

ARTICLE

The Falcon in the Web: Ecclesial Witness in Digital Ecologies of Northeast India

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Abstract

This paper examines the Amur Falcon conservation initiatives of the Rainforest Club Tamenglong (RCT) among the Zeliangrong-Inpui community in Manipur, India, to argue that grassroots ecological practices in digitally mediated contexts may be understood as a form of ecclesial witness beyond formal church structures and in post-digital worlds shaped by unequal power. The paper analyses how digital infrastructures reshape social-ecological relations, knowledge production and authority. Digital technologies have enabled RCT to engage trans-local and global networks of advocacy and knowledge sharing, while simultaneously reconfiguring relational dynamics within the community. Though operating within predominantly secular conservation frameworks, their work is grounded in Christian commitments, and their witness emerges through practices in digitally mediated contexts in the forms of ecological care, advocacy and community engagement. The paper attends to the role of digital technologies in shaping visibility, knowledge and relationality. While digital infrastructures enable new forms of collaboration and cultural expression, they also introduce risks associated with datafication, surveillance and the privileging of modernist epistemologies. These dynamics contribute to shifts in human–nonhuman relations, the translation of embodied ecological knowledge into abstract data, and the reshaping of subjectivities. Grassroots actors negotiate these tensions through plural, co-produced forms of knowledge that bring together scientific, embodied and theological ways of knowing. This paper contributes by (i) re-theorizing ecclesial presence as a digitally mediated relational practice, (ii) foregrounding infrastructural and epistemic injustice in postdigital worlds, and (iii) showing how indigenous onto-epistemologies reconfigure theological categories of creation care.

Keywords: Lived theology, Digital ontology, Indigenous, Digitization, Conservation, Tamenglong, Zeliangrong-Inpui, Indigenous theology

Introduction

This paper examines the Amur Falcon conservation initiatives of the Rainforest Club Tamenglong (RCT) among the Zeliangrong-Inpui community in Manipur, Northeast India, to argue that grassroots ecological practices in digitally mediated contexts may be understood as a form of ecclesial witness. In navigating the opportunities and constraints of digital infrastructures, RCT's work expresses a lived eco-theology grounded in relational responsibility, plural modes of knowledge-making, and commitments to ecological care. Such practices complicate conventional distinctions between "secular" conservation and "religious" activity, suggesting that ecclesial witness may emerge beyond formal church structures through everyday engagements with land, community and technology. The paper approaches ecclesial witness as lived, and emerging from grassroots contexts, attentive to the contextual, community-embedded forms that Asian ecclesial life characteristically takes (Chan 2018). The contribution is precisely that witness is identified in unexpected places and forms; or that indeed, it is enacted in pragmatic response and in plural forms (Jenkins 2013).

My usage of "indigenous" refers to the cosmological-philosophical orientation characterized by rootedness to land, embedded relational ontologies and non-fragmentary understandings of human-nonhuman life (Elias KC 2026). It does not assert a fixed or essentialized identity. Rather, the orientation provides a critical lens through which to examine the inherent assumptions embedded in digital infrastructures, particularly their tendencies toward abstraction, legibility and control. The encounter between these assumptions and indigenous lifeworlds offers a productive site for evaluating how ecological knowledge, authority and subjectivity are being reconfigured in postdigital contexts.

Methodologically, the paper approaches digitality through the framework of what I will call "digital landscapes", attending to the digital-real continuum of postdigital worlds rather than isolating online activity from embodied practice (Savin-Baden and Reader 2022). Analysed through the lens of landscapes rather than fragmented engagements, RCT's activities encompass multiple modes: digital media, embodied rituals, scientific collaboration, traditional storytelling, community festivals and theological reflection. This framework enables attention to plural cosmologies and practices as they are lived together, rather than forcing them into their respective singular modes of expression. Drawing on interviews, digital ethnography and analysis of online content (Facebook, YouTube and Instagram), the paper traces how these modes are held together in practice.

Ethnographic attention to RCT reveals a complex set of tensions. Digital platforms enable translocal solidarity, advocacy, and cultural creativity, affording agency to indigenous actors across global networks. At the same time, they introduce dynamics of datafication, surveillance logics and algorithmic authority that risk

reproducing their experience of marginalization, reshaping ecological relations and reconfiguring knowledge and authority. Rather than treating these as problems to be resolved, the paper attends to how they are negotiated in practice. In doing so, it argues that RCT's practices constitute a form of ecclesial witness beyond formal institutional structures, enacted through relational responsibility, cultural production and digital participation.

Locating the Falcon: the Rainforest Club, Tamenglong

Every late autumn, the Amur Falcons, the raptor birds, would arrive in thousands and roost for a few weeks in the forested regions around Tamenglong, located in the Indo-Myanmar biodiversity hotspot. Recent research findings by ornithologist Suresh Kumar extending beyond Northeast India indicate centuries of annual visitation; a presence reflected in Zeliangrong-Inpui (ZLRI) folklore and songs (on the ZLRI community, see Panmei 2001; Kamei 2004) that remember the birds as “winged guests” (Ghosh 2024). In one of their vernacular languages, the name for the Amur Falcon is *Akhuaipuina*. It is said that the name *Akhuaipuina* comes from the “calling” of the birds, which resembles their traditional chants or shouts, known as *huai-mei* or “hoi-hoi” (Nehemiah Panmei, interview with author, 2021). *Huai-mei* refers to communal vocalization practices that function to foster community participation, solidarity, and shared presence, such as during collective work, festivities, or invocation of blessings. This name *Akhuaipuina* seems to throw insights into how the communities relate to these annual raptor visitors: as ones with voices that call to them, much like their own human neighbours. This points to a relational understanding of the birds that exceeds instrumental or even purely ecological value.

The conservation of the Amur Falcon in Tamenglong offers a generative site for examining how digitality becomes entangled with ecological relations, indigenous authority and community dynamics. Among the ZLRI Naga community, who have historically practised subsistence farming, the seasonal arrival of the Amur Falcon has been regarded in folklore as an ecological and cosmological signifier, associated with agricultural well-being due to the bird's role in controlling pest and termite populations. In recent decades, however, intensified hunting and deforestation in Northeast India severely threatened regional biodiversity. The mass hunting and sale of thousands of Amur Falcons in northeastern states of Nagaland and Manipur drew national and international attention in the mid-2010s, marking a moment when local ecological and hunting practices became more visible within wider conservation and media circuits. It was in this context that the Rainforest Club Tamenglong (RCT), registered in 2014, emerged as a key actor, organizing conservation advocacy with the Amur Falcon at its centre.

Firmly rooted in the local community yet operating within trans-local conservation networks, RCT has collaborated with state and national institutions such as the Manipur Forest Department and the Wildlife Institute of India (WII). Central to this collaboration was the geotagging of Amur Falcons, through which numerous individual birds were digitally tracked and named after local villages and landmarks, such as Chiuluan (named after a village) and Irang (after a river). The resulting flight-path data from this digital tracking, situated the birds within their trans-equatorial migration, revealing their tremendous journeys from the Manchurian Steppe of northeast Asia, across the Arabian Sea to southern Africa. Once only encountered as “winged guests” that visited their remote villages (remote from centres of development and political power), the *Akhuaipuina* have taken on another life – reconstituted as datafied, mobile and globally legible entities that now connected continents and oceans, and linked diverse ecological, scientific and local knowledge systems.

While RCT operates largely within secular conservation networks, it is composed of Christian actors whose advocacy and activism are shaped by scriptural imagination, call for church action and prayer, and inherent eco-theological commitments, and who remain closely engaged with local church communities. In this sense, they may be regarded as expressions of the “liquid church” (Ward 2013) in that they represent Christians driven partially by their scriptural and theological convictions, and moving fluidly in the world, working across local churches, across regions and even across faiths/non-faith actors. This was expressed clearly in a news report. In a *National Geographic* report on conservation efforts in Azuram, Tamenglong district, Paul Salopek writes of Nehemiah Panmei, co-founder of RCT: “I asked Panmei where he got his green ideas. He quoted Psalms 94:5: ‘In His hand are the depths of the Earth, and the mountain peaks belong to Him’” (Salopek 2020). Thus, their work can be understood as a form of ecclesial witness, where faith-informed values shape environmental stewardship. Christian witness in conservation is particularly significant in India where, as Director Mordecai Panmei told me, conservationists are often puzzled by their Christian faith, given the wider and popular reputation of Christians as being anti-environmentalists (Stoll 2015; White 1967). He lists at least two scriptural and theological motivations: the world as “God’s creation” (creation account of Genesis) and the eschatological vision of coexistence (Isaiah 65.25). Additionally, in the context where local Baptist churches have only recently begun to engage with ecological concerns, RCT’s pioneering eco-theological praxis is noteworthy. They do not set out to constitute an ecclesial entity, nor are they animated explicitly by formal theological concepts such as *missio Dei*. Yet, their conviction and pragmatism for care for the environment (and by extension, for the marginalized and impoverished communities) locate them within the “mixed economy of Church life”, in their embodiment of faithful ecclesial presence (Müller 2019: 251). This contextual, community-embedded character of RCT’s witness also resonates with Chan’s (2018) account

of Asian ecclesiologies, which are shaped by relational presence within particular social and ecological landscapes.

In this context, the community's socio-economic designation as a Scheduled Tribe under the Indian Constitution situates them within a complex terrain of recognition, marginalization and governance (Ambagudia 2019). This juridical status shapes how their ecological practices, cultural life, and knowledge systems take shape within state, media, and digital infrastructures. As such, engagements with conservation and digital technologies in such marginalized regions cannot be understood apart from the broader dynamics of politics and uneven power that structure the position of tribal communities within the Indian "mainland" imaginary.

The Falcon Takes Flight: The Promises of Digital Relationality

Trans-local Networks of Solidarity

RCT is comprised of passionate social workers with training in media production, and attuned to broader climate discourse. Digital media and technology naturally align with their skills and experiences. According to Mordecai Panmei, the 2020–21 pandemic marked a turning point for RCT, compelling them to explore digital media. They discovered that, rather than being a limitation, the digital space offered unexpected opportunities during a time when in-person events and print media were out of reach. The news of their Amur Falcon conservation spread online during this period, reaching individuals and communities across the globe, including me in Edinburgh, coincidentally during my PhD on digital ethnography. Digital tools provided unprecedented opportunities for advocacy for their efforts related to the falcons, the blue pitta and the Chinese pangolin. Journalists from around the world could reach them to amplify their work and foster further connections. This also allowed them to participate and present papers at international gatherings such as the ICCA Consortium (Indigenous Peoples' and Community Conserved Areas and Territories 2023) and the United Nations in Geneva. During this pandemic era, RCT drew inspiration from other indigenous conservationists, such as the Pangolin Man in Zimbabwe, and collaborated with scientists and organizations like WII. Indigenous communities rallied digitally around shared "pan-indigenous" identities, exchanging knowledge and experiences across borders in what Roturier and Beau (2022: 165) describe as transnational environmental struggles. These experiences helped locate their place in a broader struggle of grassroots and Indigenous communities in the work of cultural and ecological conservation (Linkola-Aikio et al. 2025). Such solidarity and connectivity are especially significant for RCT and the ZLRI community, who have historically faced marginalization and a lack of visibility. Digitality offered

opportunities to break from the infrastructural constraints and marginalization, creating new spaces for recognition and influence on both local and transnational stages. It enabled them to join forces and speak out against state and infrastructural projects that “massacred” dense forests in the name of progress (Gore et al. 2022).

Interestingly, however, participation in national and global conservation circuits often required the translation, and at times the muting, of explicitly Christian language and theological motivations – a subtle constraint on their ecclesial witness. It is in the local and grassroots engagement that their place in ecclesial witness is most prominent. In other spaces, RCT’s ecological commitments needed to be articulated in terms legible to secular environmental discourse, even as they remained shaped by scriptural imagination and religious conviction. This tension reveals an important dimension of how Christian witness and convictions are professed and enacted in postdigital contexts, which demands some sort of translation and negotiation. Nonetheless, Panmei admitted that their grounding in scripture and religious convictions did not go unnoticed even in these trans-local and national circuits, much to the puzzlement of the reporters and fellow conservationists.

New Networks and Structures of Relation within the Community

Online platforms also introduced new ways of communication and connection within the community. During the pandemic, RCT organized online events for the local community, such as art competitions to promote Amur Falcon awareness. The 2024 community event was a photography competition, titled “Shoot me with your cam.” Such online outreach facilitated creative participation and active learning about local biodiversity, encouraging participants to observe, document and share their experiences with the falcons. It created new forms of interaction across generations, with youth mentoring older participants on technological processes, while elders shared traditional knowledge about the *Akhuaipuina*. Besides these activities, RCT developed approaches that built on traditional cultures. They recognized that the *Akhuaipuina* not only had ecological and scientific significance, but also were featured in traditional folklore, folk songs and customs. As Panmei puts it, to preserve the biodiversity is effectively to preserve their cultural traditions. Building on this, RCT organised folk song competitions, poetry and painting competitions, and even included folk dances. These efforts coalesced into a rich repertoire of activities, eventually becoming the annual Amur Falcon Festival observed every late autumn.

The digital media produced by RCT served educational purposes besides advocacy. These activities introduced new relational dynamics within the indigenous landscape, creating fresh pedagogical possibilities. Unlike conventional structures of knowledge held by schools, churches, or elders, digital technologies allowed younger content creators and activists to generate information about birds and the environment, and about associated traditional cultures. This enabled new relational

structures within the community, redistributing influence, and thereby reshaping cultural production. Through intergenerational learning and collaboration, elders contribute ecological and cultural wisdom, narrating the significance of species, local flora and folklore, while the younger community members mediate these teachings digitally – designing posts, running social media campaigns, or creating educational content for broader audiences (as seen in Gonmei 2024). In this emergent configuration of cultural production, the transmission of knowledge becomes increasingly mediated through digital infrastructures and platform logics. Younger, technologically adept actors assume a mediating role, determining what is rendered visible and shareable according to the demands of legibility, online aesthetics and ease of circulation. What is curated within these parameters ultimately comes to be recognized as ecological and cultural knowledge in digital spaces. In this sense, the knowledge of elders becomes dependent on the technological and curatorial capacities of the younger generation. While intergenerational transmission has always been integral to ZLRI social life, digital mediation introduces an added layer of dependence that reshapes how knowledge is selected, translated and circulated. Again, this is not entirely unprecedented; however, what is new here is the extent to which transmission is now entangled with digital infrastructures, rather than circulating more immediately and traditionally through oral narration, embodied practices and ritual or festival life. Moreover, knowledge is preserved and amplified insofar as it aligns with the priorities of digital regimes and conservation agendas, where ecological value becomes a key criterion for visibility.

The pandemic intensified this dynamic. As youth returned from mainland cities during lockdowns, they re-engaged their homelands through digital documentation and representation. The result is a form of digital relationality in which care for land, species and community is enacted online as much as offline, reconfiguring how territorial belonging is expressed. Visibility itself becomes charged with ecological responsibility, functioning as a mode of ethical action on behalf of their eco-social community.

A contrasting dynamic is visible in accounts of Amur Falcon conservation in Pangti, Nagaland, where external conservation narratives and digital storytelling are framed as central in shifting local practices from hunting to protection (Veríssimo and Kudalkar 2024). While this foregrounds the role of persuasion through media, it also implicitly reproduces a hierarchy in which ecological knowledge is introduced from outside the community by experts who leverage an epistemic authority based on science and modern technology. In the Tamenglong case, however, RCT's work complicates this hierarchical model, as conservation initiatives are actively produced from within the community itself, drawing on indigenous cultural forms and ecological knowledge, supplemented by indigenous actors utilizing digital media practices. Here, ecological responsibility emerges through the community's own

reconfiguration of cultural and ecological meaning within digital infrastructures, alongside being informed by experts and educated conservationists.

Reconfigured Relationality with Nature

It is often framed as preferable to “shoot the falcons with the cam”, as expressed in the photography competition theme of Amur Falcon 2024, rather than with guns for hunting. Yet this paper asks whether the act of capturing the falcon within digital regimes should also be critically examined, in ways not dissimilar to earlier concerns about capture within hunting and market economies. This also has theological implications on how humans interact and engage with nature. A full philosophical treatment of this question lies beyond the scope of this paper, but here I will foreground two interrelated theological concerns related to digital mediation: epistemology and subjectivity.

Datafication and Indigenous Onto-epistemology: Expansion of Knowledge or Epistemicide?

Rendering “nature” into data, intensified through digital mediation, can displace complex, embodied, relational, and lived (“walked in”) knowledge with more abstract and easily circulated forms of knowledge. This shift is often aligned with the logics associated with high modernist rationality in its emphasis on legibility, abstraction and control. In the context of indigenous communities, this translates into a reconfiguration of relations with nonhuman life, alongside the reduction of situated, sensory, and relational knowledge into “data” (Duarte et al. 2019: 173). Where such logics prevail as dominant, as is increasingly evident in the case of Tamenglong, digital landscapes risk functioning as sites where relational and embodied forms of knowledge are subordinated to scientific and “datafied” knowledge.

This tension becomes noticeable in the datafication of the Amur Falcon migration narrative, particularly in the scientific and digital reframing of the *Akhuaipuina* as the Amur Falcons. The introduction of geo-tagged flight paths produced a different narrative of these birds, one that articulated identities and movements extending beyond the community’s cultural signification. In 2020, the flight patterns were circulated widely on social media. Reading these reports from distant Edinburgh, I was stunned. As a ZLRI from Tamenglong, in these digital maps, I was encountering the familiar *Akhuaipuina* through new lenses. They were different from my childhood memories of noisy flocks filling the evening sky in Tamenglong, and seen from the ground as we paused from our evening games. The digital colour-coded flight paths traced across maps of Asia and Africa offered a distinctly different perspective: a view from above. The information gained from geo-tags expanded on the community’s pre-existing traditional knowledge and practices surrounding the familiar

Akhuaipuina in ways that enriched their significance into broader ecological and geopolitical scales. For the community then, they represent and quantify the journey of our guests, the *Akhuaipuina*. These representations articulate a different ontological register in which the falcon is constituted primarily as data-in-motion rather than as relational presence. Their sensorimotor knowledge (Roturier and Beau 2022: 167) is supplemented and repositioned within a plural epistemic field, where embodied, ecological and scientific knowledges are managed and negotiated, albeit in uneven interactions.

Where datafication displaces this relational and epistemic plurality, however, what is at stake is the ontological reduction, and the reframing of what nature is understood to be. In its more extreme form, the dominance of data-driven epistemologies in conservation contexts can marginalize indigenous ways of knowing, raising the risk of epistemicide (Hall and Tandon 2017; Sonkqayi 2024). In privileging objectivity and legibility, the plural subjectivities acknowledged in indigenous life-worlds stand to be discarded.

New Subjectivities and Identities: “Relating like a State”

Aiyadurai’s work on the Mishmis of Arunachal Pradesh notes how complex, lived relations with tigers – previously viewed as protector, prey, or kin – are flattened within state and conservation frameworks that re-classify them as “endangered” or as national symbols (Aiyadurai 2016: 312). A similar reconfiguration can be observed in the shift from *Akhuaipuina* to the Amur Falcon. Once encountered as “winged guests”, embedded within seasonal rhythms and relational cosmologies, the falcons are increasingly reframed as objects of conservation, eco-tourism and scientific classification. The vernacular name *Akhuaipuina*, “the one who calls”, signals rather a form of subjectivity, a being that addresses the human community. By contrast, the sterile taxonomic “Amur Falcon” (*Falco amurensis*) situates the bird within a classificatory and managerial order that abstracts it from these relational contexts; a shift of ontological significance. It signals a reconfiguration in how human-nonhuman relations are structured and understood. As Roturier and Beau (2022: 165) observe in the Sami context, digital and scientific frameworks can recast nonhuman beings as mere passive recipients of human rational intentionality. In such configurations, animals are no longer encountered as relational subjects but as entities to be tracked, managed and interpreted through human-centred systems. These developments may be understood in relation to what Scott describes as “seeing like a state” (Scott 2020), which can be extended here as “relating like a state”. It characteristically privileges legibility, standardization and control, often positioning scientific expertise as the primary arbiter of valid knowledge, while treating indigenous knowledge as subordinate or peripheral (Harding 2011).

At the same time, the empirical situation in Tamenglong resists such a straightforward account. As noted by ornithologist Suresh Kumar in neighbouring Nagaland state, the introduction of geo-tagging and digital mapping actually generated new forms of engagement and enthusiasm among the community, who were deeply affected by the newly acquired knowledge. “In this whole process, people were learning about the geography where these birds were passing through,” he explained. “They started getting emotionally attached to the birds” (RAPTORS 2013). In this sense, digital mediation can be said to extend knowledge, introducing new epistemic and ontological horizons, and connecting local lifeworlds to wider ecological networks. Vernacular understandings of the falcons as relational beings coexist with their digital representation as datafied entities. The falcons continue to “call out” within local cosmologies, even as their movements are mapped, tracked and circulated across global networks. Digital infrastructures thus generate a layered field of relationality in which different ontologies of nature, encompassing relational, scientific and data-driven, intersect, if in an uneven terrain.

As an uneven terrain, digital platforms remain human-centric infrastructures, structuring how nonhuman life is made visible and intelligible. In doing so, they subtly shift the balance of relational authority, privileging legibility and abstraction. The issue then is how digitality *reorders* how human relations with nature are envisioned and recognized. For this paper, this reordering has immense theological significance. If relations with nonhuman creation are increasingly mediated through infrastructures that privilege abstraction and rational subjectivities, then the conditions under which care, responsibility and witness are enacted are themselves transformed. Rather than the relational and sacramental view of nature as “the body of God” (McFague 1993), digital mediation introduces fresh risks of further objectifying nonhuman creation. Indeed, theologian Norman Wirzba identifies significant theological implications in this epistemic shift: the objectification of nature in modernity is closely linked to the rejection of transcendence and the disenchantment of the world. If anything, digital infrastructures exacerbate this tendency towards epistemic abstraction and the exclusive prioritization of human rational subjectivities.

Reconfigured Relations of Marginalisation: Caste Logics & Surveillance Capitalism

The expanded visibility afforded by digital technologies has been crucial for RCT and the wider ZLRI community, as seen above. Yet this visibility introduces further vulnerability. It exposes communities to external scrutiny shaped by unequal social imaginaries, particularly what may be described in the Northeast Indian context as the “mainland gaze,” driven by caste-inflected hierarchies and cultural distance. Within this gaze, tribal communities are alternately romanticized as ecological custodians or

denigrated as culturally backward, especially in relation to food practices as “dirty” or inferior, reflecting casteist notions of contamination, privilege and moral superiority (Kikon 2022).

The viral circulation of photographs showing animals sold in local markets for food in the 2010s further amplified these prejudices, framing Naga tribal communities as cruel or irresponsible. In this framing, the hunting and consumption of Amur Falcons long practised among the communities, became freshly entangled with longstanding casteist and racialized narratives, positioning indigenous practices as evidence of backwardness or moral deficit. Faced with this scrutiny and surveillance, indigenous youth have used digital platforms to assert their own narratives of care, knowledge and identity. In particular, by sharing stories of RCT’s work on Amur Falcon conservation and other ecological projects, they perform a deliberate counter-narrative: demonstrating that indigenous communities are intimately familiar with their lands, and deeply invested in “stewardship” (a theological word often encountered in my interviews) and relational engagement with the nonhuman world. Through such digital practices, the youths assert that their plural ecological engagement is both culturally grounded and globally relevant, claiming a space within global networks of knowledge and advocacy. Such work, which might be superficially waved off as representational work, constitutes a form of moral and relational practice; what this paper understands as an expression of communal witness, enacted beyond formal institutional structures. Importantly, witness, in this case, is expressed in more subtle and implicit manifestations. Although operating within secular spaces, their practices are often undergirded by Christian moral language alongside ongoing relationships with local churches. In this way, ecological action, digital participation and theological imagination intersect in diffuse but meaningful ways.

Here too, we encounter conditions of digital mediation that impose constraints on this witness and representation. Visibility must be carefully managed, especially when images and spectacles are circulated with minimal account for local contexts or cultural meanings. As Mordecai Panmei notes, even a single poorly timed or candid image, such as one capturing a momentary lapse in the handling of an animal, could circulate widely and undermine years of conservation work and the collective reputation of communities. This ambivalence highlights the ethical stakes of digital mediation: visibility can empower, connect and teach, but it can also expose communities to misrepresentation, judgment, or coercive forms of authority. Furthermore, what gains traction and circulation is often what aligns with dominant expectations: visually compelling, legible, aesthetically palatable and easily interpretable knowledge, while those that do not fit this mould possibly risk marginalization. For ecclesial reflection, this underscores the importance of attending to the affective and relational dimensions of postdigital worlds: visibility and platforming alone are insufficient for cultivating ethical, caring, and networked communities. If Christian witness

is to be attuned to justice, it must attend to the infrastructures through which visibility and knowledge are mediated within contemporary realities. The practices of RCT suggest that faithful engagement in such spaces requires discernment: a commitment to relational accountability, to the protection of vulnerable representations, and to the cultivation of forms of presence that resist epistemic reduction to spectacle. Public theology in India calls for attention to subaltern concerns (Patta 2023), and this is especially pertinent in the domain of digital publics strained by infrastructural imbalances and ingrained racial and casteist prejudices.

At a broader level, these dynamics find resonances with concerns about surveillance capitalism and the extractive logics of digital companies, especially towards marginalised communities (Zuboff 2019). Increased connectivity has created new opportunities for participation, but also new asymmetries of power regarding who owns, interprets and benefits from digital knowledge that is scraped from marginalized communities. Online documentation of species, landscapes, and frontier regions can expand awareness, but it also risks extracting and instrumentalizing what is perceived as valuable according to dominant frameworks. Seen in this light, digital landscapes are recognized as moral and theological terrains, which have the capacity to shape how persons/communities relate, how knowledge is formed or muted, and how responsibility is enacted. Stoddart's (2022) call to "dismantle White surveillance" provides a liberative framework for challenging the Whiteness inherent in Western digital norms. However, in the Indian context, racialised minorities further face an intersectional challenge: they must navigate not only dominant digital norms but also the added burden of a casteist gaze. Ethical Christian presence in postdigital contexts then is about critically interrogating inherent logics of domination, and cultivating practices grounded in relationality, care and justice. It involves action and solidarity alongside the "sinned against", who in this case comprises of nature and marginalized communities, and thereby articulating an expansive understanding of ecclesial presence in the world, the body of God (McFague 1993).

Becoming Digital Natives: Authority, Plurality and Ecclesial Witness

RCT's practices suggest that digital engagement reworks, rather than replaces, existing lifeworlds, creating new sites where authority is negotiated and shared. A close analysis of RCT's activities has revealed the innovative ways in which they manage a pluralistic paradigm – an interweaving of epistemological, relational, cultural-religious and methodological plurality. For example, in the annual Amur Falcon Festival, data maps and scientific figures are presented alongside traditional dances and newly composed folk songs about the falcons. On the same platform, government officials, nationally renowned ornithologists, local pastors, folklorists, dance

troupes and village elders converge. Painting and photography exhibitions, documentary screenings, prayers, pamphlets and posters all coexist, reflecting a co-production of knowledge that simultaneously draws from science, tradition, community expressions and lived experience. Digital technology enables this pluralism: the integration of “new orality”, audio-visual media and text allows indigenous creators to narrate, perform and document knowledge in ways that reach both local and transnational audiences. In this sense, indigenous digital activists, or “digital creatives” emerge as new actors of cultural and religious authority, shaping both ecological and cultural narratives (Campbell 2020). This indicates that in practice, ecological and theological authority is distributed across generations, institutions and platforms. In this sense, RCT inhabit roles that extend beyond conservation, and include cultural and, implicitly, theological mediator.

Interestingly, however, authority is constantly being contested even in these digital landscapes. Local communities assert their authority online, often resisting the conservation efforts, especially when they are perceived as high-handed and paternalistic. Digital fora such as Facebook and WhatsApp provide space for sustained deliberation, debate and dissent – whether over the surrender of hunting guns during the falcon season or the allocation of village land for eco-sensitive zones. Such discourse, which would be difficult to organize in person, allows for the negotiation of authority, the airing of dissenting voices, and the maintenance of pluralism in conservation and cultural practices. This resistance should be read as a challenge to romanticized and essentialized notions of indigenous “environmentalism” that paint indigenous communities as perpetual “noble savages”. In reality, and as such dissent against conservation works indicate, traditional lifeworlds have historically accommodated the simultaneous sacralization, honouring, hunting and consumption of *Akhuaipuina*. (See similar observations in other contexts: Nadasdy 2005.) Thus, we see digital infrastructures provide space for dissent, and therefore for seemingly-contradictory cosmologies to be articulated.

At the same time, these locally negotiated forms of authority remain vulnerable to the wider digital infrastructures in which they are embedded. Algorithmic logics shape visibility and credibility, often privileging what is legible, measurable, or aligned with dominant expectations (Campbell 2020). As a result, relational and embodied forms of knowledge risk being marginalised within digital infrastructures. For RCT, this creates an ongoing tension: digital media enables plural expressions of knowledge and care, while simultaneously pressuring them towards abstraction and standardisation.

Conclusion: Ecclesial Witness in Postdigital Contexts

This paper has presented digital ecology as a contested space in which relations are continually reconfigured: between humans and nonhuman life, between local communities and external powers, and between different ways of knowing. Digital infrastructures enable visibility, advocacy and collaboration, while also introducing pressures of datafication, surveillance and epistemic hierarchy. RCT's practices navigate this complex terrain, negotiating these tensions rather than resolving them. The paper has argued that RCT's work constitutes a form of ecclesial witness beyond formal church structures. Though operating largely within secular conservation networks, their practices are implicitly shaped by Christian commitments – expressed through notions of care, responsibility and relational accountability to land, community and nonhuman life. The tension RCT navigates between secular conservation circuits and explicitly Christian conviction is itself theologically instructive. It points toward a mode of ecclesial witness constituted by presence and plurality, rather than through explicit confessional stances or proclamation. That Christian convictions must sometimes be implicit or translated into secular idiom does not diminish their ecclesial character; it rather reflects the contextual, pragmatic form that faithful witness takes at the margins, where, as Jenkins (2013) argues, religious creativity emerges in plural and pragmatic responses to crisis. Seen from another perspective, these practices represent lived expressions of eco-theology. What is often articulated in conceptual terms, such as stewardship and care for creation, appears here as a relational ethic shaped by indigenous cosmologies – a form of lived eco-theology that is in continual onto-epistemological negotiations within postdigital worlds. Indigenous relational lifeworlds reshape Christian concepts, reworking them and resisting the singular or universalized frameworks of environmentalism or, indeed, of theology. Such epistemological openness and cosmologically-attentive approaches provide a pathway for reframing ecclesial presence that is grounded in lived contexts, attentive to both human and nonhuman flourishing, and responsive to marginalized communities.

For ecclesial futures, this carries two implications. First, it suggests that Christian witness in postdigital contexts must attend to the infrastructures that shape visibility, knowledge and authority. Second, it calls for forms of theological reflection that are grounded in lived practice and open to plural ways of knowing. The example of RCT points towards an ecclesial imagination, shaped beyond the centre of institutional ecclesial structures, through grassroots practices of care, attentive to questions of epistemic justice, shared responsibility and digital presence.

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