

History of the Relations between the Nagas and the Valley Kingdoms

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The central thrust of this paper is to reconstruct the social sequence of the relations between the Nagas and the Valley Kingdoms of Northeast India during the pre-British period. This particular stage in history has been generally classified as the medieval period, with reference to the social forms that were developing in the Valleys roughly between the 12th and 18th centuries A.D. This attempt at reconstruction basically raises questions about the viability of using narratives from oral tradition, which constitutes a crucial element of collective memory among the Nagas. Some of these traditional sources have now been rendered into written form by the village or tribal authorities. These works are mainly concerned with the social processes of the Nagas with particular reference to the politico-economic conditions prevailing before the British period.

The reconstruction of history through oral sources has now become necessary since written records are basically limited to the documentation of issues and events connected with the interests of the ruling groups in the Valleys or the official line of the colonial times. Moreover, whatever written sources are available to us tend to be rather legalistic or bureaucratic in nature, so much so that the greater part of social history has gone unrecorded even for the populace of the valley kingdoms. In

the process, 'preliterate' people were either pathetically underrepresented or simply denied a history of their own. But again, while one could maintain that the vital contributions of oral sources can hardly be denied in historical reconstruction, one cannot always sustain the idea that the historian, by empathizing with the 'voices of the past', can reconstruct their histories with unerring accuracy. In other words, oral tradition as a source for history has its limitations. It must be kept in mind that oral tradition does not convey the original words and images from which the historian may be able to recreate the mental world of the past. This is so because oral narratives are essentially malleable and might have got distorted over a long period of time. We also know the dangers of accepting, at face value, any oral tradition that might as well be the 'negotiated past', part of an idealized self-image of a present-day community. One such instance is the present day penchant for inventing a 'golden age' in the past of any given society. Such oral traditions now function as 'charters' to lend credence to different versions of the people's past. These charters have played a significant part in legitimizing the basis of political rivalry among various factions (as illustrated especially in contemporary Africa). This eulogy of the past or the manipulative nature of historiography is rather problematic for serious research pursuits. Which is why, oral tradition is still considered by some historians to be an unreliable source for the study of history.

Nonetheless, recent works on oral tradition have been rather encouraging, being immensely influenced by the contributions of Jan Vansina on African oral tradition.¹ Social scientists have now come to realise that there is a need to go beyond the straight-jacketing confines of archival records in historical reconstruction. The present-day analysis of oral history and oral tradition is one way of rectifying this deficiency. Over the years the use of oral sources has been enlarging the scope of oral history in the Western societies; an identical exercise in historical reconstruction has been going on in the tribal communities through oral tradition in certain other parts of the world. Although oral tradition and oral history have several common problems of technique and interpretation, their characteristic subject matters are still quite different. Nonetheless, oral history and oral tradition are now being taken up simultaneously in a meaningful way.² Both oral history and oral traditions are being recognised as the representation of those

who were denied their rightful place by the archival sources of historical research. This reconstruction of history through oral sources then refers to works based on oral traditions as well as data collected from personal reminiscence — also known as the ‘oral history’ (or the ‘biographical approach’ in modern sociological literature). But one has to admit that both the oral sources are, after all, verbal materials, and they share many of the strengths and weaknesses of the written sources, endowed as they are with the same manipulative elements like cultural biases or political interests of the communities or individuals in question. For instance, one can expect genealogies to be remembered accurately and in depth, if politico-jural status and land rights are tied closely to the kinship structure. It is apparent that oral tradition is directly linked with the retention of the socio-economic rights of clans or lineages. In that sense oral tradition is also essentially about the contemporary distribution of land or other jural rights. If such is the case then this recall normally goes a few dozen generations back among the tribal groups. But this recall is utilitarian. That is, it is only those lineages which continue their social reproduction upto the present day that are given preference in this ‘remembering’ process. In this process the common genealogy of a group is constantly modified to accommodate the entry of new members. Thus shared genealogy by a kin group is likely to be continually re-edited to accommodate the changing demographic realities. Through oral tradition, each generation is recalled with rich details of the major events during its time.

Although one cannot screen out the manipulative aspects of oral tradition, external checks over exaggerations have always been available in the oral traditions of neighbouring villages or other clans. There is also the mechanism for crosschecking statements made by Naga elders, especially in the present day *Dobashi* Court of the Deputy Commissioner’s office. Large numbers of cases are adjudicated by the customary procedure in this court. Some of the cases have been taken up by the High Court that accepts the rendering of oral tradition in all its forms, i.e. ballads, myths of origin, etc., in the court proceedings. In the same manner, these techniques are now accepted as valid methodological and theoretical means of exploring history. This ushers in a new source of social history for analysis in tandem with archival sources or archeological remains. In that sense these sources are not part of a

new sub-specialization of History, but rather a supplementary and a refreshing new technique of research. The basic technique we can apply in this kind of work ought to be a blending of diverse sources such as the British records, the ethnographical monographs, the chronicles of the Valley Kingdoms, written form of oral narratives, and fieldwork data.³

It is to be noted here that the tribal histories of Northeast India are intrinsically interwoven, embracing a welter of different linguistic, cultural and even different layers of evolution/development of their polities at any given point of time. Moreover, the histories of many of these tribes are, for most of their existence, devoid of absolute dates, and they must depend on interrelations with their immediate neighbours, i.e. the Valley kingdoms. Thus, their chronologies are, or ought to be, built upon the nature of their contacts with the Valley 'early' state formations. This would ensure crosschecking of their oral narratives and possibly fill in what is generally known as the 'ghost centuries'. But for now, I must admit my inability to either translate or decipher the *Buranji* or the *Cheitharol Kumbaba*, *Ningthouel Lambuba*, etc., and my reliance on the translated (or second hand) data reproduced by scholars. It is apparent from these sources that the Nagas remained largely unencapsulated even though some of them were subjected to the influence of Brahmanically engendered early state formations. Their state of existence was partly due to their insular geo-political environment, as much as retention of their traditional, politico-jural forms. This observation holds good for most of the tribal communities in both the Southeast and South Asian highlands. It is true that most tribal peoples in the region of Southeast Asia lived in a type of society that F.K. Lehman⁴ has termed 'sub nuclear'. Such a collectivity was organized in part around principles embedded in the particular tribal culture, and in part around patterns of adaptation to neighbouring lowland polities. The rulers of the Valley kingdoms, for their part, regarded the tribal peoples living in the peripheries of their realms as being in a different category from their lowland peasant subjects. This analysis can also be applied to the highland peoples of northeastern India. Edmund Leach indicates the peculiar social and natural environment that prevailed in the region:⁵

The normal shifting cultivation techniques practised by the hill peoples can only be expected to yield a surplus under

exceptional conditions of low population density and specially favorable terrain. Whenever this technique proves inadequate, the hill peoples are forced into expedients of various kinds. Some groups, such as the central Chins, have developed quite elaborate schemes of crop rotation; others, notably the Angami Nagas and certain Kachin groups, have gone in for the construction of irrigated rice terraces cut out of the mountainside; others again have found a solution to their difficulties by achieving some form of political and economic alliance with their more prosperous neighbours of the plains. This latter kind of symbiosis has assumed a variety of forms at different times in different places.

Leach's perceptive observations deserve to be taken up further in the context of the topic set out in this paper. This exercise can be best achieved as follows:

The Nagas and the Ahoms

Different communities took residence among the mountains of the north and west of Burma and the Northeast highlands of what now constitutes India. Starting from the tenth through the eighteenth centuries A.D., constant friction occurred between numerous ethnic groups, tribes and the people of the Valley kingdoms. A series of wars took place, with the Chutiyas, Ahoms, Kacharis, Tripuris, Meiteis, Mons, Burmans and Shans struggling for the upper hand in the low lying areas.⁶ The highlanders were embroiled in these conflicts one way or the other. In the early part of the Christian era, the northern Nagas, i.e., Nocte, Wancho, Konyak, Phom, Ao and Lotha were living alongside the Kacharis.⁷ There are indications that the various groups of highlanders also exchanged their surplus produce for their cultural necessities from Tibet and Burma. The Membas, Mishmis and Khamtis had direct access to Tibet and this contact was linked up with the Angami traders for internal circulation among the Nagas. The Kachins of Burma had a virtual monopoly in the east, until the Singphos took it over from the 12th century onwards, and maintained trade links with the northern Nagas. The entry of the Shans into northern Assam brought about a change in the Naga traditional links with the Tibetan trade, which were maintained through the inhabitants of present Arunachal Pradesh. The change became marked when

the Ahoms under Sukrunga or Rudra Singha (1696–1717) monopolized the Tibetan trade for transaction of goods.

It is said that Sukapha (Sukafa), an adventurer, left Maulung in A.D. 1215 and entered Naga territory enroute to the Assam valley. As Sukapha moved into the Patkai mountains, the Nagas resisted his advance, but Sukapha is said to have overcome them. The whole tract between the Daikham and the Patkai was declared a province called Khamjang. It took Sukapha thirteen years to bring the region extending from the Hukong valley to the Patkoi range to 'fair order' before he could effect a toe-hold in the Brahmaputra valley, and keep the trade routes open. But still then hostilities continued till the late 16th century. Later, a fragile form of peace was maintained with the Nagas during the reigns of Sutyinpha or Nariya raja (1644–1648) and Sutamla or Jayadhvaj Singha (1648–1663). Verrier Elwin⁸ has made some references to the thriving trade between them. The items of exchange were ivory, gongs, spears and *dao* from the Nagas; and beads, silver dangles and cotton from the Ahoms. Clearly, their relationship was becoming symbiotic and it lasted till the latter period of the 18th century.

Politically, the Nagas mentioned in the chronicles of the Ahoms (1228–1819) were with reference to only the northern segments, viz., the Nocte, Wancho, Konyak, Lotha and the Ao. Alexander Mackenzie⁹ had made some observations on the nature of the Ahom-Naga relations then:

The Assamese government had at times indeed claimed them as its subjects, and Purunder Singh is known to have asserted successfully his rights to share with the Nagas the produce of the salt manufacture of the lower hills. The hill chiefs, when the native government was strong, came down annually bringing gifts, and that may perhaps have been considered to be tribute. It has been in fact conjectured that the inhabitants of this tract are descended from settlements of hill mercenaries of various tribes planted here by the ancient Ahom kings, and the variety of the tribal dialects is adduced to support this theory. However that may be, it is certain that several of the chiefs had received grants of *khats* or lands, and of *bheels* or fishing waters on the plains and enjoyed assignments of *paiks* like the ordinary Assamese nobility.

E.A. Gait¹⁰ had maintained that the Ahoms never subjugated the Nagas. He pointed out that it was the strategic location of the

habitat of the Nagas and economic interest of the Ahoms that brought them under a mutual orbit of Ahom-led confederacy against 'external' threats such as the Mughal-Muslim invasion. Such relations were obviously translated into mutual defence pacts and trading. Although their relationship was not always peaceful, their politico-economic links seem to have stretched over a period of nearly 450 years. A significant aspect of their relations was the political kinship that was articulated between the Ahom and the Konyak ruling houses. One such well-known intermarriage has an interesting story behind it, which involved palace intrigues and the forming of political alliances. A Konyak oral tradition narrates that the Ahom *raja* Gadadhar Singha (1681–1696) took one Watlong of Wanching as one of his principal wives. The *raja* extended his hand of friendship to the wife-giver group through land grants. This Watlong of the 'royal' household of the *Angh*, was born of one Longmoi of Tanhai village, which was then a tributary of the Chui *Angh*dom. She lost her father at an early age; her mother Nonzeng sought a home in her uncle's village of Wanching. Her uncle, the *Angh* of Wanching (a satellite of Chui *Angh*dom) took them into his household in the year 1660. Meanwhile, in the Ahom capital, the autocratic Sulikpha (or Lora *raja*) on the advice of Laluki Borpukhan ordered the mutilation of all members of the Ahom ruling family in order to disqualify them from contesting for the Ahom throne in the year 1679. Consequently, Godapani, the heir-apparent, fled to the hills and through his sympathisers in Ponkong village took up residence in Wakching. One Taiwang of Wakching was the *Angh* then. During a friendly feast between Wanching and Wakching, the beauty of Watlong took in Godapani. After he ascended the throne and assumed the title of Gadadhar Singha in 1681, he took Watlong as his second wife a year later. As a gesture of a binding relationship between them, the Ahom *raja* granted Mezenga Borthar, Lingiri and Pukhiri Chunpura lands to the *Anghs* of Wanching and Wakching (Until very recent times the *Angh* of Wanching used to collect annual revenue of Rs. 140 from his share of land grants).

The *Angh*doms were basically chiefdoms that developed in tandem with the evolving Valley kingdoms. One can ascertain the timeline of this development. According to an oral tradition at Chui it was during the rule of Ami (the fourth *Angh* of Chui) that the British entered Tamlu in the early 19th Century. Tamlu at that time

was a subsidiary of Wanching, which, in turn, was a satellite village of the Chui *Anghdom*. Certainly pressures were being mounted on them by the Ahoms. This acted as a stimulus for the Konyak rulers to develop a higher polity. There was however no process of encapsulation. Perhaps at that point of time the Ahoms simply lacked the wherewithal of a strong state to subjugate the highlanders. At a later period a loose form of ritual encapsulation of Nagas who were settled further north took place. But in any case it did not develop into the political incorporation of those within the Ahom kingdom. As a case in point, the Nocte Nagas came under the influence of the Vaishnavite Goswami of *Baragarh xatra* near Nazira. It also appears that the *xatra* exercised a considerable amount of influence in secular matters like the involvement of the Goswami in settling a dispute between Namsang and Borduria on the share of tribute from six villages. Subsequently there was a manipulation of their origin myths to legitimize a developing polity. It was for this particular purpose that the Nocte, Wancho and Konyak segments accorded the ruling 'class' the prerogative in all their myths of origin or narratives of their migration. The Noctes, though considering themselves the offsprings of the union between the sky god's daughter and the spirit of the earth, would rather give precedence to their *Lowang* in reckoning their origin. The *Lowang* of Namsang recounts a tradition about the migration of the Noctes from Burma led by one *Wanghang*. They are said to have ridden horses and brought over water buffaloes on their trek. The present *Lowangs* of Namsang, Borduria and Laptang claim descent from Khumbao, the first Nocte chief. According to the tradition, he sired two sons, namely, Khunlung and Khunlai. This story linked them with the Ahoms. However, the Ahoms had their genealogies attached to the Hindu pantheon, i.e. to Khenkham (the son of Indra), who was the progenitor of Khunlung and Khunlai. In the course of the Ahom state formation under Brahmanical influence, the Nocte *Lowangs* were not encapsulated within this legitimization process, even though they became Vaishnavites, at least nominally, at a later stage.

In order to reinforce the emerging territorial claims, permanent territorial markers were placed on the ground in the form of the *Ladoigah* line, the *Dhodur-ali* and the *Naga-bund*. These were embankments raised on the ground to mark the boundary between the Nagas and Ahoms. It is apparent that these boundary marks

'institutionalized' the territorial rights of the Ahoms and the Nagas.¹¹ The demarcation of territorial boundaries was also crucial to the process of identity formation in this region of ever-shifting alliances and entities. An oral tradition testifies to this point. An oral narrative speaks of a protracted war between the Ao Nagas and a group of erstwhile Daflas, locally known as Nokranger, who, settled the lower ranges of Ao territory. The oral tradition narrates that the Ao conflict with Nokranger began seven generations before the Ahoms entered the Brahmaputra valley. It appears that Nokranger polity was incompatible with the social temperament of the dominant settlers — the Aos. The latter, organised as they were under a council of elders found the 'autocratic' Nokrang polity (which operated under a chief) a thorn in their side, and so the Nokrang polity was eventually destroyed by the confederacy of Longkhüm and Waromong. J.P. Mills¹² referred to a group of erstwhile Daflas (the Nishi of present Arunachal Pradesh) visiting in 1907 their ancestral place of residence (Nokrang) that was razed to the ground by the village of Longkhüm and her allies. Longkhüm continued to raid the Nokranger settlements in the Brahmaputra valley, and this brought them into conflict with the Ahom kingdom. It was the institutionalisation of the boundary markers that finally brought their belligerence to an end. An oral tradition now rendered into written form by the Longkhüm *Pudo Menden* (Village Council)¹³ gives us some more details:

During the third *pudo* (*pudo* = a thirty year cyclic government of age groups) after founding our village, we declared war on the Nokrang heretics. It was in the year A.D. 860. We lost many good men to Nokrang warriors but we too took numerous heads of the enemy over the years. It was during the Mepungsanger *pudo* (Chongli) and Kojahjanger *pudo* (Mongsen) that our warrior of many hornbill feathers, Pentochechep of Pongen clan and his twenty-eight men were speared to death in the stone cavern of Tsürong river near Nokrang. Eventually, with the help of our ally Waromong, we descended upon Nokrang and razed it to the ground.

But the past rancour has been such that Longkhüm warriors continued to cut up Nokrang elements even in the Punitzübak (Brahmaputra valley) long after Nokrang was destroyed. By then the Ahoms had entered Punitzüpak. We

were known as Hatigoria then, and routinely met with the Ahom king for political niceties. But it was this Nokrang factor that strained our relationship with the Ahom kings. Many a battle we fought with the Ahoms; one such was called the *Rangkhüm Kosari*. Over the generations, many Ahom kings ascended their throne but the belligerence continued.

In 1681 Hatigoria Aoluin Jamir leading a contingent of warriors left for Namsang area of the Konyaks. The combined Naga warriors then descended on the plains and drove away the incumbent *Raja* and placed Gadadhar Simha (Gadadhar Singha) on the throne. On this occasion, Aoluin Jamir jabbed the palace ground with his decorated spear in the traditional way and declared friendship with the Ahoms. King Gadadhar Simha in return, presented the lands on the foothills immediately to the east and south east of Rangpur (Sivasagar). The settlements in this valley came to be known as *Rangkhüm* (Longkhüm) *Bongala Gaong* henceforth. But within the valley we still used to seek out and eliminate the Nokrang remnants. Many a time we sought the help of the Molunger in doing so. Sometime in the year 1687, Longkhüm warriors met the Ahom king to seek the release of a Molunger who was taken into custody by the *Raja's* men. On this occasion, King Gadadhar Simha and Longkhüm warriors entered into an agreement for maintaining lasting peace:

[Literal translation from Ao Naga dialect]:

- a. *Chubai Nokranger ajak Punitzü atena yokatoksü.*
The king will deport the Nokrang people across the Brahmaputra to the north bank.
- b. *Doudar-ali (Dhodur-ali) ajanga Naga nunger nokne pener maidtsü*
No Naga will cross the *Dhodur-ali* with *dao* and spear.
- c. *Doudar-ali ajanger Naga nunger shipai timtem aketsutir, Tzümar demi merenshitsü.*
Any Naga creating trouble within the Ahom side of *Dhodur-ali* will be prosecuted by the Ahoms.
- d. *Tzümar shipei Doudar-ali atener rara menatir, Naga nungeri merenshitsü.*
Any troublemaking plainsman (*Tzümar* = living on top of water) within the Naga side of *Dhodur-ali* will be checked by the Nagas.

Chuba-i artsü tamaitsü long asem azüng. Iba ya onok kidanger den artsü. Iba ajanga Nokrang den anem tembanga ayu.

The King (Gadadhar Simha) then effected a permanent boundary by erecting three monoliths.* We still consider this line to be our traditional boundary with our neighbour. This brought to an end our long drawn conflict with Nokrang.

*[These monoliths were erected in the present Mariani area].

To digress from the main point of the discussion, this oral tradition brings us to a very crucial element in the reconstruction of history. It is concerned with the Naga way of reckoning the generational depth of their genealogy and history. The Ao *Pudo Menden* ('generation council-seat') best exemplifies it. They have a standardized cycle of five generations (or *pudo*). Here, *pudo* is generation in the political context. It is different from *aso/neso* or biological generation in the sense that *aso* or *neso* is reckoned from the transfer of parental authority to the eldest son. It is generally effected on the demise of the head of a family. On the other hand, every individual inducted into an *Ariju/Züki* (*Morung* for boys and girls respectively) got slotted into one of the five political generations, namely, Mechensanger (Chongli moiety)/Mechenjanger (Mongsen moiety); Mepungsanger (C)/Mevungjanger (M); Kosasanger (C)/Kojahjanger (M); Rionsanger (C)/Riongjanger (M) and Medemsanger (C)/Medemjanger (M). This system is directly linked with the *Ariju/Züki* induction. That is, if the cycle had begun with the Medemsanger in the distant past it was coordinated with a simultaneous induction of a *zünga* or age group in the *Ariju/Züki*. This concurrent recruitment of young people attaining the age of ten every spring continued till one of the male inductees got a male child. Then a process known as *mendang* ('blockade') occurred and the Medemsanger generation was considered to be complete. A new *pudo* would then be ready to start, i.e. the Mechensanger *pudo*. In this way successive *zünga* groups filled up the remaining *pudos* in an endless cycle. Here the demographic attribute played a crucial role, as one generation may have four *züngas* or even six *züngas* depending on how early the members got married and procreated. Nonetheless, on no account the fixed cyclic generation government was hindered, i.e. even if a generation had six age groups, when their turn came for power, the first and second age-groups might have died out and the rest would take up the *Tatar* or councillor position of a particular ruling

generation. When an old generation demitted office after every thirty years, a ceremony known as *atsingtepba* ('pushing out') marked this occasion. In this ritual every member of the incoming *pudo* contributed a pig or else he would forfeit his rights to have any say in the decisive matters taken up by his *pudo*. The ruling generation would then throw up elders to fill up official posts in the *Tatar Menden* (C)/*Samen* (M). The positions were assigned on the basis of the seniority of clans (This system is still in vogue among the Ao Nagas).

In reckoning the era of the events in their narratives, it is important to ascertain the difference between *aso* and *pudo*. Normally they use the *aso* to give a rough approximation of age with reference to the clan or family genealogy. But in recounting specific political events they would reckon from the thirty-year cyclic generation, which was fairly accurate in the sense that they could recollect how many times a particular political generation came back into the cycle since their settlement got established. It is apparent that in their reckoning, *aso* is decidedly longer than *pudo* in terms of time span.¹⁴ Another technique is to ascertain the number of times a particular *Jhuming* area was cultivated. Taking up the *Jhum* blocks was based on a cyclic pattern. In their concept of man and land relations each mount, stream, valley or forest was labeled with an appropriate social meaning. In that sense there were no blank social or geographical spaces in their land. It made for a ready reckoning of a particular event or genealogy by naming a specific territory.

To come back to the main discussion, a significant aspect of the Naga-Ahom relationship was the institutionalization of the *Dwar-s/Duar* (literally, 'gate'). Each *Dwar* comprised clusters of villages and was directly linked by roads to the Ahom capital. There were fourteen such *Dwars* covering the Nocte, Wancho, Konyak, Phom, Ao and Lotha segments. They were known in several groups according to the names of several *Dwars* through which they came down to the plains. Thus the Aos and the Lothas were known as two small groups, each according to the physical features of the areas from which they descended on the gates of trade in the plains, while the Konyaks, Wanchos and Noctes were known by the dominions of their respective *Lowangs/Anghs*. The Nagas derived considerable profit from their economic relations with the Ahoms. They received *Khats* (grants of lands) and *bheels* (fishing waters on

the plains) from the Ahom rulers and enjoyed assignments of various rights like the ordinary Assamese nobility. These politico-economic relations were maintained through the *Kotokis* residing in the plains near their paths. The *Kotokis* were the spokespersons well conversant in Assamese language. The *Kotokis* superintended the land held by the Nagas and made what they could out of it in return. The Nagas in their trading expeditions used to deposit their weapons at the houses of the *Kotokis* and reclaimed them while returning to the hills.

In the published work of an oral tradition by Nokpu *Pudo Menden* one gets a glimpse of the nature of the Ahom-Naga relations. It mentions that in each of the *Khats* the Ahoms settled three distinct occupational groups, viz., the peasants, traders and blacksmiths. They catered to the needs of the Nagas in transit either on trading expeditions or on militia movements in aid of the Ahoms during 'external' threats. This oral tradition is mainly to do with the establishment of the *Assiringia Dwar*. This *Dwar* of Nokpu was named in honour of the marriage of *tongdi* ('headman') Assiring's daughter with *raja* Gadadhar Singha. Nokpu was also granted the right to collect land revenue from *Naganijan khat*, and this revenue continued to be paid by the Assam government till 1974 through the Deputy Commissioner of Mokokchung as the British had done even after the Ahom power declined. The oral tradition about *Assiringia Dwar* (*Saring Rongpang* in Ao) in written form by Nokpu *Pudo Menden* is translated here:¹⁵

After shifting from our ancient settlement at Atu hills, our permanent home Nokpu was established. It was during our third *neso* at this village that *Saring Dwar* (*Assiringia Dwar*) was opened. This *Dwar* was to facilitate our interaction with the plainsmen like the other two *Duars* in our part of the country. It was through the efforts of Imchen clan elders, namely, *Asomsangba* (*Asom* = Ahom, *Sangba* = flattered by) and his brother that this *Dwar* got instituted. One day, while the two brothers were steaming a bamboo vessel full of fish on the bank of a stream, a group of the Ahom *raja's* hunters searching for wild elephants chanced upon them. The hunters had failed to catch elephants that day and were in great despair. The plainsmen befriended the two brothers and took them to the Ahom *raja*. But then, their intention was to lay

blame on the two brothers. They reported to the *raja* that their guests had driven away the elephants. Hence they returned empty handed. Fortunately, their story did not convince the *raja*. Instead he talked about maintaining good relations with us. Subsequently, we entered into a pact to open up a route for reasons of mutual benefit. On the appointed day we, the Nokpurs, began to clear the jungle and make a road leading towards the plains. Likewise, the *raja's* men began to construct a road heading up to the hills. We finally met on the banks of Ponu stream and feasted together. Thus, the opening of this *Duar* allowed free interaction between the Ahoms and Nokpur. One day, a group of the Ahom *raja's* men took notice of a beautiful damsel, namely, Sentishila and reported back to the palace. She was the daughter of Saring alias Assiring of the Walling clan. The *raja* sought the hand of Sentishila from her father. But being a widower, his intense attachment to his daughter dissuaded him from parting with her. The Ahom *raja*, Gadadhar Singha (1681–1696) took great pains to take our girl by stealth. One day, his nobles sent in a trained Osen bird (mynah) to Assiring's house. During this time Sentishila was basking newly harvested paddy on the bamboo platform behind her house. The trained bird could lure her out beyond the fortified gate of Nokpuyimchen. In no time, the nobles seized and rushed Sentishila down to the plains and reached the *raja's* palace through a feat of human relay.

Much later in the day, a tired Assiring came home with a load of firewood. His neighbours told him that Sentishila was seen running off chasing a talking Osen bird beyond the gate and yonder. Assiring knew it was the handiwork of the Ahom *raja*. Infuriated, he gave chase and cut up a number of Ahom soldiers that he met on the way. He did not know that the *raja* had ordered his soldiers that no harm should come to him. A Boarhi (Barahi) medicine woman who was dispatched by the *raja* to assuage Assiring's misgivings reasoned with him. She informed Assiring that Sentishila was already the wife of the Ahom *raja*. She beseeched him to accept that fact and go back to Nokpu and return to meet her in four days' time. On the appointed day Assiring descended to the plains and was taken by this medicine woman to the Ahom *raja*. There they entered into a peace pact. The *Duar*, which was opened prior to this

episode, was now named Assiring *Dwar* or Saring *Rongpang* (in Ao).

The institutionalization of *dwars* further enhanced the economic transactions in the region. As a medium of exchange, the cowrie shell was a convenient form of payment in inter-polity trade, as barter exchanges operated among the Nagas. Other media of exchange were the *Lah* or large disks/gongs cast of brass or alloy of brass, and the *Jabili* or thinner iron plates. Both were currencies in the northern block of Nagas; and in the south conch and cowrie shells were standard exchange media. Salt was an important ingredient for household consumption as well as for trading as currency. Notably, salt became a politico-economic item in the Ahom-Naga relations, as it was a scarce commodity in the plains of Assam. The Ahoms since Sukapha had considered the Naga areas important for strategic and economic reasons. The brine springs of Namsang and Borduria were indispensable in this respect, as known from the explorations of Wilcox and Mc Cosh who revealed that "on the Disung (Disang), there are about twenty of these brine springs from which Nagas are in the habit of making salt".¹⁶ Pemberton observed that the salt imported from Bengal was inferior in quality to that acquired from the brine springs of Borhat and Sadhiya.¹⁷ Kashinath Tamuli Phukan refers to the important salt wells at Mohong, which were occupied during Suhungmung's reign (1497-1539).¹⁸ The Ahoms derived a large amount of revenue from the salt of the hills. Thus they had to maintain friendly relations with the Nagas in the interest of regular salt production. Otherwise, internal feuds had adverse economic repercussions on the plains. The last contest for supremacy was during the reign of Purandar Singha (1833-1838). Subsequently the Burmans invaded the Ahom territory and disrupted the existing salt trade.

It appears that the Ahom rulers routinely recruited efficient tribesmen to important administrative posts. One such instance was the "appointment of a second Barphukan who was the son of a Naga of Banfera clan."¹⁹ It is no surprise that Kancheng, the first Barpatra Gohain was said to have been brought up in a Naga family. Generally the Ahoms pursued certain diplomatic principles prescribed in the ancient Brahmanical texts for conducting foreign and frontier policy.²⁰ They adopted the conciliatory policy in the case of the Nagas.²¹ But such a policy eventually boomeranged on

the Ahoms in the sense that it had its own inbuilt paradox. S.L. Baruah observed that:²²

...working on these lines, the Ahoms could keep the turbulent hillmen in harness for a period of over six hundred years. Yet the policy proved disastrous, finally, because of the evils rooted in the *posa* system. This system was the worst form of slavery, under which a class of *paiks* called *bahatiyas* was made authorised victims of exploitation by the tribal people. The lives, properties and the crops of the *bahatiyas* were at the mercy of the hillmen, and despite this, they had to pay certain revenue to the Ahom government and had to proceed to the battlefield, when called upon to do so. These miserable *paiks* were to serve two masters- the tribal chiefs and the Ahom monarch at the same time, and were thus exploited by both. Always looking askance at both the masters, they were prone to be on the side of the stronger, the Ahoms usually. But as the Ahom subjects elsewhere raised their standard of rebellion and fought for freedom from bondage, they soon joined hands with them. At times, during the last years of Ahom rule, some hill chiefs found their allies among the *bahatiyas* and together they proceeded to help the rebels to overthrow the Ahom government.

The Nagas and the Dimasa-Kacharis

The early history of the Ahom-Naga relations was confined more or less to the account of interaction between the northern Nagas and the Ahoms. South of them, the Angami and Rengma segments arose noticeably at the close of Suklingpha's (Kamaleswar Singha's) reign (1795-1810). In this region, the Nagas established colonies in order to effect firm holds over the plains. One such colony can be identified with the *Nzongteri-phenyü* settlements. Subsequently, that sub-segment of Rengmas came under the Ahoms. According to the Rengma oral tradition, during the close of Ahom rule, their chief, Kehang, was conferred the title *Bar Phukan*, to fill up a vacuum created by the collapse of the Dimasa-Kachari kingdom.²³ This office eventually became hereditary. The last to hold the title was one Phüfka of Panchirep village.²⁴ Their oral tradition also recounts that Kehang (or Keihin), the *Bar Phukan*, was deputed by the Ahom monarch to receive a British Officer. The Naga in his

full regalia of a warrior appeared to be quite an apparition to the officer. Hence he enquired what the 'natives' call ghostly appearances in a dream; to which the *Bar Phukan's* reply was "Rema". Hence the official affixed the name Rengma or Rema ('ghost' in native dialect) to this group. It is reported that one of the first groups of Nagas that encountered Lt. Grange at Mohung Dejoa in 1839 was the *Nzongteri-phenyü* group.²⁵

A Naga segment that came under the dominant Khonoma confederacy was the Zemi (a sub-segment of the Zeliangrong), who established settlements right up to the Kopili river. They had a politico-economic interest in the North Cachar Hills and the adjoining areas which supplied to Bengal a number of products of 'the forest' and animals, viz., timber, elephant tusk, precious wood (including sandal), cane, rubber, cotton and silk. The central Cachar area was a fertile region for surplus extraction from agriculture and was symbiotically linked with North Cachar, Manipur, Naga Hills, Assam and Jaintia hills. The Kopili route connected it with Sylhet, and a considerable volume of trade passed through this route and was linked with Burma through the old Cachar road, which passes through the Zeliangrong territory. Elwin had indicated the politico-economic importance of this region.²⁶

The ruggedness of the Barail mountains in which the Zemis had settled down did not allow sustained agriculture over a long stretch of time; as a result they resorted to a form of cyclic migration over a compact territory. After establishing a number of villages they would come back to their ancestral village. The cycle would be repeated over and over again. It was quite a long process and their movements were reckoned in terms of generations. Their movements, however, should not be construed as proof of a non-sedentary life. They certainly had a clear demarcated territory. Their oral tradition claims that they occupied the area around the thirteenth century. Laisong and Haijak (of present North Cachar Hills) were their first settlements.²⁷ At the height of their rule the Dimasa-Kacharis had exercised suzerainty over the Zemis. Their village headmen were designated as *Kadepeo*. This title is said to have been conferred on them by the Kacharis. An elder of the founding clan of a particular village took up the position of *Kadepeo*. Apart from the lands owned by the clans, all the village lands were placed under his control. A number of exogamous clans were represented in all the Zemi villages. For instance, in Laisong there

were the Heneunme, Ndriami and Nkumi clans; the Pneume and Ndriami clans settled Haijak, while in Kapailo there were the Nkumi, Ndriami and Pneume clans.

After the Dimasa-Kachari chiefs abandoned their capital at Dimapur, the Ahoms mounted pressure to wrest the whole stretch of the Kopili-Doyang-Dhansiri valleys. These animosities and frontier clashes continued till they were all superseded by the Burmans (and later by the British in the 19th century). As this region became politically unstable during the late 1820s, the Angami confederacies began to expand and they took control over most of the territory. A point to note is that the British had limited the Ahom territory under Purandar Singha (1833–1838) to the northern bank of the Dhansiri river, which was considered to be the eastern limits of the Ahom power. The Naga oral narrative asserts that the British tacitly acknowledged the whole area from the present Golaghat to Asalu near the present Haflong as under the sphere of influence of the Angamis by not establishing any tea gardens in the area, although they had discovered wild tea plants in the present Ruziephema. This Angami-led influence used to fetch the confederacies an annual tax from the area. The settlements of Mohung Dejoa and Bokolia last paid one bullock and 50 lbs of salt to the Angamis in 1869.

The Nagas and the Meiteis

When the Meitei kingdom evolved under the Brahmanical influence and confronted the highland Nagas politically and culturally, the latter preferred to retain the central features of their socio-cultural order while making innovative adaptations to their polities. With the emergence of this Valley kingdom, a sharp distinction appears to have arisen between the highland Nagas and the valley dwellers. Apparently, the early state structure was now in a position to degrade the cognate highlanders within the 'Hindu' reckoning of purity and pollution henceforth. There was also a functional division of labour in the Valley. For instance, the Tarao Nagas settled in three villages were earlier assigned the task of tending betel leaves for the *raja*. It is interesting to note that the use of the Naga warrior dress, dao and spear must validate the coronation ceremony of the Manipur *raja*. The coronation hall of the *raja* used to be decorated with material elements of Naga

houses. Some scholars assumed that the politico-ritual act of exchanging presentations between the *raja* and the *Awunga* of Hundung village of the Tangkhuls could not have been mere political courtesies.²⁸ But then, such assumed kinship affinity could also have been later day fabrications.²⁹

One gets a fair idea of the economic institution of the hill people from the rudimentary data available in the monographs and British records. We are informed that blacksmithy was a preserve of a few assimilated clans in the northern Naga villages, e.g. the Molunger. There were enough iron ore deposits in the Lotha and Ao territories. But in the southern Naga settlements, there was no such restriction or taboo attached to this industry. Hodson³⁰ had reported that the *dao* and spear were manufactured in each village by the blacksmiths and that this blacksmithy was an 'institution' throughout the area. The southern Nagas purchased crude metals from the valley traders, who, in turn had obtained it from the Loi group. Weaving was a cottage industry carried on by almost every Naga woman. But among the Tangkhuls it was a specialisation confined only to the womenfolk of an exclusive cluster of villages.³¹ Hodson had identified these villages as Ukhrul, Tolloi, Ngainga, Somdal, Toinem and Phadang. They used to acquire raw cotton from Manipuri women traders in the Sena Kaithel market. These women, in turn, procured it from the Kukis inhabiting the western slopes of the valley.³² Among the Tangkhuls, three clans of Hundung and the village of Nungbi used to make earthen pots. Hodson also observed that the potteries at Shuganu and Chairael could supply the requirements of the hillmen over a large area.³³

Coming to the political conditions, it appears that before the introduction of firearms at the time of the Burmese war, the numerous hill tribes were entirely independent and constantly feuding amongst themselves and with the people of the Manipur valley. The inhabitants of the valley had to meet the hillmen with their own weapons — the spear, and the bow and arrow. A British officer, E.W. Dun, reported that amongst the hill tribes at this period:

The Tangkuls and Luhupa were the most troublesome, occasionally making raids into the valley itself, but like all hillmen, afraid to quit the shelter of the hills for any distance, and easily beaten back by the pony cavalry of the State.³⁴

It was further recorded that communication with the west at this time scarcely existed, and only large armed bodies of men could go with safety from the Manipur valley towards Cachar. The whole of the hill tribes was unfriendly to the Burmans during the latter's invasion of this region. This is borne out by the fact that, after the defeat of the Burmans in Cachar, the latter lost a number of men in the hills during their retreat.

The Manipuris and the British had a common interest in reducing the inhabitants of this part of the highlands into submission. The Manipur rulers established early contacts with the British government about the 1760s during the reign of Jai Sing (Cheengthangkomba, 1763–1798) to seek assistance against the Burmans; but nothing was effected. It was only in 1833 that a treaty was concluded by Gambhir Sing alias Chinglen Nongdren Khomba (1825–1834). During the time of Gambhir Sing two British officers, namely, Captain Jenkins and Pemberton, accompanied by some 1000 Manipuri *sepoys*, crossed the hills between the Manipur and Assam valleys; they met with tremendous opposition from the Angamis.³⁵ After the Burmese war, Gambhir Sing turned his attention to the subjugation of the highlanders. He made good use of the firearms now in his possession to reduce the Kabui Naga completely and to bring the Tangkhul and Angami Nagas into 'fair order.' The *raja* of Manipur invaded Kohima village and even claimed territory upto the Doyang river (a claim not accepted by the British authority), which took the boundary to the watershed of the Barail mountain and the Barak river — assumed to have been the *raja's* actual line of control. We must keep in mind that the historical records of Kangleipak were documented in the *Cheitharol Kumbaba* and *Ningthourel Lambuba* supposedly since early times. But nowhere in these historical records of Manipur is the direct subjugation of any Naga tribe by the Kangla — the royal palace of Manipur — found. However, it appears that from time to time some Nagas rendered services to the Kangla under the *Laliup* system.³⁶

Over the years, a number of Meitei designations appeared in the hills to facilitate political relations. R. Brown reports that among the Kabuis or Rongmei there were three hereditary officers, i.e. *Khullakpa*, *Lulakpa* and *Lampu*. The *Khullakpa* was the village chief; whereas the *Lulakpa* was in charge of the *Lallup* or *Laliup* labour service extracted by the Meithe *raja*.³⁷ Khasim Ruivah refers to an

administrative post, called *Luplaka* (or *Lulakpa?*), which was known to the Tangkhuls.³⁸

In those days, just below the headman (*Awunga*), there was a senior councilor, called *Luplaka*, or group leader — who represented the next oldest clan to that of the headman's clan. The *Luplaka* assisted the village headman in all the affairs of the village administration. He was the next to first man among the equals — the headman. As a group leader, he might initiate (sic) in all the administrative affairs. But in any case he could not override the rights and obligations of the other councilors.

The *Lampu* on the other hand was a mediator between the village and the Meitei king.³⁹ Thus, the politico-administrative structures of the Meiteis eventually made their way into the highland communities. Even though the Nagas had their own myths of origin to legitimize their kinship structure and clan prerogatives, there was an infusion of the Meitei structure by way of assumed kinship affinity.⁴⁰ It was, of course, putative in nature.

It will also be instructive to seek more illustrations from the Maring oral tradition to discern this process of fusion with the Meitei structure. Their narratives refer to an earlier 'underworld' existence, from which they eventually emerged through a hole after dispatching a ferocious tiger that guarded the mouth of their underworld. After verifying as to who had speared and killed the tiger in order to confer politico-ritual position on that particular clan (i.e., Charang clan), they set off to settle down in Maring land. They got segmented into various groups and eventually developed different versions of this myth of origin each according to its geographical spread and social needs. Among the Marings the *Khulpuwa* was a chiefly clan. By 'native' and Meitei reckoning the *Khulpuwa* clan was considered to be synonymous with the *Ningthouja* clan; so also the *Dangsawa* with the *Arongja* of the Meiteis. The *Khulpuwa* clan abstained from eating goat's meat. We observe here that the position of *Khullakpa* (a Meitei term for a village administrator) was also meant for this clan. But in Lamlong settlement the *Khulpuwa* men certainly partook of the goat's meat and the *Khullakpa* post did not go to them. In *Kudei Khullen* village, the *Khullakpa* would sacrifice a goat, but he and his kinsmen would not eat its meat. In the *Ramyang* group, the *Khullakpa* hailed from the *Dangsawa* clan and his deputy, the *Khunbu*, was from *Tangtanga* clan, while the position of *Khulpu* (priest) was reserved

for the Narhang clan. The politico-ritual structure that prevailed in the Ramyang group of villages illustrates the power structure:

Clan	Office	Duty
Nangsa (akin to Dangsa)	Khulak	Criminal cases were adjudicated deputy to Khulak
Marim (Inpi or Kangsowa)	Lumlak	
Thoupong		
Thounam		
Makhu		
Narhang (Ronglu or Rung-lo)	Khulpu	Village priest
Charang		

The power structure that emerged among the Marings approximated the result of a tussle that supposedly had taken place in their underworld existence. In this arrangement, their *Khulpu* managed the religious affairs, which function seems to have changed hands between different clans over a considerable period of time. Eventually, the Meitei administrative terms like the *Khullakpa* (or *Khulak*) found accommodation in the structure of their polity.⁴¹ It is interesting to note that the *Khullakpa* (or *Khulak*) position was co-terminus with the function of gate worship in the Maring village of Kurau Khunou. Moreover, the fixation of an 'alien' administrative term like *Khullakpa* to a specific clan is quite significant. In the Maring traditional arrangement, an adopted or assimilated person was forbidden to claim the post of *Khulpu* (even today an adopted or assimilated individual cannot claim the post of *Khulpu*). We have noted that the *Khullakpa* is a 'non-indigenous' administrative post that emerged among the Nagas. This indicates a polity formation emanating from their interaction with the Meitei state apparatus, and this articulation is found among the settlements nearer to the Manipur valley. Hodson observed that among the Kabuis and Quoirengs, the office of *Khullakpa* seemed to have lost its authority in religious matters. Their elders took over most of the religious functions, which elsewhere were the task of the *Khullakpa* at a particular period in their history. This particular office continued to exist in its altered form and became hereditary and was not an appointed position.

South of the Marings are the other *Khul* (or 'hole' referring to their emergence from a cave) groups, viz., Anal, Moyon, Monsang, Tarao, Lamkang earlier collectively known as the Pakan. They were also referred to in early anthropological literature as the old Kuki group. This *Khul* group of Nagas was settled in and around the

old trade route that connected Thangdaut of Burma with Cachar via Tamu and the old Cachar road. The Anal segment was divided into two moieties, viz., the Muchal choko and Chanang musum attached to a number of clans. The position of the *Khuruwng* or headman was hereditary to the Sunruwng clan of Chanang musum moiety (it is now an elective post among them). The *Khuruwng* designate used to sacrifice a *mithun* and distribute its meat, and served rice beer from big earthen pots to the villagers. This practice kept the door open for 'big men' to assume this role and status. Eventually this position was taken over by men who could offer feasts of merit. The *Mirung* assisted this *Khuruwng* for defense of the village, while the *Pamrung* managed rituals connected with agricultural activities, and the *Donrung* kept a tally of domestic animals in possession of the villagers. Anal Khullen is believed to have been their oldest village. Citing the evidence of the *Cheitharol Kumbaba*, Gangmumei Kabui⁴² wrote that in A.D. 1570, the Meitei king Mungyamba failed to take over this dominant settlement. It was during the reign of Khagemba that the Anal chief Bungyamba was killed and his village was subjugated. The chronicle also refers to the failed invasion of Lamphou village by King Chalamba (1545–1562). Much later, during the reign of Paikhomba (1666–97), a peace treaty was arrived at. It marked the assumption of Meitei dominance over the Anals. Being located in a strategic region, the Anals over the centuries rendered assistance to the Meitei kings in their wars with the Burmese invaders. The Anals were given the present name by the Meiteis. Before 1590 they were called Pakans. The interaction brought about several fundamental changes in the Anal polity. As Kabui⁴³ said:

The case of Anal Khullen is interesting because the nature of chiefship has undergone structural changes from the historical incidents in Anal Khullen. Before subjugation by the Meitei kings, the Anal chiefs were really Khurwang and after the dispute between Chamthong and Kom who were the Khurwang — the Meitei kings decided that the chief should be Khullakpa, a lower status, subservient to the Meitei kings not friends or allies. However, the character of the chiefs in the neighbouring Khubong Khullen is more of a ruler.

The other Naga segments, namely, Moyon, Monsang, Lamkang and Tarao have also assimilated certain features of the Meitei structure in their polities. Among the Moyon's two moieties, viz.,

Sumphuw and Jungvain, the *Iruwung* or headman's post was held by the Sumphuw moiety, while the post of *Khurfu* (ritual head) was reserved for the latter. The traditional structure had the *Iruwung* heading a council composed of *Khurfu*, *Vankhrah* (aide to *Khurfu*), *Pakhanglak*, *Ningonlakpa* and *Nahalakpa* (controller of young boys, girls and youth respectively), *Jupan* and *Laoching* (caretakers of rice beer for elders in session), *Serung* and *Keirung* (tax collectors) and *Changlu* (village crier). Their oral tradition points to the development of a chieftaindom of sorts alongside the Moirangs of the valley. It is said to have emerged around the 'seventh century A.D.' under one Kurkham Ngarii of the Ngoru clan. He is said to have controlled twelve villages at that time. There is an account of the Moirangs and the Moyons going to war in their narratives. Kurkham was lost in battle with the Moirangs (the Moirangs knew him as Konggam Ningthou). The latter erected a monolith in honour of their slain enemy. His sword was buried in the ground and in course of time a bamboo grove grew at the spot. The Moyons say that this grove was still around when the Chandel district headquarters was established in this place in the era of Independent India. Today, a monument erected around this place in his honour is called the *Ruwth-iphon* or memorial stone. Eventually, the Meitei functionary posts were introduced into their village administration:

Office	Meat	Function
Iruwung	cock's head, head and tongue of animals killed in ceremonies.	Overall head of the village
Senapati	same as above along with cock's stomach.	mobilization of warriors
Khullakpa	-do-	social welfare of the village
Lulakpa	-do-	deputy to Khullakpa
Mantri	-do-	the right hand man of Iruwung
Khurfu		agricultural priest
Chingsanglakpe		external matters
Mithiramfu		deputy to Chingsanglakpe
Vankhrah		helper of Khurfu
Pakhanglak,		controller of boys, girls and youth respectively.
Ningonlakpa and Nahalakpa		
Juban and Laoching		caretakers of rice beer during feasts etc.
Serung and Keirung		controller of finance and tax
Changlu		village crier

'Non-indigenous' designations such as *Mantri*, *Khullakpa*, *Lulakpa*, *Senapati*, *Chingsanglakpe* and *Mithiramfu* (Meitei Lampu) became a part of their evolving traditional structure. The southern Naga polities appear to have developed close affinity with the valley kingdom.

Epilogue

As is clear from the preceding discussion the narratives of the oral tradition have thrown new light on the relations between the Nagas and the Valley kingdoms. The evidence, when studied in conjunction with the well known written documents of the latter area of the pre-British and British times, reinforces the existing assumptions that the relations were by and large marked by considerations of effecting control over organization of various resources. The evidence of the oral narratives has also offered an insight into the process of change in the politico-jural structure of some of the Naga segments. This is an area of research largely neglected in previous studies, but which could be subjected to further investigation. After all, it is obvious that the changes that have taken place are peculiar to this region, based as they had been on a symbiotic relationship between the Nagas and the valley kingdoms.

END NOTES

1. To Jan Vansina oral tradition is quite different from oral testimony and oral interviews. He considered the latter two to be implicitly "lesser than the former". Vansina while primarily focussing on oral narratives as a primary source maintains that oral data "serve to check other sources as they serve to check it...they also can give minute detail which is otherwise inaccessible and may thus stimulate the historian to reanalyze other data in fresh ways." See, Jan Vansina, *Oral Tradition as History* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1985), p. 27. For a discussion on the unresolved debate among historians regarding the utility of memory as a source in historical research, see, James Fentress and Chris Wickham, *Social Memory* (London, 1992). See also Elizabeth Tonkin, *Narrating our Pasts: The Social Construction of Oral History* (Cambridge University Press, 1992). For an anthropological perspective, see, Robert H. Lowie, "Oral Tradition and History", *Journal of American Folklore* (1917, Vol. 30).
2. See, B. Bernardi, C. Poni and A. Triulzi (eds.), *Orali: Anthropologia e Storia* (Milano: Franco Angeli, 1978). Many of the substantial articles contributed here are in English. The recording, use and preservation of oral tradition and

oral history have been going on for quite some time now. Both of them belong to a common source. There is not much difference in the ways they are recorded and made available in the archives. Still then, one can bring out the basic differences between the two. Oral traditions are those orally transmitted recollections of the past that exist within a culture. They are generally expressions of the identity, functions, customs of that particular culture. They are neither creations nor direct experiences of the narrators. Oral history, on the other hand, is usually identified as a technique of inquiry into the memories of people who have experienced the recent past directly. Oral history is the product of Western European historiography. It was ostensibly created to supplement or rectify deficiencies in written records. Although many historians view this technique as a kind of maverick historiography, there is always the need to collect testimonies of participants and witnesses to events such as the Nazi holocaust. In any case, materials of oral history are subject to rigorous analysis as is applied by historians to written documents.

3. In this type of research, while appreciating the anthropological paradigms, it is crucial to deviate from the functionalist approach, which preclude diachronic analysis of social forms. In historical reconstruction there is always a need to interpret change and dynamics both internal and external. Edmund Leach is right in saying that British social anthropology has given an overbearing role to the "oversimplified set of equilibrium assumptions derived from the use of organic analogies for the structure of social systems." This assumption precludes the idea of an internal source of change. See, Edmund Leach, *Political Systems of Highland Burma: A Study of Kachin Social Structure* (London: The Athlone Press, 1964 edn.), p. ix. Moreover, historians working on African state formation have relied on anthropological methods to facilitate their analysis of data from oral sources. But then one must be aware of the fact that 'Asiatic' societies fit awkwardly into the African models. See, A.L. Epstein, *The Craft of Social Anthropology* (London: Tavistock, 1967).
4. See, F.K. Lehman, *The Structure of Chin society: A Tribal People of Burma Adapted to A Non-Western Civilization* (Illinois Studies in Anthropology No. 3, Urbana: The University of Illinois Press, 1963).
5. See, E.R. Leach, pp. 21-22. Writing about the economy of the swidden agriculturists, Marshall Sahlins pointed to the fact that swidden agriculture had not brought about an ecological disaster nor had it been inimical to a stable and sedentary village life, particularly in sparsely populated rainforest regions where colonialism had not taken firm roots. This type of agriculture decidedly demonstrates a richer material existence than hunting-gathering, even though it may not lead to greater surplus production. The cultivators are generally organised as simple segmentary tribes. Since this kind of adaptation enhances segmentation of tribal groups it does not lead to the formation of regional organizations. Sahlins maintains that "swidden agriculture has centrifugal effect on the distribution on the settlements, and a population dispersed through tropical forest is not well situated for political unification." See, Marshall D. Sahlins, *Tribesmen* (New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1968), p. 31. Thus, communities based on swidden agriculture have been at a disadvantage in terms of polity development as compared to the surplus producing valley dwellers. But then, apart from the practice of terrace cultivation among the Angamis, the other Naga groups, especially the Nocte,

Wancho and Konyak polities supplemented their swidden agriculture with various forms of economic transactions, i.e., salt production, trans-polity barter trade and control over trade routes. They could then sustain advanced polities like the *Anghdoms*.

6. The Burmese apply the term 'Shan' fairly consistently to all the inhabitants of Burma and of the Yunnan-Burma frontier area, who call themselves Tai. In the west and southwest of Burma this involves some ambiguity since the Burmese distinguish the Shans from the Siamese, although both groups call themselves Tai. But for northeast Burma, the definition is clear enough. The Shans, so defined, are territorially scattered, but fairly uniform in culture. Dialect variations between different localities are considerable, but even so, apart from a few exceptions, it can be said that all Shans of North Burma and western Yunnan speak one language, i.e., Tai. For making sense of this identity flux, see, Edmund Leach, *op. cit.*
7. When the Ahoms entered Assam in the 13th century, the Kacharis had already attained a stable polity covering an area extending from the river Dikhu in the east to the river Kopili in the west. An Ao Naga tradition talks about the existence of Kachari settlements in the lower ranges of their hills. S.L. Baruah also refers to a *Buranji* source that speaks of Sukapha encountering a large number of Kacharis in the Naga Hills (present Tirap district of Arunachal). It was either Sukapha (1228-1268) or Supimpha (Subinphaa, 1281-1293) who pushed out the Kachari *raja* Dersongpha to the hills. The Kacharis were then removed to the south bank of river Dikhu by the Dihingia *Raja*. See, S.L. Baruah, *A Comprehensive History of Assam* (New Delhi, 1985).
8. V. Elwin, *India's North-Eastern Frontier in the Nineteenth Century* (Bombay, 1959).
9. Alexander Mackenzie, *History of the Relations of the Government with the Hill Tribes of the North-East Frontier of Bengal* (New Delhi, 1994 reprint), p. 92. The 'Welsh Report on Assam, 1794' indicates trading relations between the Nagas and the Ahoms in the latter part of the 18th century. See *Ibid.*, pp. 377-394.
10. E.A. Gait, *A History of Assam* (London, 1926, 2nd edn.), p. 336. S.N. Barua, *Tribes of Indo-Burma Border* (New Delhi, 1991) indicates the strategic nature of the territory and the relations that ensued thereon:
There was a time when the Namchangias and the Barduaris were capable of waging war even against the most powerful Ahoms, who ruled Assam for six hundred years. The former were, however, brought to defeat and made an alliance with the Ahoms. They entered into matrimonial relations. The Barduaris had to maintain sharp look out at the principal point of entry to the plains so that no undesirable elements made an inroad to the Ahom territory. There was a Pani *duar* also at the Tisa or Dilih or Disang river which flows from the Patkai border. It was to be looked after by a Nocte chief whose country was the right bank of the river.
11. The existence of a definite boundary can be discerned from British correspondence. One can also refer to the cartographic presentation reproduced in the second edition (1926) of Gait's work to substantiate this point: See, E.A. Gait, *op. cit.*, Map. The present day territorial dispute involves Naga claims to appropriated territories inhabited by the Zeliangrong and Rengma Nagas, which were transferred to the contiguous areas of Nowgong and Cachar districts of Assam. This was part of a British cartographic exercise

to take in lands for tea cultivation and logging. Further north of this, adjacent to the Lotha, Ao and Konyak territories, the rapid expansion of tea cultivation gave rise to territorial conflicts between the English and the Nagas from 1869 to 1873. During this time, the limits of the revenue jurisdiction of Lakhimpur and Sibsagarh to the south were the Ahom-Naga frontier demarcations of *Dhodur-ali*, *Naga-bund* and *Ladoigah*. The British had earlier recognised a defined boundary:

... it appears that the *Ladoigah* line is assumed by the Nagas to be the boundary, and that the propriety of the claim seems in some measure admitted by the local officers who regret that some grants have been made beyond the line, and the late Lt. Governor accordingly prohibited any fresh lease beyond the line.

See, Memo No. 2733, Dated Fort William the 19th June 1871, from H.L. Harrison, Ofg. Junior Secretary to the Government of Bengal to the Commissioner of Assam. See also a Memo, from Lt. Col. W. Agnew, Ofg. Commissioner of Assam to the Secretary to the Government of Bengal. Judicial Department, No. 185, Dated Gowhatty the 10th June, 1869.

12. J.P. Mills, *The Ao Nagas* (Bombay, 1973 reprint), pp. 9–10. The oral tradition of this war has been reproduced in W. Chubanungba Ao, *Pentochepechep Ritsung* (Allahabad, 1964), and Waromong Village Council (ed.), *Nokrang and Nokrang* (Calcutta, 1993).
13. This oral narrative has been recorded by a village council which recounts the nature of contracting political alliances with the Ahom *raja*. See, Longkhüm Podu Menden (ed.), *Longkhüm Heroic Memorial Hall Aonokpo*, (Mokokchung, 1994). The *Ahom Buranji* is however silent on this matter. See R.S. Golap Chandra Barua (ed. and tr.) *Ahom Buranji: From the Earliest Time to The End of Ahom Rule* (Guwahati, 1985 reprint).
14. In the Ao village of Longkhüm, their oral tradition records a forty-five *pudo* cycle. This settlement has the *Rionsanger* (Chongli) and *Medemjanger* (Mongsen) currently running the village administration. They took office in 1999 and 1992 respectively. Their first administrative year cycle started with the Medemsanger (Chongli) and Mechenjanger (Mongsen). Reckoning from the Chongli system of thirty years of an unbroken chain of administration upto the 1999 transfer of authority, one gets A.D. 749 as the time of the establishment of this village.
15. Nokpu Pudo Menden (ed.), *Nokpur Otsü* (Mokokchung, 1983). I have summed up and translated the contents that were originally rendered in Ao language.
16. This is stated in W. Robinson, *A Descriptive Account of Assam* (Calcutta, 1841), pp. 386–398. The conflict for the control of salt between Suhungmung (alias Dihingia *raja*) and the Nagas in 1536 was perhaps inevitable. The former eventually took possession of the wells. See, Kashinath Tamuloi Phukan, *Assam Buranji* (Calcutta, 1906), p. 20. The Ahoms later on captured the Jaboka (Yansa) and Borhat wells. But they did not deprive the previous owners of the salt. A kind of quota in manufacture of salt was worked out between the two parties.
17. Quoted in V. Elwin, *The Nagas in the Nineteenth Century* (London, 1969).
18. The inhabitants of Namsang, Borduria and Paniduarua were also called Mohongias, being residents of a land that was earlier called Mohong. It was famous for rock salt. Mohong in Kachari means salt wells and the land was

- earlier occupied by the Kacharis. See S.K. Bhuyan, *Assam Buranji* (Gauhati, 1945), p. 13. See also, L. Devi, *Ahom-Tribal Relations* (Gauhati, 1968), p. 33.
19. S.L. Baruah, op. cit., p. 382-383.
 20. H.K. Barbujari (ed.), *The Comprehensive History of Assam, Volume Three* (Guwahati, 1994):
Four principles guided their political conduct viz., *sam, dan, danda* and *bheda*. These respectively mean reconciliation through equality in status; gifts or presents, of protected i.e., subordinate feudatory status; punishment where necessary, which implies division; and rapture, implying a wedge among neighbours. Ahom history is replete with numerous instances of applications of these fundamental principles in dealing with the several frontier chiefdoms and numerous tribes that surrounded Assam.
 21. S.K. Bhuyan, *Anglo-Assamese Relations 1771-1826* (Gauhati, 1974), p. 34.
 22. S.L. Baruah, op. cit., p. 384.
 23. In 1531 the Ahoms took over Dimapur and the Kachari king Khunkura became a fugitive. The Ahoms propped up one Detsung, a relative of Khunkura, on the throne. But in 1536 the Ahoms sacked Dimapur and killed Detsung. The Kacharis eventually shifted to Maibong in the North Cachar Hills. In December 1706 Maibong was also invaded by the Ahom King Rudra Singha, and the Kachari King Tamradhaja was defeated. The latter moved southwards to Khaspur in the plains of Cachar and established his capital there. For a description of these people, see, Sidney Endle, *The Kacharis* (Delhi, 1975 reprint).
 24. But this will require cross-checking with the *Ahom Buranjis*. It is not clear whether the Rengmas of the present Karbi Anglong area are talking about a fully designated *Phukan* title or an additional frontier *Bar Phukan* which post might have been created by the Ahoms. Ordinarily, a *Phukan* used to be the head or superintendent of a *Khel* or *Mel*, the strength of which was usually 6,000 *paiks*. The *Bar Phukan* was the governor of lower Assam with his headquarters first at Kajali/Kaliabar (Koliabor) and later at Gauhati (Guwahati). He was entrusted with the civil and military administration of the area from Kaliabar to the western boundary of the kingdom. The Rengmas were recent immigrants from the eastern side of the Dhansiri river. They shared the living space with the Mikirs (now Karbis). The Mikirs on their part, as Lyall points out, were earlier settled in the eastern portion of the Khasi and Jaintia Hills near Kopili river. But on being constantly harassed by warfare between the Khasi (or Synteng) chiefs, the Mikirs migrated and were allowed to take over their present habitat by the Ahom *raja*. This evidence would make their migration to this place fairly recent. See, Sir Charles Lyall, *The Mikirs* (Calcutta: East India Press, 1908), pp. 4-5.
 25. J. Butler, *Travels and Adventures in the Province of Assam* (London, 1855), p. 121.
 26. Verrier Elwin, op. cit., p. 231.
 27. Elwin (*Ibid.*, pp. 408-9) held that the Zemi Nagas are the first inhabitants of North Cachar:
In North Cachar there is only one tribe, who called themselves Aroon (i.e. Zeliangrong) Nagas... and that the Nagas are the earliest inhabitants of the soil.
 28. M. Horam, *Naga Polity* (Delhi, 1975), p. 42.
 29. The oral tradition referring to the brotherhood of the Meitei *raja* Khagemba (1597-1652) and *Khuruwng* Bungyamba of Anal Khullen is a case in point.

See, Gangmumei Kabui, "Glimpses of Land and People of Ancient Manipur" in Naorem Sanajaoba (ed.) *Manipur Past and Present, Volume 1* (New Delhi, 1988), pp. 12-19.

30. T.C. Hodson, *The Naga Tribes of Manipur* (Delhi, 1974 Reprint), pp. 38-49. Hodson described the segregated nature of this industry:
 there is evident among them a strong tendency to prevent the girls marrying outside the weaving village, naturally in order to keep valuable knowledge to themselves. In this, as I found, they were aided by the operation of the belief, which underlies the whole system of *genna*, "that one man's meat is another man's poison." A woman I knew had come from a cloth weaving village was settled with her husband in an outlying village, where I saw her. I asked her if she had woven any cloths recently, and she told me her husband's village people forbade her weaving because it was *genna* to them. I was well aware that by discouraging the marriage of their girls outside the group of cloth weaving villages they were fast making themselves a close corporation in enjoyment of a valuable monopoly. ...I asked the headman why they forbade the women to weave cloths, and he told me they all feared something terrible would happen to them if they allow her to make cloths. There is also the fear of the magic of the craftsmen being directed against them, for these villages which have this special industry are regarded as possessing remarkable powers which they claim, and which others believe, to have been taught them by some divine being.
31. *Ibid.*, p. 45. For a different view, see: A.S.W. Shimray, *History of Tangkhul Nagas* (New Delhi, 2001), pp. 97-100.
32. T.C. Hodson, *op. cit.*, p. 83.
33. *Ibid.*, p. 48.
34. E.W. Dun, *Gazetteer of Manipur* (Delhi, 1975 reprint), pp. 37-48.
35. Dun, *Ibid.*, p. 49.
36. Dun (*op. cit.*, pp. 26-36) describes the *Laliup* system thus:
 The inhabitants, instead of taxes, give labour on the same principle as used to obtain in Assam. With the object of carrying out their duty systematically, the Meithei population is divided into four parts, called Pannaahs, which are designated, in the order of their seniority, Kaphum, Laipham, Alallaup, Niharup. The Pannaahs perform *Lalup*, or service, for ten days in rotation, thus bringing every male above sixteen years of age on duty ten days in forty. This service is a due to the state. None are remunerated for it. The head of each family or tribe furnishes the proper persons for the different services required of that tribe in this own Pannaah. The immediate family of the *pipa*, or head of the tribe, is not called upon to perform any heavy duty. Its post is near the *raja*, acting as Ningthou Selba or personal attendants.
 ...*The Labour system as applied to the Hill tribe*: The more distant hill tribes, instead of giving labour, pay a small tribute in whatever is easiest for them to supply. The more distant Tankuls (The Tankuls within five or six days of Manipur come in to work at the capital or on road in the valley. They are the ditch and tank diggers of the place, and work by contract for private individuals), the Mao and Maram tribes, the Marrings, and a few Kuki villages pay tribute. Of these, however the Mao and Maram men have to work on the Kohima road, build the rest houses, and carry loads for officers or officials passing along it... The chief labour, however, which is imposed upon hillmen, is that of carrying up articles for trade or for the *Raja's* private use. The Tankuls, being good hands at spade work, are usually employed in making

tanks, etc., about the *Raja's* own grounds or on canals; but every hillman is bound to make two journeys per annum to Cachar to bring up loads on the *Raja's* account. A vast amount of tact and ingenuity is displayed by the Manipuris in getting work out of the hill tribes, and they perform many tasks in addition to their regular quantum.

37. R. Brown, *Statistical Account of Manipur* (New Delhi, 1975 reprint), p. 24.
38. See, Khasim Ruivah, *Social Change Among the Nagas (Tangkhum)* (New Delhi, 1993), p. 153.
39. C.A. Soppit, *A Short Account of the Kacha Naga (Empeo) Tribe in the North Kachar Hills, With an Outline of Common Vocabulary and Illustrative Sentences* (Shillong: Assam Secretariat Press, 1885), p. 427.
40. Earlier Hodson (op. cit., p. 72-73) had made some observations on this:
In many perhaps most, of the villages in this area these clans are also known by the Manipuri titles, Ningthaja, Kumul, Luang, but it is safe to say that these names are not found in that portion of this area where Meithei rule was not really effective before the days of the British occupation. Now among the Tangkhuls we find the names Ningthaja, Kumul, and Luang in every village; Khaba occurs twice; in one village only, Nungbi, we have clans bearing the names of Angom and Anganba, and in addition clans, which possess names, Atum and Kasu, believed to be Manipuri names but which are not known to the Manipuris themselves. We have reason for holding that there were at one time ten clans in Manipur, which have been reduced to seven by the disappearance of two clans and the amalgamation of the clans Khaba and Anganba into one. Perhaps as a small essay in political palaeontology, we may conclude that the names of the two Manipuri clans which have been in their own picturesque phrase, 'extinguished', were Atum and Kasu.
41. In this context Hodson (Ibid., p. 80) has also observed that:
As a general rule each village possesses at least one officer to whom the Meithei title *Khullakpa*, is given. For convenience of administration he is often regarded as exercising secular authority, but in reality in ordinary village affairs just that amount of influence to which he is on personal grounds entitled. His authority in their eyes is religious in origin and nature. We have in many villages an official; entitled the *Meithei Lambu*, who is generally invested with that dignity because he knows rather more of the Manipuri language than his fellows. Many of them owe their promotion to a temporary sojourn in the state gaol. In nearly every Tangkul village we find in addition to the *Khullakpa* a village officer bearing the Manipuri title *Lulakpa* who is the head of the clan just as the *Khullakpa* is the head of his clan. The title of '*khulpu*', which seems to mean ancestor of the village, was borne in earlier days by the person now designated as *Lulakpa*. Among the Marrings there are two hereditary officers, *Khulpu* and *Khullakpa*, with, in some villages, a *Meithei Lampu*, who is the villager possessing the best knowledge of Manipuri.
42. See, Gangmumei Kabui, *Anal: A Transborder Tribe of Manipur* (New Delhi, 1985.), pp. 12 and 58. He also informs that among the Tangkhuls, Maos and Kabuis the *Khullakpa* and the subordinate office bearers were also introduced. Ibid., p. 30.
43. Ibid., p. 55.