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"Where did the Question 'Where did one come from?' come from?"- Remembrance of Things Past

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Identity Construction and Transformation in Migration Processes

"Let him who has not a single speck of migration to blot his family escutcheon cast the first stone...if you didn't migrate then your father did, and if your father didn't need to move from place to place, then it was only because your grandfather before him had no choice but to go, put his old life behind him in search of the bread that his own land denied him..."

— José Saramago, *The Notebook*

Migration is moving from one place to another, forced or willed, that renegotiates and reformulates space and identity anew for the site of migration as well as the subject of migration. In a world mapped by geo-political boundaries, migration is often accompanied by discourses of growth and development. However, migration is not a recent phenomenon. Neither is it always willed or desired. From the very early gathering practices of the human race to the contemporary global village, migration has been a definitive aspect of human civilization. Corollary to migration is the concept of identity. Identity has many sources and forms. If on the one hand migration or constant mobility – forced or otherwise – is symptomatic of residing on a moving planet, identity is supposed to be a fixed axis around which this mobility is negotiated.

Questions of "Identity" have become one of the central questions in academic debates and contemporary human and social sciences all across the world. Since the 1980s, research has

intensively explored how meanings, expectations, and conflicts are associated with the different locationalities of individuals and groups; how individuals represent themselves using one or another element that constitutes their identity; how these elements can be categorized; and how multiple identities are compounded and negotiated when they conflict. One of the crucial point regarding the debate on identity has been something which has not been given it's due importance: the influence of migration on identity formation and transformations.

Identity is the dialectical interplay among self-representation—meant as identification in terms of interpersonal differentiations—and social categorization—meant as hetero-definition in terms of categories that establish boundaries between "us" and "them". But the recognition of a certain individual as belonging to a certain group is something not fixed or definitive. As has been asserted by Stryker and Serpe (1994) individuals choose different ascriptions as self-descriptive in different situations and contexts. It therefore implies that social categorization and self-representation conflict to various degrees, the notion of identity. Moreover, the processes of conferring meaning to the elements that constitute identity and reaching (explicit or tacit) agreements regarding "who is who" are interactions with others and society at large. At the crossroad between self-representation and social categorization lies the core mechanism of individual and collective identities. Individuals differentiate themselves by adopting criteria that are shared by the members of a group and by developing a sense of belonging to it. When outsiders recognize individuals' belonging, collective identity emerges. But, the more important issue in this is the whether and how identity can be conceptualized by acknowledging individual features and collective identification when both tend to shift over time.

In multicultural societies, identities adjust one to another and are gradually modified. The negotiation of identity, referring to a gradual transformation of identities within new vital contexts, generates new forms of cultural hybridism. Embodied roles, and the specific behaviors associated with them, undoubtedly change over time and across space. Consequently, the perception, representation, and definition of identity also change. This shift is particularly explicit during migration. migrants explicitly perceive identity as fluid and multiple. Identity is, indeed, better described as something that individuals "do" rather than something that they "have", as a process rather than as a property. (Jenkins 2008) A number of studies have shown

that the patterns of identification among migrants vary greatly, ranging from identification with one's country of origin, religion or mother tongue to receiving country, neither or both (Berry 1997; Roccas and Brewer 2002; Schwartz et al. 2008; Ramelli et al. 2013). Thus, in the migratory context, ethnicity and religion became especially important as identity markers and can be subjectively appropriated. Indeed, mobility is essentially a search for better economic, working, and living conditions; a search for food, love, and shelter; in other words, a search for happiness. This expectation helps migrants to persist in a process that often worsens their living conditions during the initial phases. However, although migrants perceive mobility as a way to escape a limiting environment, migration policies problematize migration as a destabilizing force that must be kept under control. This representation of the problem greatly influences the construction of identity and generates the resulting condition of urban and social marginality.

The arrival of a migrant in the receiving country is a total event which requires the complete (re)construction of identity. Indeed, leaving their country of origin, migrants lose their social status, family, and social networks. In the receiving country, they find themselves without a history and without an image. Faced with an unknown universe of meanings, migrants feel lost, alone, and without reference points. As much as they strive to become integrated, migrants remain strangers. Moreover, migrants face distrust and hostility. The harsh reality of exclusion differs from the idealized image of the receiving country as a place to better one's life that originally drives migrants to leave their country of origin. Disillusionment and nostalgia contribute to idealizing the country of origin, which is in turn beautified through memory. However, when the migrant returns home, the contrast between the ideal and the real reappears. To a certain extent, migrants live between idealization and disillusionment both in the receiving country and in the country of origin. Their new condition is in between, at the borderland, in transit. The process that begins when one leaves his/her own country never ends, and it generates an unfinished condition of not yet belonging "here" but no longer "there".

In the postcolonial globalized world, this has led to the reconceptualization of the concept of "home". The very notion of home is questioned by considering that it can be defined as the place where one is born or where one grows up, the place where the family of origin lives, or the place where one lives and works as an adult in an exclusive or simultaneous way. One can

actually have several "homes" that only partially match with the physical places. Nonetheless, the sense of belonging appears to be a crucial step in the processes of formation and identity reconstruction for refugee and migrant women. Their desire for roots and stability and belonging challenge the traditional constructs of social codes and national boundaries. This construction / (re) construction of identity is also explicit in the quest for upward mobility in the receiving country. The search for recognition and the feeling of empowerment are crucial to the (re)construction of identity. Because identity formation is a relational (and oppositional) process, recognition is an element that often appears in opposition to other groups or persons. If it is true that the Self needs the Other to self-represent (De Beauvoir 1949), then the question concerns how the Other is selected and integrated into the construction of identity. Belonging or non-belonging to a particular social category is not a straightforward process. Indeed, self-representation mobilizes different levels of belonging that do not reflect a simple dichotomous division between "them" and "us." Belonging emerges from a complex process of appropriation and (re)interpretation of social boundaries that depends on whether those who are on the other side of the boundary may accept or reject the minority group. The Other and the Self are not clearly defined as constant categories, but serve as situational shifting references used in relation to individuals who want to define themselves within the larger interactional context. Moreover, as a product of belonging to multiple affiliations, the hybridization of being at the borderlands poses serious challenges to the existing hegemonic culture of society (Bhabha 1994). Re-interpreting practices and discourses of the "cultures" of the country of origin and the receiving country, migrants challenge the essentialist and homogenous representations of cultures and ethnic communities. The identities of migrants are understood as products of intersectional identifications, which require a procedural and dynamic understanding. More than a site of discrimination and exclusion, the marginality of being at the borderlands is reinterpreted as a speculative space. The borderlands are hence described as an "interstitial zone of displacement and de-territorialization that shapes the identity of hybridized subjects", which is deemed a particularly adequate conceptualization of identity in postcolonial and globalized societies.

Migration Memories: The Nexus between Memory and Migration

The growing diversity of societies is a phenomenon which is regarded both as an asset as well as a challenge which has forced academicians and thinkers to re-evaluate some of the basic assumptions about migrant incorporation and social memories. In the 1920s, Robert E. Park and Ernest W. Burgess from the Chicago school noted that "Assimilation is a process of fusion and interpenetration in which persons and groups acquire the memories, sentiments and attitudes of other persons or groups, and by sharing their experiences and history, are incorporated with them in a common cultural life. But, by the 1960s, it had become clear in immigrant societies that, even in the face of pressure to conform and assimilate, successive generations of migrants and minorities tended to retain traits from their own cultural backgrounds. In order to encapsulate this, scholars began to replace "assimilation" with the more hybrid term "multiculturalism". This term recognized that people tended to preserve parts of their own heritage and continue to identify with their cultural backgrounds. Today scholars have tended to apply a policy mix of assimilation and more pluralist "multiculturalist tendencies", fittingly termed "applied multiculturalism" by Riva Kastoryano. Scholars have since regarded 'incorporation' of 'new immigration' as interplay between migrants and society. In the same way, Memory Studies which was concerned with national and other identities have overcome it's cultural paradigms to include a more transcultural perspective.

Migration and the referencing of certain memories of the past can influence social cohesion between immigrants and the host societies. This in turn can lead to the stabilization of mobility among the migrants in the host societies which stabilizes and redefines notions of "identity" for the concerned people. As an example, in public debates about immigration, historical experiences are often recalled to underpin political positions. The past is remembered in different ways by different actors. As Henry Rousso has rightly pointed out, the battle for memory is no longer confined only to exceptional cases, such as the Holocaust but is a structural element of contemporary societies. Memories being highly selective and politically contested, divergent actors cite contrasting memories of the past to argue for the inclusion or exclusion of new immigrants. Pro-migrant actors may compare their forefathers to contemporary migrants for empathy and understanding amongst citizens for migrants. On the other hand, anti- migrant

actors, may reference past events or experiences that can increase animosity amongst citizens against immigrants.

Traditionally, theories in memory are focused on the contention that social remembering constructs cultural identities, 'imagined communities', and homogeneous belonging in nation-states for their own sake. Yet, migration creates a paradox in many countries that have traditionally imagined 'belonging' along homogeneous lines, which markedly contradict their often heterogeneous history, their increasingly heterogeneous present, and their presumed heterogeneous future. Memories that had contributed to social cohesion in European states for many years by constructing 'national identities' now appear to exacerbate social tensions. Fundamentally, memory is regarded as both individual and social. "While the collective memory endures and draws strength from its base in a coherent body of people", sociologist Maurice Halbwachs pointedly argued, "it is individuals as group members who remember." (Halbwachs 22) The relationship between individual memory and social memory is still contested today. Studies continue to refer to works by Halbwachs and the psychologist, Frederick Bartlett, who, independently of each other, first described this dichotomy in the 1920s and 1930s, with leanings towards a predominance of the social and a predominance of the individual, respectively. While Memory Studies may emphasize one type of memory over the other, the interdependence of individual and social memory in the process of remembering is always acknowledged. From this stipulation is derived another supposition: that remembering connects individuals with others and creates notions of belonging in a bounded social relationship. Following Halbwachs, society and social peers are required for individuals to remember since they provide the 'social framework' or logic for recalling an event, and the imagination of a group. Belonging to that group is thus a result of remembering. The belonging constructed in the process can take on different modes, and the groups imagined vary in form, size and, crucially, in their types of relationship. In regard to their social aspect, memories are political. Public references to the past are considered 'memory politics' for they construct belongings that determine who and how someone may be included in a group, a society, a nation or a polity. Migrants may or may not be incorporated into such belongings. They may constitute a group among others, or they may not be recognized as

migrants at all, depending on the social and political context in which the past is evoked. Memories that conjure up a relationship between migrants and the receiving society are political in terms of incorporation, determining the selectivity of admission, the position of new members in a society, and migrants' potential participation in the receiving polity. Who is a citizen and who belongs to a nation, who makes up society's majority and who is part of a minority are questions posed, not just for migration, but in recourse to memories in which selections and constellations of belonging are expressed. As memories evoke notions of belonging, they affect political action. They gear policies towards ensuring the preservation of the heritage or tradition they evoke. In this case, memories function as a way of indirect persuasion to act according to a particular social group's legacy. In addition, memories directly inform state policies, including migration policies, with 'lessons from the past'. Moreover, the social relations imagined as belonging in references to the past constitute a model for political action in the political community or polity in question. In other words, memories influence who the principle actors executing policies are – whether individuals, nationals, citizens or the state itself – as well as the content of their policies. Since memories construct belonging and are relevant to political action, they are also politically contested. Known as the 'politics of memory', members of groups and societies debate the interpretation of their collective past. The conflict stems from the friction between the singularity of the group or society and the multiplicity of memories proposed as being constitutive of the group or society. This is especially prevalent in societies that have experienced drastic political transformations, such as regime change. The politics of memory can be intense and passionate since different political actors' interpretations of the past compete with others to establish a society's belonging and the direction of its policies. It is therefore also significant for societies that debate migration, in which case the memories recalled make specific statements about belonging and migrant incorporation. Moreover, the politics of memory are historical and respond to general developments and changes in society, both by adjusting the perception of the past to shifts in social constellations and because actors can utilize memories to meet new challenges. Last, but not least, countries differ in their debates about the past because the politics of memory are specific to the socio-political organization of groups, societies and polities. Due to their political character, memories are relevant to migration in several ways: by determining belonging and the ensuing relationship between migrants and their receiving society,

by influencing policies of migration, and by structuring the political debate about belonging and migration.

Migration Memories and Northeast India

The geographical area of Northeast India is an entity marked by diversity and heterogeneity clustered together by a homogenous geographical space and an umbrella term of "Northeast". There abound various myths, oral narratives, folk beliefs, rituals as well as many migration stories of many of the tribes and communities of "Northeast". The history of Northeast India is a history mainly of migrations. The indigenous communities of the region mostly find affiliation and trace their genealogy and ancestries back to many parts of Southeast Asia. Subsequently the inflow also came in from the Western side of India in the form of various communities like the Hindu-Axamiya speaking population of Assam.

Migration and the stories of these migrations have been a recurrent figure in both Western and Eastern thinking. In the case of Northeast India these stories regarding origin or the tracing out of an ancestral "paradisic home" is a recurring motif in many of the folktales and folk-beliefs of many communities abiding in these regions. For example, '*Môsēra Kihir*' is an important genre of Karbi folk narrative that literally means 'recounting the past from memories'. '*Môsēra Kihīr*' is an essential recital in Karbi funerary ceremony (*chōmkan or thī-kārhi*) and the 'collective youth ritual' known as '*risō chōjun*'. In every funerary ceremony, it is customary for the host (of *thī-kārhi*) to formally welcome the visiting dignitaries (represented by youths) from neighbouring villages and bid them goodbye at the end of the festivity. The ritual of '*Môsēra*' serves as the host's formal expression of 'gratitude' to the visitors for their cooperation and a prayer for forgiveness if any lapses or irregularities were committed unwittingly during the occasion. This is the occasion when the 'heads of village youths', known by their traditional titles of '*klēngsārpò*', chant the '*Môsēra*', in the manner of a long 'question and answer' session, recounting the memories of the tribe's migration and the ordeal it suffered. The long verses of '*Mosēra*' are ceremonially chanted, in breathless fashion, during the '*risō chōjun*' as well, at the completion of the co-operative of unmarried youths, known as *Jīr Kedām*.'Return to village' or '*ārông kachevōi*' is a Karbi euphemism for death. When a person dies, he is believed to have

returned to his ancestors' village as ".....journeys of the soul often retraces the routes of migration from an imagined homeland...."

Likewise the Karbis also have many hypotheses regarding the origin of the words "Karbi" and "mikir". Hypotheses (as well as myths and folk-beliefs) are also abound of the migration which may have landed the Karbis in their present geographical location. More generally, the region of "Northeast" is itself considered a major corridor of human migrations and a major linguistic contact zone that was predicted to have witnessed an extensive population interaction. Recent studies speak of—'A series of migration brought the Mongoloids to Northeast India from the North, Northeast and Southeast. In ancient literature like the Vedas, the Mahabharata, the Ramayana and the Puranas, one comes across the term Kirata, which means the Indo-Mongoloids, who are easily distinguishable by their physical features from the Nishada, another pre-Vedic population group of India. The term Kirata is for the first time found in the Yajurveda. Reference has been made to a Kirata girl in the Atharvaveda also.

In a similar vein, the Zos are the indigineous tribes of Manipur, Mizoram and Bangladesh. The Chin, Kuki, Mizo and Zoumi share close affinity with each other and are collectively known as Zo. Historically, they have different theories or origin and migration based on their folklores, folktales and songs narrated down from one generation to another. Among the different origin theories are: the Khul/Chhinlung or Cave origin theory, Chin Hills origin theory and the more recently postulated lost tribe (Manmasi Theory)/ one of the ten lost tribes of Israel, specifically from the tribe of Manasseh.

Migration and Colonialism

The very naïve question –Where did one come from? carries certain connotations of it's own. It implicitly implies that the individual/group/community/ tribe that is being talked about had lived somewhere before they had migrated there. Now the question seems quite ridiculous when considered in the case of a particular tribe/community? Supposedly one asks where did the

Assamese come from is invalid as what/who//how one constitute "Assamese" is a process of transformations, assimilations and appropriations to constitute the "we" of the Assamese.

Until 1826, the kingdom of Assam was independent. On colonial occupation the region was transformed into a frontier and a policy for taming the hostile tribes was immediately generated. In 1873, the northeast was demarcated into two zones by the Bengal East Frontier Regulation I: the inner line area of hills with their local administration, and the plains area of the Assam Valley under colonial administration. Ironically, while the topographical and administrative division between hills and plains was established within colonial discourse the negative stereotypical perception toward the people remained unchanged. Colonial officers were obviously interested in the origins of the people they administered, and they looked for migration. The catalogue of books written by colonial administrators, missionaries and ethnographers working in the Northeast region wrote and published a series of ethnographies, each dealing with a single tribe. Quite interestingly, the books follows a general format with a first chapter usually discussing the migrations that brought the tribe to it's present location.

Some of the excerpts are:

"The history of how the Naga tribes came precisely to occupy their present position has, of course, passed into dim obscurity of vague traditions. But, enough of them remain to give some indication of the course which the migrations took." (1921: 6)- J.H. Hutton *The Angami Nagas* (1921)

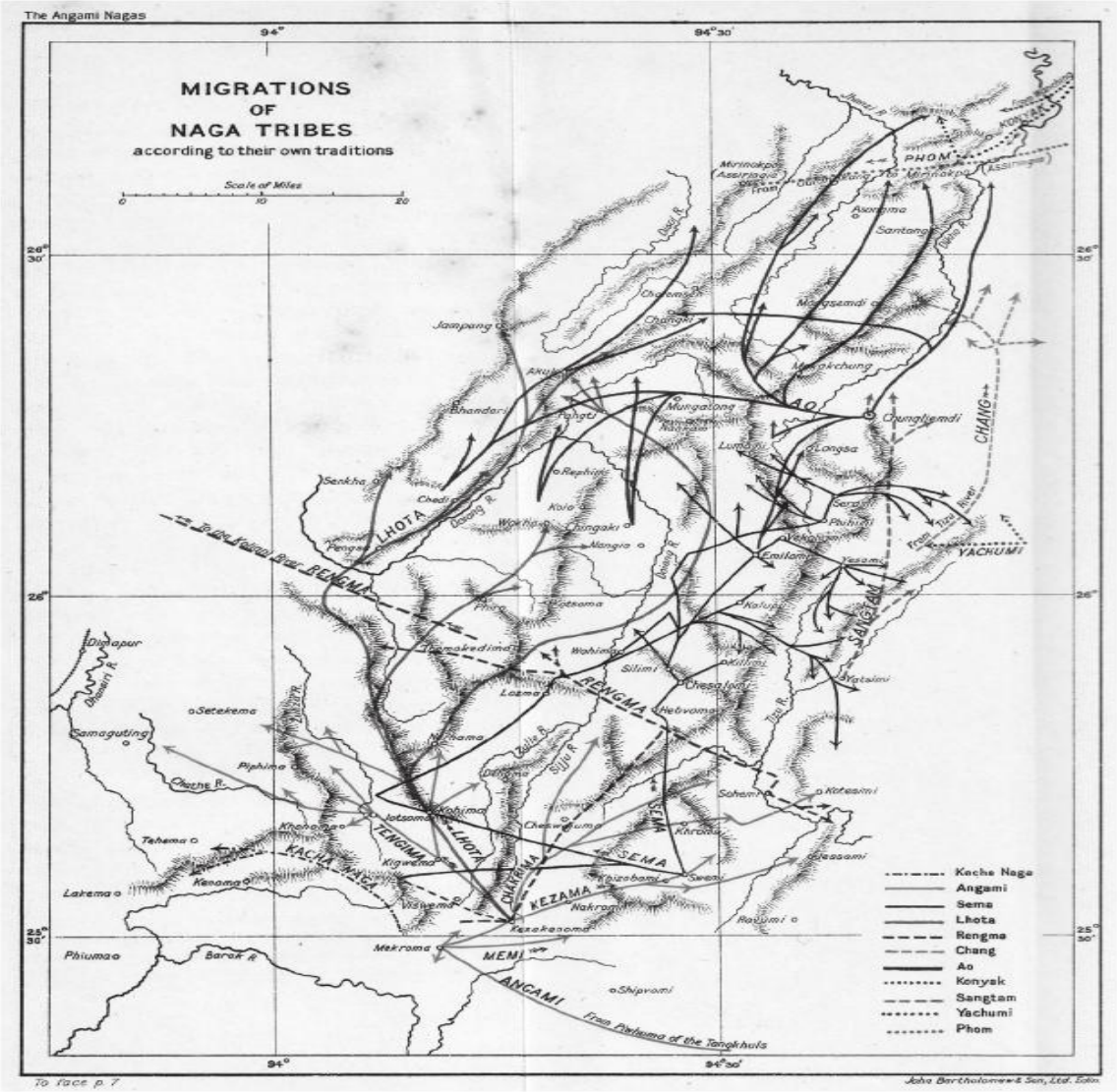

Fig: J.H. Hutton's Migrations of Naga Tribes map. The routes of eleven Naga tribes from the Pom and Konyak in the north to the Tangkhul and Kacha Nagas in the south as they might have migrated into and round about the hills. (Source: *The Angami Nagas* 1921:opp. p.7).

The knowledge of the Angami Nagas in wet rice agriculture might have been acquired during a sojourn in the lowlands of (Imphal) Manipur as they migrated north. However, he also says that "where the Angamis came from before they reached Manipur is a much more difficult problem and one quite beyond the scope of this book." (1921: 8)

Even J. P. Mills in his book *The Ao Nagas* (1926) begins with the same assumptions regarding the migration of tribes for granted. He states: I have been at pains to collect all the traditional information possible as to the people whom the Aos found in possession of their present country when they invaded it. These stories give us some of our very rare glimpses of the early history of the hills, and may help to throw welcome light on the complicated question oof the origin and composition of the Naga tribes as we know of them today." (Mills 1926: 8) His account also lays out a very paradoxical and naïve summary when he states that

Naga invaders do not as a rule obliterate their foes. More usually, after reducing the village which is their objective to a suitable frame of mind by repeated raids, they come and live in it as overlords, take wives from it, and gradually absorb into their own community. (Mills 1926:8-9)

In his other book *Lhota Nagas* he observed that the northeast route (to enter Assam through Hukawang valley in Burma over the Patkai passes with Lidu-Margherita road in Assam) was followed by the tribes like Aka, Mishmi,Garo, Mikir, Boro and Kachari while the southern route was taken by the Naga tribes and the Lushai Kukis.

In his book *The Garos* (1909), another writer A. Playfair talks in similar vein regarding the migration stories of the Garos from Tibet. He skeptically states: "It is difficult to place any reliance on a legend which been handed down by word of mouth from generation to generation." (Playfair 1909: 14) But, though he disclaims the validity of these legends and myths, he finds other grounds for migration and states:

....the coincidence of a similar belief existing in Bhutan and on this side of the Himalayas, which is further supported by evidences of language, points to the possibility that in bygone ages the ancestors of the Garos and of the many tribes with which they are closely allied, did cross the Himalayas and settle in the plains at their foot. (Playfair 1909: 14)

Conclusion

The examples from Hutton, Mills and Mayfair though not too fallacious and has their points of credibility; is based on the assumptions of migration (which are mostly based on theories of language). This in turn lead us to question whether the tendency to assume that

people migrate in sufficiently large and coherent groups was an assumption that was lended out to the British ethnographers and administrators by the people that they described or was it the other way around? Did these men, get their enthusiasm from the people and their originatory myths and legends? Or did the people whom they were describing have their interest aroused by the outsiders? Who persuaded whom to believe in the migration stories of the tribes?

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