

Performative Culture of Tribes and Modernity in India's Northeast

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Abstract

In this essay we attempt to answer the following question: What culture is performed by tribes in Northeast India? Two divergent cultural phenomena strike any onlooker: cultural differences between tribes are vanishing and at the same time there is an attempt of one tribe to differentiate itself from another. The tendency toward vanishing of differences is taking place through anonymous agencies of appropriation of modernity. The same modern material culture embodied in consumption, dress, hair style, politics, economy, education, healthcare, religion etc. is the culture which is lived and is a matter of daily performance. On the other hand differentiation of tribes is also part of culture, but not by way of everyday living and performance, but more by way of announcement and pronouncement in academic institutions and political arena. The ideal culture, which is presented as basis of differentiation, is the invented primordial culture, which is no more in being in performance, but resides as objects in museums and photographs and described in anthropology and sociology textbooks. These modernization-induced claims of differences are not differences inherent in culture; rather differences are invented due to factors exogenous to so-called traditional culture.

Key Words: Tribe, modernity, identity, culture, change

Introduction

It was noted in an earlier essay¹ of mine, that culture is not an object lying out there in space and time like a table or a chair enduring through time by sheer inertia of its substance. Our contention is that there is no 'objective culture'. Culture is in being because people belonging to it perform it. Culture in its being shares in the aspect of game, festival, drama, language etc. To be in being a game needs to be played, a festival needs to be celebrated, a drama needs to be performed, and a language needs to be spoken. In the same way to be in being a culture needs to be performed. Hence it is to

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indicate this aspect of culture we have used the locution 'performative culture' in the title.

In this essay we attempt to answer the following questions: What culture is performed by tribes in Northeast India? Is it the same culture that is performed by all the tribes, even when they distinguish themselves from each other? Is it a unique culture which is performed by each tribe, and hence, is different culture being performed by different tribes? How is modern culture appropriated by tribes in the region? To answer these questions we will be using the theoretical framework articulated by Jean-Francois Bayart in his book *The Illusion of Cultural Identity*.²

Vanishing Cultural Differences and Multiplication of Cultural Identities

With performative understanding of the mode of being of culture when we have a look at the living culture of tribes in Northeast India to try to figure out 'what it is' that is presented in the performance and celebration of culture we notice an aphoristic situation. Two divergent cultural phenomena strike any onlooker: cultural differences between tribes are vanishing and at the same time there is an attempt of one tribe to differentiate itself from another.³

The tendency towards vanishing of differences is taking place through anonymous agencies of appropriation of modernity in all tribes. Every culture in the region has anonymous agents of appropriation of non-tribal modern culture. They are school children avid for knowledge, college students thirsty for learning English, Science, History etc., religious believers of the Christian churches, consumers of outside goods (clothes, cosmetics, consumer durables, like television, computer with internet connectivity etc.), hospital patients, nurses and doctors, and those intellectuals for whom the sordid politics of universities have become second nature, the musicians in various bands, the clerks who insist on carrying out bureaucratic procedures, the government officials and ministers absorbed in the spending of central funds, the political activists talking about 'sovereignty', 'human rights', 'right to self-determination,' 'ethno-nationalism,' 'sub-nationalism,' 'civil society,' 'good governance,' 'democracy' etc., functionaries of NGOs lobbying at various levels: provincial, national and global, even sports persons playing volley ball, foot ball etc. These are the anonymous agents who are not only opening up their culture to modernity but also appropriating modern culture to enlarge and enrich their culture and in the process all tribes are becoming similar. This is the culture which is lived and is a matter of daily performance and

hence to use Renan's phrase this culture is a 'daily plebiscite.' Let it be emphasized that the vital culture of a people is a matter of daily performance. "Culture is created from time to time, but it is performed all the time. Once it is created, constant performance keeps the culture alive. Doing culture is a performance whether it is the industrial or business processes we do in work hours, or ritual, or preparing a meal. Culture can be stored in the form of artifacts and writings; it can be remembered in peoples' heads. But to be living, vital culture, it has to be performed constantly."⁴

On the other hand, differentiation of tribes is also part of culture, but not by way of daily living and performance, but by way of annunciation and pronouncement in academic institutions and political arena. But this is an irony of such cultures that annunciation of difference is taking place in that part of performative culture which is same in all cultures, e.g., universities, schools, state politics etc. Annunciation of difference is made by being oblivious of the lived performative culture, which these institutions represent. When people make film on specificity of their cultural past they are not only reproducing representation of that cultural past as performative culture, but also filmmaking becomes the part of performative culture.

One can clearly hear the fear of the spectre of differences vanishing due to modernization and globalization.⁵ According to postmodern anthropologists the 'reinvention of difference' is inherent in the process of modernization and globalization.⁶ That is to say both the phenomena are due to modernization. There is a generalized fear that under the impact of modernization and globalization everything will become uniform and identities will vanish. This fear leads to reinvention of difference and exacerbation of identity-related particularisms.⁷ No doubt differentiation of tribe has become a cultural phenomenon, but it is erroneous to attribute this claim of irreducible difference to the influence of 'culture', or more precisely to the exclusive relationship each individual is supposed to have with 'his' culture.⁸ This is an un-argued assumption. There is no demonstration that modernization induced claims of differences are cultural differences. No doubt, there is no activity, even of an economic nature, that does not immediately produce meanings and symbols. No doubt understanding a social, economic or political phenomenon amounts to deciphering its 'cultural reason'. But it is not certain that the 'cultural reason' that people think they depend upon actually determines their actions, or even that it exists as a totality or a tangible system now in Northeast India. In fact invention of difference is due to factors exogenous to so called traditional culture.

Northeast culture is under the grip of culturalism, which defines culture in an objective substantialist manner and assumes that substance of culture has causal power to determine political action,⁹ leading to generation of phobia of other cultures and giving rise to dream of autonomous political territory for one's own culture as a kind of inexorable inevitability.¹⁰ It is this political dream of autonomous political territory for one's own culture that is inducing tribes to invent differentiation. Unfortunately culturalism produces malign inebriation, which is invalidated not only by facts but also due to the very mode of being of culture explained above. Culture is not a substance which can harbor causal power. It is also not something that can endure through time by inertia of its substance. Here it must be kept in mind that when people open up to modernity and yet want to retain fidelity to tradition, then tradition has more or less to transform giving rise to contradictory interpretations even on the part of actors themselves, who are native to the tradition.¹¹ There can be no choosing between tradition and modernity. There is also no question of any determinate political action following from fidelity to cultural tradition in the context of modernity. Here two important factors play their role: the social complexes creating narrow limited solidarities and the dream political autonomy.

Narrow limited solidarities are created and maintained by three fundamentally related complexes within the tribes. (1) The extended family, the kinship relation, based on a principle of sharing and solidarity is being utilized for defining a tribe and this also serves as a principle to exclude one who is not a member. Here, within the tribe, one gives oneself to the others, and expects the others to do likewise. This is a question of the merging of selves in a larger collective life project. This also is in turn the principle of exclusion of others, the outsiders, who must relate if at all externally. (2) The second is the principle of committing oneself to the needs of others of the extended family and the principle of organization of the collectivity, but it can also be understood as a general strategy of personal relatedness requiring investment of time and resources exhibited by frequent visits, meetings and common festivities. (3) Third is the principle applied to land. Love of the land is the relation of man to a sacred nature upon which he is totally dependent and for which he has to care; the concept of caring, as in stewardship, is being promoted as central to tribal collective land holding. But in this land holding the outsiders can have no share. These three complexes together create and maintain solidarity of a tribe.

These complexes are instrumental aspects of tribal identity today, i.e.,

instrumental for the dream of various kinds of autonomy. These complexes are clearly continuous with what might be described as tendencies toward tribal closed-corporateness that may have emerged in the 19th century and that might be accounted for as social defense mechanisms in face of an encroaching British culture. Whether the tribe and its closure predate the colonial period is difficult to ascertain. But love of any particular land could not have been defining character of tribes of the region from the beginning as they were migratory. It might be argued that this closed corporate solidarity is itself in its turn generative of the principles of sharing, love of the land, and extended family in the service of political dreams. But all this is projected as cultural differences. To give an analogy: this is like similar companies competing with each other for the same profit through the same mechanism of market yet presenting themselves as culturally different, i.e., distinguishing themselves by claiming cultural uniqueness.

Invention of Identities

Culturalism maintains that a 'culture' is composed of a stable, closed corpus of representations, beliefs, or symbols that is supposed to have an 'affinity' with specific opinions, attitudes, or modes of behaviour.¹² There is no truth in the substantialist definition of ethnic groups or tribes, which are only political artifacts and fabrications. Culture is always open, i.e., open to other cultures. Culturalist kind of falsehood is perpetuated by deliberate academic subterfuges. To take an example: A 'Khasi' obviously is a Christian if he goes to church. If he is not a Christian he is a 'Seng Khasi.' But whenever in the Department of Philosophy¹³, there is a thesis related to 'Khasi Worldview,' 'Khasi Religion,' 'Khasi Culture,' what we discuss is a 'Seng Khasi' worldview, religion or culture. The same goes about other tribes of the region.

Invention of tradition has itself become a cultural phenomenon, and it is now a fundamental constituent of the formation of the tribes and ethnicities in the region.¹⁴ Main characteristic of the invention of tradition is the recycling – whether instrumental or unconscious – of fragments of a more or less phantasmal past in the services of social, cultural or political innovation.¹⁵ Generally the process of ritualization and formalization of custom goes hand in hand with an intensification of social change. Fixation of official sartorial code of the tribes is a certain example of late product of modernity.

Traditional culture of tribes started to lose its being as a lived phenomenon and began to become an object of exaltation and reification with the British occupation of Northeast India and these two tendencies

intensified through subsequent incorporation of the region after independence. With colonial state formation the peoples and cultures of North-East India were studied, described, listed and photographed for libraries and museums. The colonial rulers defined who was a Khasi, Naga, Garo or a Mizo.¹⁶ While the British administrators fabricated the essence of particular tribes, their native inheritors formulated their respective particular tribalness by resorting to strategic syncretism. This involved structuring one's identity in opposition to the Other by assimilating the latter's prestigious and efficacious cultural characteristics. The appearance of an external threat awakened among the native people of a culture a feeling of vulnerability, and even an inferiority complex, that justified a reform of their particular tribalness borrowing from the dominants their strong points, under the cover of a return to primordial culture that was largely invented but whose xenology remained active. The reinterpretation of tribal past by tribal intellectuals and their instrumentalization of tradition for militant political purposes has sustained political identities in the cultural landscape of the Northeast, by incorporating foreign representations into tribal life – e.g., vocabulary of egalitarian democratic rights, right of self-determination, (sub)nationalism, proselytisation, ecclesiastical structures – and by seeking to homogenize in order to create a particular tribe, a social formation that is characterized by differentiation of sub-tribes, clans etc.¹⁷ More the native agents self-consciously instrumentalized the past incorporating foreign representations more the traditional culture lost its vitality and the foreign elements which were modern started becoming part of their lived performative culture.

On the Northeast political chessboard, the celebration of a golden mythic past by almost every tribe has become a mere fig-leaf to conceal their obscene modernity. Modernity has been adopted, practiced and performed in the region emptying it out of all its great ideals: there is progress in consumption, but the Idea of Progress is shunned as progress will take them out of their tribal formation, there is faster and faster hankering after wealth, but the idea of production as a source of wealth has disappeared. Democracy is paid lip service, but public sphere of free and frank discussion of political issues by citizens is not allowed to develop, while the electoral process is reduced to legitimization of ethnic hegemony. Equality is extolled but individual performance and achievement is not judged so that equality is allowed to become an escape from standards: one hears all around, "Don't judge us, but accept us as equals regardless of our performance." All great ideals of modernity have met with such banal destiny in this region due to its

refusal to entertain any theoretical and critical foundation for its culture as required by modern enlightenment and its justifying its present condition in the name of its primordial culture. Even institutions like university are not spared. University, which is part of culture, is not valued so much for its academics, i.e., teaching and research, but valued more as institution through which funds flow into the community and also valued more as an employment agency for the community. Since this kind of regressive modernity needs resources which are not being generated, as that productive aspect of modernity is not adopted, it leads to conflict over resources both political and economic. It is to create a winning combination of people strong enough to fight for resources and yet small enough to have maximum per capita value of resources, the unity and differentiation of tribes is taking place and this has become a part of culture of almost every tribe now, which itself is a modern phenomenon.

In such a situation of regressive modernity identity related strategies potentially become totalitarian. First, because the tribal culture imagined to be authentic is defined in opposition to neighbouring ones that are seen as radically different, and because this alleged alterity entails a principle of exclusion whose logical conclusion is ethnic cleansing. And second, because the imagined culture assigns to those individuals who are supposed to belong to it a simplified identity that they are expected to endorse, if necessary via coercion. This is like providing an identity kit for the tribes. Extreme forms of ethno-nationalism draw on great ways of misreading others and in turn misreading oneself.¹⁸ Even though imagined communities resulting from the invention of tradition have totalitarian tendencies, they need not always be realized. The actual processes of 'building' identity-related autonomous areas of various types of autonomy require compromise with the processes of political organization. The complex interaction of forces and social institutions, the influence of demography, the limits of economy, and the practices of the actors involved, both native and non-native, all have impact on the totalitarian tendencies. Northeast India is in the grip of the invention of political modernity hidden behind the veneer of invention of tradition. Ethnicity in the region is ambivalent, as it is simultaneously a principle of exclusion and due to its totalitarian tendency, a vehicle of a new moral economy of the *tribal hegemonistic provincial state* replete with compromises limiting the totalitarian tendency.

Identity Creation and Dialectical Unity of India

By asserting the irreducible difference of tribal identities culturalism contributes

in a strange way to the dialectical unity of India and its culture. It has legitimized the unacknowledged borrowings of mainland educational model, governmental and bureaucratic organization, Christian ecclesiastical schemas, and modern consumption pattern. This has generated great dismay among the backward looking people of various tribes. The borrowings are generally justified by claiming that these would serve the destiny of tribes without altering 'culture.' This is no doubt a healthy view. But this goes against the very philosophical premises of culturalism, which fails to notice, acknowledge and accept that in the very process of these borrowings the primordality of cultures are compromised. Hence none of the tribal culture as it exists can be reduced to the differentiated 'official culture' of these tribes, which they have sought to instrumentalise with varying success, for the purposes of carving out an autonomous political territory with varying degrees of autonomy in post-independent India. This is how the so-called native people of the region are inserting themselves in the state and culture of modern India.

The imagination of the tribal community in Northeast India has not only validated a territorial framework of various kinds of autonomy, the development of new political and administrative institutions, and the allocation of economic resources or social status, but also led to the emergence of new moral, economic, and political values that have been disputed, but generally ending up providing legitimacy to tribal-hegemonistic political formation of various kinds. The natives who collaborated with the British served not only their own economic interests along with those of their supposed masters, but also incarnated ideals, norms, lifestyles, bodies of knowledge that might inspire sympathy or fascination. In this task of inventing tradition and imagining the tribal community, the British and native often acted together, sometimes within the same institutions, the same intellectual currents, and the same beliefs. Thus the British were the first to attend to the reification of custom and culture in the region. This was done to differentiate the British themselves from the natives. It allowed them to consolidate their racial identity and their social status in a context whose precariousness we tend retrospectively to minimize. In this way the British administrators forged a quasi-aristocratic lifestyle in order to overcome the isolation in which they found themselves and to preserve their dignity as 'civilized' people among and against the 'barbaric' natives.

The culturalist interpretation of the tribes of the region is an outcome of the experiences of fear of the British administrators. The colonizers were not abstract agents of social change. They were flesh and blood actors and

came from concrete historical societies. In their own society they had experienced relationships of inequality, participated in political debates, and acquired mental representations, occupied precise positions and had harboured ambitions, frustrations, convictions, and dreams. Colonizers were a divergent lot: their origins and values were disparate, their colonial project divergent, and their culturalism was not of the same kind. Hence, there were conflicts between the administrators and the missionaries and it raised the problem of cultural relativism in many ways. For the administrator the cultural difference between themselves and the natives was for respective mastery and servitude. The missionary also saw that the tribes, in their nonage, are perfectible. Thus the missionaries saw in this situation an opportunity to raise the native to the dignity of modern individualism and the nuclear family, even at the cost of recasting the tribal social formation. The contradiction of the colonizers percolated to the tribal communities through the medium of the school and the mission. The natives perceived and related differently with the two components of the British colonialism: the administration and the mission.

The British were also responsible for another aspect of the officially projected culture of tribes. British imperial expansion was concomitant of industrial revolution. Industrialization threatened the innocence of countryside and corrupted the cities in industrial England. The colonizers carried this sensibility to their colonies. Hence, Christian missions put a great stress on the idealized representation of the rural life in the colonies. But the missionaries' attitude was very confused and constantly oscillated between two positions. On one hand, they rejected backward and barbaric customs and hence sought to reform the tribes in order to lead them to the threshold of civilization, for example, by encouraging trade. On the other they had naïve respect for tribal authenticity, which could only be rural, and which had to be defended against the cupidity of traders, the brutality of administrators, the corrosive effects of money, the foolish attraction to the trinkets of modern Western civilization, and, last but not the least, the pernicious evangelism of competing missions and denominations. Tribes creatively transformed European cultural forms, rejecting both these approaches. They neither became individualists nor shunned the cities. While remaining faithful to Christianity, they developed ecclesiastical institutions and rituals, they started wearing shorts and trousers, and went off to become urban city-dwellers. But the missionary myth of village community did not die. Even the British colonial administration which laid great emphasis on its ethos of the bureaucratic 'gentry' and was convinced of the benefits of Indirect Rule, took pleasure in this vision of

tribal life, going so far as to create protected inner lines to save the idyllic rural culture of tribes from the corrupting influence of the outsiders. The same policy was adopted after independence. The joint invention of tradition by the British and the natives is inseparable from the key concept of the rural village community. The strengthening of the village structure is largely attributable to the British bureaucracy, which co-opted its notables as intermediaries, and expanded their para-administrative functions. Even now one hears the expression 'gaon burah' meaning the village headman, who was a key figure for administration of tribes. This explains why romanticism of rural life is part of invented official culture of tribes even though it is never a part of life they actually aspire.

The romanticism of village life is in fact an eulogization of the 'ethics of subsistence.' It is also a calculated aversion to risk in an economically precarious situation in the name of social justice. The emphasis placed on reciprocity, and the defense of traditional rights and obligations, in short the rural 'moral economy,' is not really a resistance on the part of backward-looking communitarian representations of natives when confronted with progress. Rather, it is the development and outcome of conflict in a modern context where countryside is undergoing a transformation under the pressure of modernity. The village community obliterates simultaneously the place of outsiders on the margins of the village, and inequality among insiders within it. Even though such 'village community' is a myth, but through this allegory British administrators, nationalists, religious men, 'developers', intellectuals, businessmen, and tourists discussed the genesis of modernity, a process in which they were directly involved, and to which they were – in the name of the interest of the village life - strongly opposed. The British administrators were concerned to defend the village life of tribes, the embodiment of their exotic culture against the activities of predatory outside traders and lazy bureaucrats. Nationalist leaders, who were also in search of genuine development from below, tried to retain collectivization programmes centered on the village. Men of religion dreamt of a mythical village in the form of a robust parish. Foresters and planters negotiated with the appropriate 'chief' in order to win over the village whose land they coveted for investment. Now the dialogue among various speakers of the fable of the idyllic tribal village life has become surreal and absurd. But that is not the essential point. What is important is that in its multiple versions more or less racist, relativist, or substantialist, culturalism provides precisely one of the idioms through the intervention of which more and more actors in Northeast India interact with

each other. As the idiom of village community is becoming stronger in the culture, it is not really strengthening village community; rather it is utilized for the flourishing city life in the region. It is the city dwellers who are eulogizing village life while the villagers aspire to dwell in a city and migration from rural to urban areas in the region is indeed increasing.

Even though Christianity brought global universalism to Northeast India yet it culturally codified particularism conceived in terms of ethnicity and tribes. Missionaries translated the scriptures into native languages and helped in standardizing them in order to make these languages better vehicles for their preaching. With Protestants co-opting the indigenous leadership, local religious entrepreneurs soon reinvented difference by establishing many so-called 'independent' Christian churches, structured ecclesiastically but inspired by local tribal ethos, and hence making themselves exclusive churches of this or that tribe. This is not only the revenge of the region's cultures on Christianity or 'inculturation' of the Testament, but also the establishment of religious bureaucratic organization in the region. These independent churches during last few decades have been heavily influenced by global political, economic, and religious transformations. They enable the religious entrepreneur to extract resources from the international environment, and even from the community of faithful. At the same time, in the best cases, the latter are provided with a few tangible benefits such as free education. These churches have adopted identity-related strategy of culturalist and particularist type, and are also active in that preachers can infer from their doctrines the necessity of supporting one political group against another in the latter's political struggles. But the political character of religious mobilization goes beyond the problem of the apolitical stance affected by most religious organizations. The connection between the religious sphere and the political sphere is neither explicit nor functional. These churches are participating in the diffusion of a bureaucratic *imaginaire* and in appropriation of a modern provincial state organization (a Western phenomenon), to which their emphasis on morality and their sense of the collectivity is leading, and this is giving rise to a new form of legitimacy different from a tribal one. A new political subjectivity is taking place more than ever through the mediation of religious mobilizations, and that through this play of mirrors between tribal culture and the western culture the relation between local tribes and the processes of 'modernization,' and 'globalization' is constantly being negotiated. In some cases the entire tribal society, like Hmars of Manipur, has become church society and yet such societies claim to be tribes with primordial culture.

Cultural Dynamics

The intersection of the processes of inventing tradition, which has been constitutive of the general movement of modernization and globalization, reminds us that there is no culture that is not created, and that this creation is usually very recent. Moreover, the formation of a culture or a tradition necessarily involves dialogue, and occurs in interaction with its regional, national and international environment. As it was mentioned, the culturalist argument implicitly takes for granted that a political community corresponds to a cultural coherence, whether the latter is original and hereditary or rationally determined and chosen. This is an illusion. It is also necessary not to be duped by the ferocious identity-related conflicts. These events are themselves merely the late harvest of the cultural closure of earlier times. We need to understand not only identity related closure but also the indecisiveness about identity or processes of cultural expansion. That is to say we need to understand the dynamics of homogenization as well as those of heterogenization. Here culturalism cannot help us because it is beset with three methodological errors: first, it maintains that a culture is a corpus of representations that is stable over time; second, it sees this corpus as closed on itself, and, three, it assumes that this corpus determines a specific political orientation. Thus, it fails to understand the dynamics of evolving culture.

As soon as one begins to reflect on culture, one has to take into account of heritage, of what is received from earlier ages and inculcated in new generations. But if we are really cultured, i.e., have a cultivated mind we cannot afford to forget here the production of the new in the culture, the creativity of culture. One is greatly tempted to remember only the first aspect of the concept of culture, and to emphasize transmission, reproduction, permanence, continuity and weight of culture. Hence, culture has come to be represented as a principle determining attitudes that resist transformation. But history attests to the fact that culture in reality does not exclude transformation, and hence culture is also innovative and creative. Cultures undergo evolution, transformation and even metamorphoses. In this dialectic of old and new many a time new is nothing but revitalization of something old. The dialectic of permanence and transformation of culture proceeds *in part* from the relationship that *every* society is bound to have with its political and commercial environment. Ancient societies, instead of being isolated from each other, constituted a system of political, commercial, and cultural relations, and were structured by those ties with outside.¹⁹ Naga tribes for instance had relationship with Ahom kingdom. Hence, modernization does

not consist in a universal endogenous evolution from the traditional to the modern society; rather it involves regional or international emulation.²⁰ The emblems of cultural identity often result from borrowing. Emblematic habits of the tribes in Northeast India are often a late product of emulation. The emblematic guitar of the Khasi popular culture is borrowed. Similarly, ethno-nationalism or sub-nationalism in the region is nothing but recycled European nationalisms.

The culturalists fail to take note of the roles played by innovation and borrowing by assuming that a central, hermetically sealed core of intangible representations persist over centuries. Culturalists also fail to notice the ways in which the social actors produce their history in a conflictual manner, by defining themselves both in relation to their conception of the past and in relation to their conception of the future. At least four cultural operations recur with regularity in the field of politics in conflictual cultural identity formation according to Bayart: tactics or strategies of extraversion, practices of transfer, procedures of authentication, and the processes of forming primordial identities.²¹ In cultural extraversion one uses foreign cultural elements in native culture to achieve some objectives. It may be used as a strategy or tactics. The post independent tribal syncretism through extraversion, which was institutionalized through the mediation of various tribal-sub-national movements, was a strategy for the project of totalizing the adversary, i.e., Indian nation, in a distinct, visible, and objectivisable space.

British domination of the region before independence had opened an immense field for tactics of extraversion, whose accumulation ultimately affected the political formation of tribes. Tribal adoption of Christianity provides a good example of this kind of historical experience. Faced with the Christian missionaries who deployed an evangelism of a culturalist type and sought to legitimize native culture to the point of taking care to respect its established hierarchy, the tribes chose to submit and to accept Christianity. However, they converted to remain as tribes. Hence, over a longer period, this cultural intersection resulted in tribes Christianizing themselves while at the same time remaining tribes in their being and in their beliefs. As remarked earlier the administrators and missionaries gave them a sense of tribal collectivity by collecting their history and describing their culture. Not only did Christian missionaries and British administrators play a role in this but they also were chief matrices of subsequent ethno-nationalism and ethno-sub-nationalism of various tribes. Conversion to Christianity was one of the stages in the native actors' participation in the new political formation and

their instrumentalization of state apparatus and their invented culture.

According to Bayart, "...cultural extraversion implies a second operation: the transfer of meaning from one practice, one place, one representation, one symbol or text, to another, for it is, almost by definition, a reinterpretation and deviation."²² The Christianization of tribes in Northeast India led to osmosis between the foreign faith and ancient beliefs. The tribal celebrations found their niches in the interstices of Christian celebrations. Christianity had not been averse to appropriation for its own purposes the power of the sites or symbols of tribal religions by transfer of sacredness to these sites and symbols. Transfer of meaning links culture as heritage and culture as innovation to maintain continuity through political transformation. Symbolic shift from one sphere of society to another is systematic, and is basic to the processes of shaping the politics. Hence one should not be surprised if transfer of meaning characterizes the extreme identity-related strategies and if forgetfulness or lies play an exaggerated role in the reading of the past, as in the claim that Nagas were always a 'sovereign nation'. Even anachronistic meanings on texts were given for this purpose. One is not surprised if the leaders of NSCN (IM) tried to bring unity among the Naga tribes by raising the slogan 'Nagalim for Christ',²³ if someone reads western enlightenment in Soso Tham's lamentations on the lost cultural heritage, or finds 'worldview' in the tribal outlook, and even discovers an 'epistemology' and 'rationality' to compete with modern epistemologies and rationality and hears the claims regarding Naga "sovereignty" from time immemorial. But such transfers of meaning should not be viewed as subterfuges peculiar to identity-related radicalism, rather political action of any kind depends on such transfers of meaning, very much like oscillation of meaning of 'Hindu' back and forth from religion to culture in the vocabulary of some political parties.

How is such transfer of meaning possible? Bayart answers, "An everyday procedure of social life, the transfer of meaning is based on ambiguity and artifice."²⁴ Culturalists demand authenticity for culture, and if culture is not authentic, authenticity can be fabricated. They claim to preserve the original purity of tribal identity from external pollution and the aggressions of the Other, if need be by reconstituting, in an authoritarian manner, their pure culture, at the end of the regressive process. One hears so much about the need of protecting the admirable innocence of rural native tribals. But unfortunately determining the criterion for what is or is not authentic is always problematic. Authenticity is not established by the immanent properties of

the phenomenon of culture. What one finds authentic depends on the perspective, coloured by desires and judgments, from which one looks at the past. This perspective is always the perspective from contemporary context in which one is situated. Hence, authenticity is always conventional and socially constructed. Thus, authentic past of a culture is always a partially reconstructed past. This is how the “official costume” of Nagas becomes their authentic culture and the fabled original absence of clothing is not recognized as authentic Naga culture. Why do tribes indulge in this kind of discourse on an entirely reconstituted, fantasized authentic past? The reason is there is dissatisfaction among them with the present state of their cultures. This dissatisfaction with the present finds expression in quest for authenticity, as it is an implicit critical commentary on the present state of culture.²⁵ Hence, authenticity is also a matter of bitter dispute, as the concern for authenticity is often connected with transformation of tribe and authenticity determines the changes in scale of reference. The NNC factions and NSCN (K) were questioned by the NSCN (IM) thus: “How could there be unity between the dead and the living, between darkness and light, between rust and steel, between the reactionary traitors and the revolutionary patriots, between tribalism and the socialism of the NSCN? It is simply a pity for one to talk of unity between the totally perishing Phizo’s clique and vigorously risen forces of the NSCN.”²⁶ Quest for authenticity is thus one of the expressions of modernity and globalization. Culturalist reasoning posits the existence of a permanent inner core peculiar to each culture that confers on the latter its authentic nature and determines the present. But what actually happens is the process of elaboration of culture in the areas of ideology and sensibility that speaks to contemporaries by fabricating the past.²⁷

The genesis of particular tribal identities in the post independent political space is not so much for rejection of Indian state, as these are an inventive adaptation to the radical political changes represented by independence for appropriating its institutions (provincial political institutions) and sharing in its resources. Identity related strategies betray the hunger of the new tribal elites, eager to be integrated, for power and wealth. Tribal identities were formed as minimum winning coalition, large enough to secure benefits in the competition for spoils, but also small enough to maximize the *per capita* value of these benefits.²⁸ The middle classes, bureaucrats, intellectuals, and students (or dropouts) have played a far greater role in the radicalization of identity-related conflicts, as witnessed in the region, compared to the masses. These elites did not activate already constituted communities whose identity

was dormant. Far from pre-existing the state, primordial groups ethnic or tribal, of which they claim to be representatives, are the more or less creation of the state itself. In most of the cases crystallization of particular tribal identities, such as we know them today, took place in the British period, under the combined (but possibly conflictual) action of the foreign occupiers, their native collaborators and their adversaries. Colonial state was only one contingent factor in the process of identity formation. Post independent state and economic change also produced identity related logics.

Weberian approach correctly sees tribe as a political artifact generally established by the state, colonial or otherwise, of which it is a subdivision. This approach denied the utility of the concept of ethnicity.²⁹ Unfortunately Weber does not pursue his thought to its logical conclusion, and instead contrasts ethnic membership or ‘presumed identity’ with a group based on family relationships and endowed with a ‘concrete social action’, whose historical character he nonetheless recognizes. In fact, family relationships are also an artifact, ‘an idiom rather than a system’, through which actors constantly negotiate their membership in groups and their social allegiance. As such, it is above all a field of conflict – for example, it was the main site of head hunting in Nagaland – before possibly becoming a field of solidarity and collective action.

Here one should not be confused by expressions like ‘community bound by ties of blood and commonality of fate,’ which are denizens of the domain of illusion and have no real foundation. Tribe is a city in the head. Tribe is less a basic solidarity than a basic animosity. The habit of differentiating oneself from Other is primordial, and solidarity with one’s own people is only a ricochet action. The old adage says, ‘With my brother against my cousin, with my cousin against my neighbour, etc.’³⁰

When we are theorizing about tribes we must keep in mind that possibilities of matrimonial alliances have long been transmitted within networks in which family ties and matrimonial strategies are closely intertwined. These networks are not fixed entities, and it would be futile to classify them. These networks are not more or less identifiable groups but set of potentialities that may be realized in accord with concrete situations. For example operation of voting is one of the phases in which this relational system is actualized. No tribal identity can be fixed through the possibility of matrimonial alliances, even if the tribes did not allow matrimonial alliance outside the tribe. The tribal identities we talk about are made (and unmade) only through the mediation of such indentificatory acts, in short, by their enunciation. For

example Naga identity and Bodo identity are prime examples of making of identities through mediation of identificatory acts.³¹

An individual's acts of identification are always contextual, multiple and relative. For example, the same person can be a Dimapuri, a Mao, a Naga, a Northeast tribal, an officer, a Catholic, a husband, and a sick person. Each of these identities is presumed and may promote integration into a social group in the political sphere. None of these identities exhausts the totality of identities that an individual can claim. "The cultural argument is flawed because, not being satisfied with erecting into an atemporal substance identities in continual mutation, it conceals the concrete operations by which an actor or a group of actors define themselves, at a specific historical moment, in given circumstances for a limited time."³² There is no doubt that Nagas and Kukis killed each other in the name of their respective tribal identities, but if both of these groups were motivated solely by this one identity-related factor, then they did not need to wait for almost seven decades to kill each other again. Anyone who studies a concrete society constantly encounters such changes, as well as leaps from one identity-related register to another. The nature of inter-tribal violence defies explanation if we do not take into account these changes of identity register, which is sometimes accompanied by violence. Although we are convinced of the artificial origin of the common ethnicity and tribe, we must acknowledge the terrible efficacy of identities that are *felt* to be primordial. "In some sense, primordial identities 'exist', but only as mental facts and regimes of subjectivity, not as structures. Instead of being explanatory factors, they must themselves be explained: while we agree that 'identity considered ethnographically, must always be mixed, relational, and inventive,' that is 'conjectural and not essential', it remains to be understood under what conditions a group of individuals apprehends it in the form of a permanent, primordial core in order to follow political magicians who instrumentalize this illusion to their own advantage."³³ The production of identities, and thus also the production of cultures is relational; it reflects a relationship to the Other as much as a relationship to the Self. The identity emanates less from a privileged institutional site of the symbolic process and from the heart of societies, than from their fringes and their hollows.³⁴ Naga identity did not spring from the *morungs* or other traditional Naga institutions but from the Naga club, where the returnees from the First World War met to discuss organization of football matches.

Culture does not exist so much as a matter of conforming or identifying as it is a matter of constructing and performing. It requires fabricating

something new out of something old, and also sometimes making something old out of something new. The final error of culturalism is not only it fails to understand the logic of such cultural operations but also it attributes these cultural operations to precise political orientations. Cultural identity does not emerge from political actors' negotiation with a single cultural corpus, namely their culture; it also involves borrowing from other cultures. Identity assertion or identity-related withdrawal is an inventive response to the challenges of the changing world, i.e., of creation of independent state or globalization. Hence in studying any concrete tribe, we discern a plurality of cultural repertoires. What we call about a political culture is a result, a more or less muddled synthesis, of these heterogeneous elements. Obviously independent state formation and globalization has intensified and systematized effects of juxtaposition or osmosis. But the phenomenon was already in evidence before globalization and independent state formation as it is the very essence of the reality of culture. To understand a political culture one needs to reconstruct the cognitive connections between one era and another, which often consists in exchanges between one culture and another. The logic of cultural closure, which is also inherent in the invention of tradition, conceals these linkages intentionally or unintentionally. Thus the fabrication of tribal identity by European scholars and their native emulators has led to a de-Christianized understanding of tribe, while in fact they are steeped in Christianity. The Christian stratum in the tribal identity cannot be ignored even when it is concealed by silence. In the tribal identity one can discern multiple layers and osmosis of local culture, British legacy, Christian heritage, Hinduism etc. Do tribes not look for myths of origin - like genesis in Bible - in their fables? Are not most of the tribal languages written in borrowed scripts from the West or mainland India? Are the traditional robes not created? According to Bayart, "The complex relations between political action and cultural repertoires are created precisely in the darkness of these muddy waters that all the ethnic cleansing in the world will never make clear... But unfortunately culturalists still believe firmly in the existence of an incandescent core at the heart of each culture, which traverse undisturbed across centuries. Ultimately, it is this very concept of culture that is the problem..."³⁵ It is this concept which gives support to the illusion of cultural totalities and coherences with their lethal power, where in reality we find indeterminism, incompleteness, multiplicity and polyvalence.

As reading of a text is part of its production, so also reception and perception of a cultural phenomenon is part of its formation. Philosophy of

culture, cultural anthropology, cultural sociology, political science are not innocent disinterested perceptions of what is there but part of the interested production and formation of culture. In fact in the field of politics or political field utterances and announcements are performative.

Social *Imaginaire*

There is no culturally homogeneous political society. Political societies do not form cultural wholes. Every political society is characterized by the radical heterogeneity that culturalism – along with other trends in the social sciences – seeks desperately to conceal. Yet how is the illusion of culturally homogeneous political society maintained?

Here what French scholars call *imaginaire* comes into play to correlate culture and politics.³⁶ According to Bayart, the *imaginaire* is not unreal, but the inability to distinguish the real from the unreal.³⁷ *Imaginaire* although irreducible to any of the two or both – passion and imagination – shares in the properties of both. As the seat of passion, and of imagination, of aesthetics, of symbolic activity, the *imaginaire* is by definition both a domain of immediation and a domain of ambivalence. Both are utilized in tribal identity creation to make it a basis of political identity. In all societies, in Bayart's view, the blotter of the *imaginaire* soaks up the ink of political action. Ultimately the *imaginaire* becomes delirious inducing a kind of deep incapacity to distinguish what belongs to the present from what belongs to the past, what belongs to reality from what belongs to dream. The world of images can be identified with the major issues in a society to the point of incarnating them. All electoral campaign and advertisement depend on this principle, and hence, the torrent of electoral marketing and advertisement turn image and vision into a reality. The *imaginaire* has played a crucial role in formation of political tribal identities. This has happened through the theatricalization of politics. This is the most potent operation of the political *imaginaire* in the creation of the political tribal identity. Here empathy links the political 'actor' and his 'spectator', political orator and his audience. The spectators and the audience participate in the plot woven by the political actor through their exclamations or replies, by their laughter or tear, and by whole-heartedly accepting magic of the 'illusion' and the 'illusion' gets the appearance of the immediate reality. The act of imagination builds up something so that it "stands" for a while. According to Bayart, "The immediacy – or, to adopt the philosopher's term, 'immediation' – of political rituals, grasped in their evanescence, has to do with the 'emotion', 'passion', or 'feeling' they elicit"

from the onlookers and "...the emotional spectrum of politics is broad: it involves hatred, fear, grief and tears that are not necessarily explained by fear or grief."³⁸ These reactions should not be taken too lightly. Spinoza saw in passions the causes and the foundations of political society, of its institutions and their disorders.³⁹ What political actor brings to "stand" for a while is for a purpose, to utilize it to achieve his political goals and hence it is a false culture. Since this has only instrumental value, the instrument is discarded after the goal is achieved. It never becomes a permanent lived performative culture. It vanishes when the political identity is forged.

But it leaves a permanent intended identity and also leaves a permanent trace in subjectivation. These emotions evoked by the political actor works towards production of subjectivity, i.e., work towards subjectivation. "Subjectivation is the production of modes of existence or lifestyles."⁴⁰ According to Bayart, "The sphere of politics constantly interacts with the process of subjectivation, even when the latter seem to emerge uniquely from the heart of private life."⁴¹ This relationship between the conception of subjectivity and political action is not only permanent but also crucially work in both ways. If the political actor works for subjectivation, so also without being necessarily aware, on whom he works for subjectivation also in turn shapes his subjectivity. People expect their political leaders to have specific qualities. The repertoires of subjectivation are draped in the mantle of tradition and culture and they are fundamentally ambivalent, and this ambivalence is merely the flipside of their transience as this subjectivation is for a creation of permanent tribal hegemonistic state. One of the qualities one expects in leaders of the region is to deal with 'India' perceived and totalized as a superior alien power. This quality may be named *mètis*. In ancient Greece, *mètis* "presided over all activities in which a man had to learn how to maneuver hostile forces that were too powerful to be controlled directly, but which could be used in spite of themselves, without ever confronting them face to face, in order to realize in an unexpected way the goal one had in mind."⁴² Further, "In any situation of confrontation or competition ... success can be obtained in two ways. Either by superiority in 'power' in the domain in which the battle takes place, the stronger winning, or by using procedures of another order, whose effect is precisely to falsify the results of the trial and to cause to win the one who might have been thought certain to be beaten. The success provided by *mètis* thus takes on an ambiguous meaning: depending on the context, it can lead to contrary reactions. Sometimes it will be seen as the result of fraud, the rules of the game not having been followed. At other

times, it will arouse admiration, in proportion to its unexpectedness, the weaker, against all likelihood, having found within him sufficient resources to put the stronger at his mercy. In some respects *mètis* is oriented towards dishonest trickery, perfidiously lying or treachery, despised weapon used by women and cowards. But in other respects it is sort of absolute weapon, the only one that has the power to ensure in any situation, and no matter what the conditions of the battle might be, victory and domination over the other.”⁴³ The agent, in politics, economy, and education of the region – whether he is preacher or teacher, trader or trafficker – borrows his characteristics which pertain to *mètis* to reverse his alliances, deceive the adversary, fool the naïve, set up schemes of financial fraud, or cross borders. Even in academic field academics is defeated by borrowing procedures from alien field, i.e., field of politics. Evidence of this is can be found in the ceasefire politics of militant groups who use ceasefire as an opportunity to regroup. Similarly evidence of this is to be found also in the embedded practice of whitewashing presented in front of review committees of central government. This is not a mere response by a dependent out of dependency, rather such activities have their own positivity and degree of autonomy under the euphemism of image building. There are people who act as agents of law and order at one moment and causing mayhem at another like rebel groups who protect and also cause mayhem. This type is also visible in the academia adorning the positions of power to maintain law and order but who have no compunction in siding with lawlessness and condoning violence on the campus at the drop of a hat. In the larger society people insist on implementation of law when it suits them, but the same people resist implementation of and flout law when it protects and suits ‘Others’. When there is heat on militants by the armed forces there are loud protests by many NGOs who become active brokers of peace but when ‘Others’ are killed in the region there is a deafening silence all around.⁴⁴ It is through such social types that Northeast India inserts itself legally as well as illegally into national and international system. It is such social types that are active in illegal drugs, arms trade and fraud. The frequency with which trickery is employed as a form of action is an indication of one of the key characteristics of people in the region, namely negotiability, convertibility and malleability of their constituents. This is exhibited by the experience of people in terms of their relationship to the tribal world and conversion to Christianity, invention of ethnicity as well as easy implantation of the money and consumer goods of capitalist economy.

These procedures of subjectivation are woven through the fabric of

society, all the more because they often invoke the redefinition, or even the refoundation of the *tribal political formation* and its subjects. “They tend to set in motion representations that claim to be primordial, appealing to blood, sperm, land, identity, or authenticity. Insofar as they are procedures of subjectivation, the interweaving of tradition, on which identity-based political strategies are found, becomes so passionate, and even phantasmal and phobic, that they end up becoming sinister *imaginaire* of purity.”⁴⁵ The Other is then seen as polluting the integrity of the community, the race and the place. “This threat is felt in the arcana of sexuality as well as in those of death. The futile quest for pure identity is always pursued in specific, complex social contexts. But it can be reduced to a tragically simplifying equation that shows the superiority and integrity of the Self through the physical degradation and symbolic destruction of the Other. This is, in particular, the meaning of the modern form of torture that no longer seeks to obtain information or confessions, but to create the Enemy, to purify the social body of its soiled elements, to deconstruct the humanity of the subversive.”⁴⁶ Here what comes into operation is the ambivalence of the culture in that culture without being false is not true either. The *imaginaire* has to do with this grey area between the true and the false, which is revealed in the twofold act of instrumentalization and adhesion. In other words, it is the principle of ambivalence, which political operators cultivate.

As the seat of passions, of aesthetics, of symbolic activity, the *imaginaire* is by definition both a domain of ambivalence⁴⁷ and a domain of immediation, as pointed out before. As soon as we acknowledge its central place in political practices, we see that the latter are, also by definition, ambivalent.⁴⁸ This property of politics is largely unrecognized.⁴⁹ It is high time that we acknowledged ambivalence as an intrinsic characteristic of politics. The culturalist denies that ambivalence is a constitutive property of the political. But the cultural bases of politics proceed through metaphors, which are by nature ambivalent. There are no strategies of cultural extraversion, of transfer of meaning, of procedures of authentication, of the formation of primordial identities, and no polysemy of the discursive genres of politics without a hefty dose of ambivalence. The latter is, so to speak, the fuel of political annunciation.

Ultimately the political arena is like a theater in which what counts is not merely people’s action (and still less their intentions and principles), but the effects produced by their actions, the way in which they are understood, perceived, and interpreted. This is all the more true because of over-

interpretation. This is a recurrent characteristic, for example, of massacres. In their phantasmal sources, contemporary strategies of identity function in the same way. The ethnic descriptions of political and social cleavages now operate as a 'self-fulfilling prophecy', any or each of the groups involved calculating that its adversary has planned its extermination and acting accordingly. These are extreme situations. Nevertheless, they remind us that the phantasm of conspiracy is a strong and universal form of political *imaginaire*.

Conclusion

The lived culture that is performed by the tribes in Northeast India is the same modern material culture embodied in consumption, dress, hair style, politics, economy, education, healthcare, religion etc., but all this without the spirit and ideal of modernity. The ideal culture, which is presented as basis of differentiation, is the invented primordial culture, which is no more in being in performance, but resides as objects in museums and photographs. This disjunction between the lived performative culture and the advocated invented 'official culture' has its effects especially in the arena of education. This disjunction prevents the development of *habitus*, the modern enlightenment habitus, required for modernization, which the modern school, college and universities are attempting to impart. Similarly this kind of disjunction prevents the significance of the parable of good Samaritan sinking into the heart of individuals in spite of adoption of Christianity. It is this disjunction that is propelling the subjectivation towards *mètis* mentality.

It may be said on behalf of the tribes that the impenetrable traditions of the tribes still lives on as it has lost none of its vitality, however misrepresented that tradition may be even in the minds of tribals, and that Christian church and modern material culture are just a superficial superimposition. Be that as it may, one cannot ignore the new solidarity of Christian church, neither can one ignore the new political solidarity manifested in the fanaticism of political demonstrations and organization of state apparatus for the purpose of reaping the benefits of modernity. These new solidarities that project an image – and perhaps not just an image – are competing with or at least exist juxtaposed to the surviving traditional tribal solidarities. Hence, if the tribes in Northeast India want to have an authentic understanding of their lived performative culture they have to (1) come out of the illusion of pure primordial tribal culture and (2) acknowledge both Christianity and modernity sans its ideal as their culture and (3) undertake the theoretical task of conceptual reconciliation

between three things: their tribal conceptual repertoire, Christian faith, and modern conceptual categories. Without this threefold reconciliation a false tribal culture will remain instrumentalized in tribal identity formation by their elite for the goal of creation and consolidation of tribal hegemonistic political territory of various kinds of autonomy to satisfy the hunger of elite for power and economic goods. So far the tribes in the region have set their eyes on the objective culture of modernity, to use Simmel's terminology, but the tribal mind has not yet distanced itself from this material culture for subjective culture, i.e., for cultivating the mind, which develops at a much slower pace. Since modern consumption culture is adopted by them, the value of untrammled and self-exceeding selfhood, with its excited intensity and mobility of desire, reigns supreme. But this is not balanced by production or ethics of production, requiring self-restraint of desire, as it is not adopted. This situation has the potentiality to produce a culture which is "prodigal, promiscuous, dominated by an anti-rational, anti-intellectual temper in which the self is taken as the touchstone of cultural judgments and the effect on the self is the measure of the aesthetic worth of experience."⁵⁰ Of course, the self here has to be the self of the tribal. No one else counts. So the culture here is likely to remain as a curious juxtaposition of borrowed fragments of modernity and the exhausted relics of invented tradition turning itself into agitated stagnancy to stagnant agitation in the present, keeping it equally remote from past as well as from future.

Notes and References

- 1 Binod Kumar Agarwala, "Performative Culture: A Phenomenological Ontology of Culture," *The NEHU Journal*, 9(2): 25-48.
- 2 Jean-Francois Bayart, *The Illusion of Cultural Identity*, translated by Steven Rendall, Janet Roitman and Jonathan Derrick, Hurst & Company, London, 2005.
- 3 This kind of double tendencies are discernible in the news of *The Times of India*, North-East, Saturday, May 8, 2010 on the first page under the heading "Film on Konyaks at Cannes festival": Riding on a short film on one of its fiercest fighters, Konyak Nagas, Northeast India is set to make its mark at the Cannes Film Festival beginning on May 12. Directed by Vikeyeno Zao, an Angami Naga woman, last of the tattooed head hunters, will be screened at the famed festival in the short film category. The 15-minute film is based on the head hunting tradition of Konyaks and the ritualistic details connected with it that continued till the mid-20th century. Head hunting was part of Konyak's

survival strategy in a harsh land where they had to fight for their turf with other equally fearsome warrior tribes. “They (Konyaks) are culturally very rich but economically poor...” said Indrajit Narayan Dev, the film’s producer and husband of Zao. “The principal reason for making this film is to present to the world the last tattooed Konyak Nagas before they are gone forever,” she [Zao] explained. Modern Konyaks have forgotten their tradition and are marching ahead with rest of the world.

⁴ This passage is quoted from Paul Bohannan, *We the Alien: An Introduction to Cultural Anthropology*, by Gary B. Palmer and William R. Jankowiak, “Performance and Imagination: Toward an Anthropology of the Spectacular and the Mundane,” *Cultural Anthropology*, Vol. 11, No. 2 (May, 1996), p.225.

⁵ “I am afraid that the celebrated cultural identities are being erased by modernization, by Americanisation, by television, by a whole process of making modes of life uniform.” Quoted by Bayart, *The Illusion of Cultural Identity*, p.7 from P. Hassner, *La violence et la paix, Dela bombe atomique au nettoyage ethnique*, Paris: Esprit, 1995, p.309.

⁶ Cf. Bayart, *The Illusion of Cultural Identity*, p.8 and F. Braudel, *Grammaire des civilisations*, Paris: Arthaud-Flammarion, 1987, pp. 38-9.

⁷ J. N. Rosenau, *Turbulence in World Politics: A Theory of Change and Continuity*, Princeton University Press, 1990, p.143; A. Giddens, *Modernity and Self-identity: Self and Society in the Late Modern Age*, Stanford University Press, 1991.

⁸ Bayart, *The Illusion of Cultural Identity*, p.9.

⁹ “It is doubtful if such marginalities exist in other cultures of India. Take the tribal cultures – at least the ones I know something about. Although for many, a sense of marginality has been created by larger and more powerful cultures so that a merger or an amnesiac identification with the larger cultures becomes easily possible, many of them, miraculously perhaps, have retained a sense of both functional and moral-spiritual autonomy which provides, as it were, the springs of action for them. Such autonomy is, of course, continuously under threat, but the very fact that it has survived shows that they do not assign a marginal status to themselves; and they can have fairly authentic romantic ideas of a ‘once flourishing’ cultural being.” Mrinal Miri, “Community, Culture, Nation” <http://www.india-seminar.com/2005/550/550%20mrinal%20miri.htm> (accessed on April, 10, 2010, at 5.35 a.m.)

¹⁰ All identity movements in Northeast India - Assam, Nagaland, Mizoram, Meghalaya etc. - were inspired by such dreams.

¹¹ For example under the impact of modernization the standardization of Khasi language took place superceding multiple dialects of Khasi people. But this

happened through multiple claims of different dialects to represent the standard Khasi language. C. R. Agera writes in his “Cultural Diversity and Bio-Diversity: A study through Language Diversity,” *The NEHU Journal*, Vol VII, No. 1, 2009, p.22, “...there are several dialects of the same language, but a particular form may be accepted as the standard version for both speaking, and, more importantly, for the written communication and such other important communicative functions as administration, education, print and audio-visual media. Thus the particular form of language so chosen is often taught formally through the formative institution of education, formalized through administration, and popularized through media. In Meghalaya, for example, Thomas Jones not only chose the Roman script for the Khasi language, but also chose the Sohra dialect to be the standardized one, amidst stiff resistance from the British officials, to say nothing of the non-Sohra natives... One may experience some artificiality in the use of the standardized form of language, if also a detached formality, while there is a rare spontaneity and intimate freshness in the dialect.”

¹² Jean-Francois Bayart, *The Illusion of Cultural Identity*, p.33.

¹³ North-Eastern Hill University, Shillong - 793022, Meghalaya, India.

¹⁴ Sanjib Baruah, “Confronting Constructionism: Ending India’s Naga War,” *Journal of Peace Research*, Vol. 40, No. 3 (May, 2003), pp. 321- 338, has shown the constructivist nature of Naga identity. The argument applies to all other identities in the region.

¹⁵ For example it was the dialect of Khasis in Sohra that was recognized as the Khasi Language.

¹⁶ Let me quote a long paragraph from Sanjib Baruah, “Confronting Constructionism,” to show how British account of the tribes was accepted by the tribes themselves:

“The expression Naga, wrote John Henry Hutton in his introduction to J. P. Mills’s classic ethnographic account of the Lhota Nagas published in 1922, ‘is useful as an arbitrary term to denote the tribes living in certain parts of the Assam hills, which may be roughly defined as bounded by the Hokong valley in the northeast, the plain of the Brahmaputra Valley to the northwest, of Cachar to the southwest and of the Chindwin to east. In the south the Manipur Valley roughly marks the point of contact between the “Naga” tribes and the very much more closely interrelated group of Kuki tribes - Thado, Lushei, Chin etc.” (Hutton, 1922: xvi). The website of the NSCN-IM (2002) quotes the passage from Hutton to introduce the Naga people and their territories without the qualifications that Hutton had added to his formulation eight decades ago. Rather than calling the expression Naga a ‘useful’ but ‘arbitrary’ term, and saying that they lived ‘in certain parts of the Assam hills’ that Hutton ventured

to describe only 'roughly', the NSCN-IM's website makes Hutton sound very precise about the Nagas 'and their lands'. 'Mr. Hutton defines the land of the Naga people thus', it states, and then goes on to describe 'the area inhabited by the Naga tribes' quoting Hutton. Indeed, the quotation forms part of a paragraph that begins with a precise geographical description of the territory belonging to what the NSCN-IM calls the Naga Nation..." p.322. This is also an example of how the past gets recycled in a new way for identity formation in the present.

¹⁷ Naga tribe formation and Zeliangrong formation are such examples.

¹⁸ The following news report appeared in *The Times of India*, 26 June 2009, under the title, "I'm a victim of racism in India: Mizoram CM," "...I am a victim of racism", the CM said at a seminar on water in Singapore, leaving his fellow delegates red-faced. ...Lalthanhawla said at the meet, 'In India, people ask me if I am an Indian. When I go to south (India), people ask me such questions. They ask me if I am from Nepal or elsewhere. They forget that the Northeast is part of India...I have told many that 'See, I am an Indian like you'.' He then proceeded to detail the racial make-up of the country. 'Indians consist of three races — Dravidians, Aryans and we in the Northeast', he said. Though the remarks are likely to strike a chord among people of Northeast India who often face discrimination in other parts of the country, the fact that they were made at an international forum has left the government embarrassed." This remark comes at a time when people from other parts of India, especially from the Hindi speaking areas, are targets of systematic violence in most parts of Northeast India. They are subject to discrimination both formal and informal in most states of the region, including Mizoram. When the Inner Line Permit system was in place in many states in the region, including Mizoram, there was no free movement of people from rest of India. How will they then know if it is really a part of India? The remark of the Chief Minister of Mizoram clearly demonstrates that it is the Sartrean demonic double of the self in the region, which is projected as "the other." The Mizoram CM was misreading others by ignoring the real doings of people of his state, i.e., by misreading the self. This kind of misreading arises from the tendency to blame others for what really pertains to oneself.

¹⁹ E. Leach, *Political Systems of Highland Burma*, London: Bell, 1954; S.J. Tambiah, *World Conqueror and World Renouncer: A Study of Buddhism and Polity in Thailand against a Historical Background*, Cambridge University Press, 1976, Chs. VII and VIII, and *Culture, Thought and Social Action: An Anthropological Perspective*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1985, ch. VII; G. Balandier, *Anthropologie Politique*, Paris: PUF, 1967, and *sens et puissance, Les dynamiques sociale*, Paris: PUF, 1971; I. Kopytoff (ed.) *The African Frontier: The Reproduction of Traditional African Societies*,

Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987; J.P. Warnier, *Echanges, développement et hierarchies dans le Bamenda précolonial* (Cameroon), Wiesbaden: Franz Steiner Verlag, 1985.

²⁰ R. Bendix, "Tradition and Modernity Reconsidered', *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, IX/3, April 1967, pp.292-346.

²¹ Bayart, *The Illusion of Cultural Identity*, p.71.

²² Bayart, *The Illusion of Cultural Identity*, pp.72f.

²³ H. Srikanth and C.J. Thomas, "Naga Resistance Movement and the Peace Process in Northeast India," *Peace and Democracy in South Asia*, Volume 1, Issue 2, 2005, p.79.

²⁴ Bayart, *The Illusion of Cultural Identity*, p.77.

²⁵ Bayart, *The Illusion of Cultural Identity*, p.78 and J.P. Warnier (ed.), *Le Paradoxe de la marchandise authentique, Imaginaire et consommation de masse*, Paris: L'Harmattan, 1994.

²⁶ V.K. Nuh (ed.), 2002. p. 364. quoted in H. Srikanth & C.J. Thomas, "Naga Resistance Movement and the Peace Process in Northeast India," *Peace and Democracy in South Asia*, Volume 1, Issue 2, 2005, p.79.

²⁷ Bayart, *The Illusion of Cultural Identity*, p.83.

²⁸ R. H. Bates, "Modernization, Ethnic competition and the Rationality of Politics in Contemporary Africa" in D. Rothschild and V. A. Olorunshola (eds), *State versus Ethnic Claims: African policy Dilemmas*, Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1983, pp.152 and 165.

²⁹ M. Weber, *Economy and Society: An Outline of Interpretive Sociology*, ed. G. Roth and C. Wittich, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978, pp.393-5, 389 and 357.

³⁰ Bayart, *The Illusion of Cultural Identity*, pp.91f.

³¹ Bayart, *The Illusion of Cultural Identity*, p.92.

³² Bayart, *The Illusion of Cultural Identity*, p.93.

³³ Bayart, *The Illusion of Cultural Identity*, p.95.

³⁴ R. Rosaldo, *Culture and Truth: The Remaking of Social Analysis*, Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1993, p182.

³⁵ Bayart, *The Illusion of Cultural Identity*, pp.108f.

³⁶ Cf. A. Appadurai, "Disjunction and Difference in the Global Cultural Economy', *Public Culture* 2/2, spring 1990, p. 5; C. Castoriadis, *L'Institution imaginaire de la société*, Paris: Seuil, 1975, pp, 204, 451; P. Veyne, *Les Grecs ont-ils cru à*

leurs mythes? Essai sur l'imagination constitutionne, Paris: Seuil, 1983, pp.11, 137, 12; Jean-Francois Bayart, *Illusion of Cultural Identity*, pp.133-232.

- 37 Hence imagined conspiracies become real conspiracies. Best example is provided by the Nagas. The imagined Naga sovereignty gets posited as the real Naga sovereignty before their subjugation by the British.
- 38 Bayart, *The Illusion of Cultural Identity*, p.151.
- 39 Bayart, *The Illusion of Cultural Identity*, p.152 and A. Matheron, "Passions et institutions selon Spinoza" in C. Lazzeri and D. Reynié (eds), *La Raison d'Etat. Politique et rationalité*, Paris: PUF, 1992, pp.141-70.
- 40 Quoted by Bayart, *The Illusion of Cultural Identity*, pp.152f from G. Deleuze, *Pourparlers 1972-1990*, Paris: Minuit, 1990, p.156.
- 41 Bayart, *The Illusion of Cultural Identity*, p.153.
- 42 Quoted by Bayart, *The Illusion of Cultural Identity*, p.166 from M. Detienne and J. P. Vernant, *Les Ruses de l'intelligence. La mêtis des Grecs*, Paris: Flammarion, 1974, p.57.
- 43 Quoted by Bayart, *The Illusion of Cultural Identity*, p.166 from Detienne and Vernant, *Les Ruses de l'intelligence*, pp.19-20.
- 44 In his review of Sanjib Baruah's *India against Itself: Assam and the Politics of Nationality* Udayon Misra writes, "Baruah is rightly exercised about the violations of human rights by the state. But one feels that his account should have been balanced by the violations committed by organisations like the ULFA... The issue of human rights is being viewed from an increasingly restrictive angle, with each ethnic organisation trying to put forward its own version of human rights. Even ethnic cleansing is being sought to be passed off as a struggle for human rights of a particular ethnic community!" in "Sub-National Challenges to Indian State: An Assamese Perspective," *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol. 35, No. 20 (May 13-19, 2000), p.1730.
- 45 Bayart, *The Illusion of Cultural Identity*, p.160.
- 46 Bayart, *The Illusion of Cultural Identity*, p.160. Also cf. D. Chidester, *Shots in the Streets: Violence and Religion in South Africa*, Cape Town: Oxford University Press, 1992, pp.76ff.; E. Scarry, *The Body in Pain: the Making and Unmaking of the World*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1985; L. DuBois, "Torture and the Construction of an Enemy: the Example of Argentina, 1976-1983", *Dialectical Anthropology*, 15, 1990, pp.317-28; and S. Gregory and D. Timermann, "Ritual of the Modern State: the Case of Torture in Argentina", *ibid.*, 11, 1986, pp.63-72.
- 47 This cultural ambivalence of the tribes in Northeast India is too glaring to be missed: tribes are Christianized and yet the "official identity" of these tribes

will not like to include Christianity in the identity kit.

- 48 The best example is that of P. A. Sangma's National Congress Party (NCP). He is in opposition to Congress-led coalition in the state of Meghalaya, yet his daughter Miss Agatha Sangma who is also an MP of NCP, is a minister in Congress-led coalition government at the centre.
- 49 The entire people can show this ambivalence: one can see the hate and love relationship of tribes with 'outsiders'. They hate 'outsiders' coming to live in their area yet they love to lobby for more funds from 'outside'.
- 50 Daniel Bell, *The Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism*, 2nd edn. London:Heinemann, 1979, p.37.