an impoverished imaginary.' (Carter, xii).

(slide 23: view of Khasi Hills through broken window of mission school) So, how are we to engage with creative practice in such a way that we are able together, as Indian and Welsh practitioners, encounter each other and in relation to our shared cultural history? Leaving the problematics of intercultural practice aside for a moment (a contested field within arts practice generally), how are we to find a shared

methodology for practice? Whilst we share Carter's position we have realised that perhaps our work will acknowledge and confront difference conceptually and in terms of form. Already, we realise that we are seeing and understanding the same landscapes and places with different eyes and ideas, and this makes for exceptionally rich discussion. And perhaps our divergent backgrounds in film and performance enable us to work through different modes which accentuate or heighten difference. By coincidence, in terms of our working methods, Aparna's doctoral research was influenced by Eisenstein's montage theory and my own looked at the contribution of Meyerhold's theories of performance, which included similar sensibilities to Eisenstein, to 20thC European theatre. In short, this means that we both work through a highly structured juxtaposing of elements within an artwork in order to affect an idea or have an impact beyond the individual images or elements of composition. The coming together of film and performance techniques relating to montage may itself involve a dialectical process, a relationship of conflict resulting in a new form.

(slide 24: wall in Bhoi house with Christ calendar and Khasi wooden instruments) In thinking our way through the practice as it is being constructed we find ourselves working in different and discrete areas (not only are we attracted to different aspects of history and of the material – photography / letters; we are also working in slightly different practical contexts (Aparna – editing studio; Lisa – rehearsal studio). We are aware, however, that our practices are being structured in a way that discloses a desire to be placed next to the other. So as well as stand alone short films and performances, we are working towards an installation/event comprised of performance, film and photography elements. In this way our work may be presented together or apart. We are also engaged in critical writing, and our thinking in this sphere impacts on the

practice and vice versa. All the elements are being positioned to interact with one another.

(slide 25: view through the bars of grave of Sarah, J. Ceredig Evans's wife) I have spoken here of materials relating to the 'archive' – but as Rhiannon's research has shown embodied experience can be and is a rich source of epistemology. Performance studies recognises the potential value of the lived embodiment of culture (or 'repertoire'), alongside the prevalence of documented cultural artefacts (or 'archive') (Taylor, 2003). As we are focusing on peoples' experiences of the mission, in the past, and in relation to the past, we are operating in the realm of cultural memory, where embodiment is crucial. Exploring peoples' historical relationship with the Welsh Mission, both in Wales and Khasi Hills, asking people to discuss their memories, and exploring the continued legacy of the cultural contact and exchange brought about by these historical circumstances, is vital in order to reach an understanding of the implications of this historical relationship on peoples lives and identities, then and now. And therefore we are talking with people who have been involved in the mission about their participation, is considering land and landscape, and investigating the spaces of Welsh-Khasi involvement - spaces where the relationship was performed, or where it may have been contested. We are placing an emphasis on people's knowledge, understanding and feelings, rather than following the meta-narrative of purely institutional accounts of Welsh Mission history. And in this way, our creative practice will be based on a form of situated knowledge that privileges site and embodied experience - drawing attention to the way in which postcolonial identities are formed.

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