Chapter 7

ORIGIN NARRATIVES AND TERRITORIALITY

After the presentation of a paper titled ‘The Assam-Burma Frontier’ by J.P. Mills at the Royal Geographical Society, London in 1926, D. G. Hogarth, the president of the society asked if Mills could inform “in two or three words something about the racial families to which the people referred to belong.” Hogarth further continued, “To me they seem singularly unlike what I expected to see, and I was very much intrigued about possible connections with the South Sea Islands. Will he say whether we have a Polynesian race in these hills, and, if so, how it came there?”¹ As a response to the above question, Mills answered:

As to the racial affinities of the Naga, there is a question which no one has ever settled with any satisfaction. They certainly have a Mongolian basis. They are chiefly Mongolian, with possibly a little Negrito blood in them, and they also certainly have affinities with some of the South Sea people. There are similarities of custom; even similarities of words. You can trace some words straight down from the Naga Hills as far as New Zealand. What seems to have happened is that a lot of people came through from the north somewhere and left an offshoot in the Naga Hills, and as they went along left more offshoots in Borneo – the people who made the terraces – and on right through the South Sea Islands. That is the theory which I am inclined to hold, but until we have far more evidence it is not a question we can settle with any certainty.²

J. P. Mills of the Indian Civil Service, as an officio-ethnographer, had written two ‘tribal monographs’ on the Nagas, *The Lhotha Nagas* (1922) and *The Ao Nagas* (1926), and numerous articles on the Nagas as well as other communities in the north-east frontier. According to Hogarth, Mills was “singularly well qualified . . . because not only has he been an Administrative Officer”, and that he was “keenly interested not merely in the geography

² Ibid, p. 301.
but also in the anthropology of the tribes, a rather rare combination.\(^3\) He was indeed considered an authority on the subject. His observations on the ‘racial affinity’ of the Nagas, however, also suggest a more generally accepted contemporary theory in race—mobility and miscegenation. At the same time, the observations also trace an attempt to find out both the connections of the Nagas with various other ‘races’ and their possible ‘origin’. But in doing so, he points out a close connection between ‘racial origin’ or racial affinity and geography. Or in other words, the ‘racial geography’ of the Nagas in this view connected it to a much wider domain or spatial location.

At the time Mills was writing, he was not the lone voice who emphasised the need to find the (racial) origin or affinity of a particular community. In these ethnographic writings, finding the origin was a crucial element. The importance of locating the origin in this endeavour is strongly argued by W.W. Cochrane, who wrote two volumes on the Shans as a part of the ‘tribal monographs’ series:

> The Shans . . . are a people numerous, widely spread, and with a history reaching back far into the past. Manifestly, in writing a monograph on the Shans, these facts must be taken into account. The subject cannot be treated in exactly the same way that one might write of a small tribe of the Melchizedec order, ‘without father, without mother, without genealogy,’ whether that tribe be a recent intruder or the ragged relic of a vanishing race. Certain matter and things must be looked at from the historical point of view somewhat more than is common in purely anthropological accounts of small tribes.\(^4\)

In the ‘tribal monographs’, (discussed in the previous chapter), the normal format was to begin with the habitat, then origin and affinity. In doing so, a close connection is drawn between geography and origin, though not explicitly spelt out. The connection between the two is usually presented as a mere description of the current habitat, then another discussion on their origin and affinity (with other races). But while attempting to propound a theory of

origin, it is usually traced to another geographical location. Most of these accounts would also concur on the lack of historical records, thus, ‘history less’. Given that almost all the colonial accounts written on the different communities in the frontier dwelt on the lack of information on their origin, it is interesting to note that they would at the same time, continue to propound various ‘theories’ of origin.

It was, indeed, a colonial fascination to trace the origin of a social group of people. Finding the origin of any community could, perhaps, be linked to the desire to ascertain the racial genealogy in order to place the community within the matrix of racial classification. Within race theory, origin, or bloodline was crucial to establish the purity of the race. Even when they are not able to fully ascertain the origin of a particular community scientifically, it has to be rationalized with other possible investigations to find out the characteristics of the ‘community of descent’. And in that process there is a close connection with territoriality. As George W. Stocking points, ‘“Blood” – and by extension ‘race’ – included numerous elements that we would today call cultural; there was not a clear line between cultural and physical elements or between social and biological heredity. The characteristic qualities of civilizations were carried from one generation to another both in and with the blood of their citizens.’ In a politics of control and subjugation, origin was crucial. This chapter will investigate some of the important elements in the connection between the different original narratives and territoriality in the context of Manipur. There is an attempt to explore how the colonial anxiety of locating the origin of a community is closely tied with space. Even as they discarded the existing origin narrative which was closely tied up with the socio-religious cosmology of the Meitei vaisnavs, which subdued other narratives, the British attempted to find a standard narrative, through ‘scientific’ means rather than following the ‘untrustworthy nature of the ‘myths’. Finally, it is also an attempt to study the origin narratives of many communities in Manipur as collected by the colonial officials in order to give us a sense of, one, the multiple and contesting narratives that seek to understand a past which cannot be

fixed temporally and spatially. Secondly, these narratives also situate different forms of connections to territoriality.

By terming these narratives as 'myths', I do not accept either the basis on which the colonial knowledge system grounded itself or the rootlessness/fictitious origin. But it is an attempt to look at a way of analyzing a collective memory and collective narration to keep alive and make sense of the past. I have used the term myth, here, in the sense of a collective recognition of a symbolic meaning, within or without religion, as Lutze argues, “mental images arranged in narrative sequences and shared by a community of people”\textsuperscript{7} but not as an illustration of the breach with real social incidents. The attempt, however, is neither to treat these as ‘historical evidence’ nor to discard them as mere fiction but to use them as a particular form of organising the past, origin, and the associated linkages with territoriality. In that attempt, it may sometimes, intersect with ‘evidential histories’ but most of the time, it evinces different codes of looking at one’s own past.

\textbf{RACIAL ORIGINS AND RACIAL GEOGRAPHIES}

The case of origin narratives and theories during the colonial period demonstrate the myriad intersections in the ideas of origin, race, and territoriality. The narratives of the colonial officials erased the existence of any longer tradition.\textsuperscript{8} However, from the early part of the nineteenth century the tradition of genealogy prevalent in the royal chronicles of Manipur were noticed. The colonial officials were aware of the claim of the Meitei vaisnavs to be the descendents of the Hindu mythical figure Arjuna from Mahabharata.

The narratives of the colonial officials attempted to erase the existence of any longer tradition\textsuperscript{9}: “The origin of the Manipuri people is obscure . . . The kingdom of Manipur first


\textsuperscript{9} For a strong critique against the Modern (read Western) conception of a distinction between a non-historical ‘tribal’ time in contrast to the historical time of the ‘Civilized’ world see Johannes Fabian, \textit{Time and the Other: How Anthropology Makes Its Object}, New York: Columbia University Press, 1983.
emerges from obscurity as a neighbour and ally of the Shan kingdom of Pong. In the early part of colonial period the tradition of genealogy prevalent in the royal chronicles of the Manipur kingdom of the Meitei vaisnavs were noticed, which resulted in noticing the claim of the Meitei vaisnavs to be the descendents of the Hindu mythical figure Arjuna from Mahabharata.

Closely linked with the arrival of Vaisnavism into Manipur, the origin narratives of the Meiteis traced an Aryan/Hindu descent. T.C. Hodson narrated the claim of the Meitei origin within this narrative: “By the end of the Dapar Jug and beginning of the Kali Jug, Enoog Howba Chonoo, the wife of Babroobahan gave birth to a son called Pakhangba.” In another tradition Babrubahan is the son of Arjuna in Mahabharata. The origin of the ruling dynasty of Manipur was thus traced from Arjuna, who married Chitranggada, a princess of Manipur, in this account. A connection is, thus, drawn with a story of Indo-Aryan migration, which reached the plains of Bengal and then Manipur. The legitimating point of this narrative was a purported mention of the name of Manipur in Mahabharata, which Arjuna had traversed during his period of exile. R.K. Jhalajit Singh, one of the scholars, who is an adherent of this ‘theory’, wrote in the middle of the twentieth century:

The first reference to Manipur is in Adi Parva on the occasion of Arjuna going from Hiranyavindu to see the eastern region. After seeing the Mahendra mountains, he proceeded slowly along the coast, reached Manipur and married Chitrangada, the princess of that kingdom.

He further claims the accuracy of this reference in the Mahabharata to Manipur: “She was of the complexion of a madhuka flower i.e. mahua flower. A mahua flower is of golden colour.

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10 Allen, et al., Gazetteer of Bengal and North East India, pp. 614-5.
11 T.C. Hodson, The Meitheis, reprint Delhi: Low Price Publications, 2003[1908], p. 5. In the ‘authoritative’ accounts of the Royal Family, as Hodson teasingly noted, Pakhangba assumed the form of Gods by the day and a man by night. Apart from this narrative of the Royal Family, there were other origin narratives of the different clans, which drew their lineage from the Hindu pantheon.
12 R.K. Jhalajit Singh, A Short History of Manipur (From A.D. 33 to the present time), Imphal, second edn. 1992[1965], p. 5.
Chintrangada was of golden complexion. This suggests that she might be of Mongoloid descent.\textsuperscript{13}

Over the years, this claim has been refuted by various individuals, completely discarding it to be a mere fabrication after the onset of Hinduism in Manipur in the eighteenth century. In yet another tradition, Pakhangba came down from heaven and ascended the throne in 33 A.D.\textsuperscript{14}

The origin of the Meiteis’ state polity from 33 A.D., according to the Cheitharol Kumpapa, and its relationship to the influence of vaisnavism in Manipur is still a hotly contested point. The coming of the religious order of Vaisnavism in Manipur as a state religion was the beginning of a new conceptualization of the world in Meitei vaisnavs’ cosmology. As Gangmumei Kabui points out: “The name Manipur was coined during the reign of Garibniwaz. The original names are Kangleipak, Meitrabak, Poirei, etc.” According to him a puranic legend had been created to show how this country was called Manipur and the kings of Manipur from Pakhangba (33-154 A. D.) to Charairongba were given Hindu names. For example: Pakhangba was called Jabistha, Charairongba, Pitambar Singh etc.\textsuperscript{15} There are various other ‘theories’, which claim more ‘indigenous’ origin.\textsuperscript{16}

Nevertheless, the ‘onset’ of Hinduism was considered in the colonial accounts as the historical marker. “The history of Manipur” in these accounts contained “nothing of special interest until about A.D. 1714” in which year “a Naga named Pamheiba became Raja of

\begin{footnotes}
\item[\textsuperscript{13}]Ibid.
\item[\textsuperscript{14}]Wahengbam Ibohal Singh, \textit{The History of Manipur (An early period)}, Imphal: Manipur Commercial Co., 1986, p. 4.
\item[\textsuperscript{16}]For instance see the Introduction and notes in Saroj Nalini Arambam Parratt, \textit{The Court Chronicle of the Kings of Manipur: The Cheitharon Kumpapa}, London and New York: Routledge, 2005. There are various other accounts, including some ‘historical’ treatises that talk of the early settlement of the valley of Manipur, devoid of any Hindu reference, written in archaic Manipuri language. But it is difficult to date these texts. For stories of the origin of the universe and the creation of human beings in the pre-vaisnavism period see Yengkhom Bheigya, \textit{Leithak Leikharon}, Imphal, 1967. There is a brief discussion of many of the texts of this period in Gangmumei Kabui, \textit{History of Manipur}, Vol. 1 \textit{Pre-colonial Period}, New Delhi: National Publishing House, 1991. In a way, the British were participating in the Aryan origin claim, if only by negating. Because of this blind spot, the creation myths, which they were interested in looking, and thus denounced, were only those that were influenced and within the Hindu fold, i.e. the myth of Aryan origin. It is conspicuous that the colonial officials did not take notice of the other myths and stories, which existed in Manipur, and more importantly many of these stories, predated the advent of Vaisnavism as a state religion in Manipur.
\end{footnotes}
Manipur and adopted Hinduism, tacking the name of Garib Nawaz." The recorded history of Manipur prior to the coming of Vaisnavism is written off. The history of the period prior to the coming of Hinduism is not visible and not worthy of attention, and the Hindu narrative being 'untrustworthy', it was substituted by another narrative, crafted by the British, which tells the history of the origin of the people.

Colonial accounts took Pamheiba’s conversion into Hinduism in 1714 A.D. taking the name of Garib Niwaz as the beginning of historical era. At the same time, since the conversion to Hinduism took place only in the eighteenth century, the Hindu/Aryan lineage was discarded. As a replacement to this, the colonial accounts claimed to have found the history of origin of the Meeteis. Pemberton, “[r]ejecting, as totally unworthy of attention, the Hindoo origin claimed by the Muneepoorees [sic] of the present day,” professed to have ‘discovered’ the history, with a ‘theory’ of long distance migration. He asserted that the Meiteis were the descendants of a Tartar colony, which probably emigrated from the north-west borders of China during the sanguinary conflicts for supremacy, which took place between the different members of the Chinese and Tartar dynasties, in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries; at which time, there was an extensive kingdom called Pong, occupying the country between the frontiers of Yunan, and the hills separating the Kubo valley from Munneeppoor.

17 Allen et. al, Gazeteer of Bengal and North East India, p.615. The British kept on emphasizing the descent of Pamheiba or Garib Niwaz from Naga whereas the Manipuri scholars refute the charge. There is also a difference of opinion on the year of accession on the throne between the two. See Jhalajit, A Short History of Manipur.

18 For stories of the origin of the universe and the creation of human beings in the pre-vaisnavism period see Yengkhom Bheigya, Leithak Leikharon, Imphal, 1967. There is a brief discussion of many of the texts of this period in Kabui, History of Manipur, Vol. 1. In a way, the British were participating in the Aryan origin claim, if only by negating. Because of this blind spot, the creation myths, which they were interested in looking, and thus denounced, were only those that were influenced and within the Hindu fold, i. e., the myth of Aryan origin. It is conspicuous that the colonial officials did not take notice of the other myths and stories, which existed in Manipur, and more importantly many of these stories, predated the advent of Vaisnavism as a state religion in Manipur.

19 Allen et. al, Gazeteer of Bengal and North East India, p.615.

20 R. Boileau Pemberton, Report on the Eastern Frontier of India with an Appendix, Calcutta, 1835, p.36. It is never made clear in Pemberton’s formulation as to why there is a sweeping rejection of the claim to Aryan descendent even when he claimed the ‘truth of the historical annals’ of many other events that were found in the royal chronicles, if it was corroborated by the royal records of Ava, on which he based most of his observations. In contrast to his complete rejection of an existing notion of origin what he offered is so fragile and groundless that it has to be qualified with ‘probably’.
Beginning from the colonial writings, the Hindu origin of the Meiteis has mostly been taken as historical 'evidences', rather than 'fable geographies' that went alongside the religious changes that were happening simultaneously. By turning it into 'scientific' analysis of authenticating the past, its connection with other socio-religious processes is emptied out. Mostly from the beginning of the twentieth century, both the promoters and the critics of the Hindu origin claim have looked at the narrative in terms of historical events. But this misses the connections that the narrative may share with the changes happening in the neighbourhood of Manipur. This claim to a Hindu origin is not singularly found in Manipur. Various other areas, especially in which some variants of Hinduism had found their influence, have these stories. Claiming descent by the royalty from one of the figures of the Hindu pantheon was a common phenomenon practiced by the Khamptis, Kacharis, chiefs of the Moamarias, etc. Furthermore, in the more ancient history of Kamrup, a 'Hindu geographical polity', it is claimed that Manipur was a part of that political formation.

Finding the true origin for colonial writers was also a question of finding the real claimant to the territory. Or in other words, searching for the aborigine, understood in the sense of the real and original settlers of a particular territory, and solving the problem of origin was to help in deciding the original territorial ownership. But a popular imagery of the north-east frontier of Bengal as mountainous terrain inhabited by isolated and disparate, wild population without any written records, confused the colonial accounts on the question of aboriginality. One of the accounts in the middle of the nineteenth century wrote:

There is not perhaps any country in the world of the same extent, where there are so many different races of men collected together, as are to be found scattered about within the Valley of Assam, and on the adjacent Hills situated in its immediate neighbourhood. Who were the real aborigines of the province, is still a profound mystery; and as the histories in possession of the natives themselves do not contain any record of the times precious to the first century of the Christian era, at which

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period Assam appears to have been a populous country, it is not very probable that this question will ever receive a satisfactory solution.\textsuperscript{22}

It is puzzling to note that Pemberton's rejection of the Aryan (or Hindu) origin was put forward so forcefully considering that in the neighbouring areas of Manipur, there were various colonial 'theories' which propounded a Hindu origin for other groups. Having made this forceful assertion the account continues,

The earliest invaders of whom any account is extant, would seem to have come from the west, and to have established in the lower parts of the valley a Hindu form of Government over the people, whom they regarded as melech (mletcha) or unclean. After this, the country was subject to inroads from the northern tribes inhabiting the Himalayas, and again by the Mahomedan rulers from Gour in Bengal. In the eastern portion of the valley, the chief invaders came from the borders of China and Burmah, and as the rule of each of these conquering tribes generally lasted but a short period, a continued succession of foreigners were constantly over-running the province, each in their turn leaving some of their members settled about in various places, who, on a fresh change of rulers, soon became merged in the general body of the inhabitants. In this manner numerous tribes from the four points of the compass have become engrafted on the original stock, which may have consisted of Kooches in some parts, and of Kacharis, Rabhas, Salongs, and Mekirs in others.\textsuperscript{23}

Pemberton's account of the origin of the Meities when compared with the above account written a decade later, share an important point – an understanding that various groups of population had migrated to these territories in the past to settle in spite of the two different claims on the question of Hindu connection. Such a history of origin of a population, marked through migration, being inhabited by disparate groups, isolated from one another and most importantly none of them being aborigines set the stage for a discourse of how the territory has no legitimate natural claimant. It gives a sense of how various groups of people had

\textsuperscript{23} Ibid.
invaded and settled or transacted and intermingled. In other words, there has been a long process of colonisation, thus, placing the British within this process.

Such an account is not merely to complain of the difficulty of finding the true aborigine but also that all those who have ‘settled’ in the area have managed to maintain their distinctiveness. In a way, this accentuates the imagery of the ‘isolated tribes’.

Although so many years have elapsed since most of the tribes invaded the province, it is still easy to perceive the great difference of physiognomy which characterizes the different races. Very little fusion appears to have taken place, the customs prevailing amongst them having perpetuated the distinctive casts of countenance, whereas, had the practice of intermarriage been adopted, it would, long ago have produced a similarity of appearance, and obliterated the peculiarities which separate one class from another.24

The interesting point to be made here is that finding the connections through origin was closely linked to locating religious geographies in these colonial accounts. Emphasising the connection of the Hindus with the Brahmaputra valley, Walter Hamilton wrote, “Kamrup] was formerly an extensive Hindoo geographical division”. He further claimed the extent of this ‘Hindu geography’:

On the north Camroop extended to the first range of the Bootan hills; the southern boundary was where the Lukhiya river separates from the Brahmaputra, where it adjoined the country called Bangga (Bengal). According to this description, Camroop, besides a large province of Assam (which still retains the name), included the whole of the modern divisions of Rungpoor and Rangamatty, a portion of the Mymunsingh district and Silhet, together with Munipoor, Gentiah, and Cachar. . . .

[Guwahati] was the capital of the ancient Hindoo geographical division named Camroop, which included great part of Assam".  

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The important point to be made, here, is not the authenticity, or the facticity of this claim, but a different way of imagining and incorporating a Hindu geographical space. Though historical evidences place the arrival of Hinduism in Manipur to a much later date, according to this narrative Manipur had already been incorporated within the sphere of ‘Hindu territoriality’. In fact, the whole region from the Ganges eastward till Thailand was said to have formed one territoriality in another such ‘fable geography’. Michael Symes who went as an envoy of the Company in 1795 to Ava wrote,

Of the ancient Pallis, whose language constitutes at the present day the sacred text of Ava, Pegue, and Siam, as well as of several other countries eastward of the Ganges; and of their migration from India to the banks of the Cali, the Nile of Ethiopia, we have but very imperfect information. As a nation, they have long ago ceased to exist. They are said to have possessed, in former times, a dominion stretching from the Indus as far as Siam.

26 Ibid.
This understanding of Symes could, perhaps, be seen in the light of the orientalist project of finding the origin of the Hindus.\textsuperscript{28} James Mills' study on these accounts of Hindu creation narratives could show the desperate attempt of these early scholars to find the true 'origin'. He wrote, that the Hindu creation narratives

differ from one another very widely in the minor forms and circumstances; but strongly resemble in the general character, and in the principal ideas. That contained in the sacred volume which bears the name of Menu may be taken as a standard, being more full and circumstantial than any of those which are given us from the Vedas\textsuperscript{29}.

Pemberton's strong reactions against the claim to Hindu descent, and thus Hindu geography, could be read as a reaction against the earlier orientalist accounts. In fact, by the time of the first Anglo-Burmese war, Hindus were becoming abhorrent to the British. The idea of the degenerate, effeminate character of the Hindus was slowly setting in by this time, as Hamilton commented: "Hitherto the Assamese had been a warlike and enterprizing people, and their princes worthy of the government; but after their conversion by the Brahmins the nation sunk into the most abject pusillanimity towards foreigners, and into internal turbulence and confusion."\textsuperscript{30}

Though Hamilton's work was critical of the Hindus, and its assessment derisive, in so far as the Hindu geography was concerned, it shared certain commonality with the earlier understanding. It did not yet challenge the idea of a Hindu geography expanding far and wide across the whole territory from the Ganges to beyond in the east. But by the middle of the nineteenth century this understanding had become more complicated. Pemberton's work, in that sense, could be located as a point of transition. After a decade of his work, the history of a Hindu geography extending to the Brahmaputra valley was qualified. In contrast to the earlier writings, in which Hamilton's work could be positioned, which talked about the

\textsuperscript{29} Ibid, p. 286. For more detail on the creation narratives and the ways in which these were looked after the end of the orientalist era see till p. 289.
ancient Hindu geography, which extended till Kamrup, now the Buddhist geography and their connections were said to be prior to Hindu connection, thus, delegitimising Hindu claims. A mid-nineteenth century account, thus, recorded the change in the understanding of the Hindu geography and its influence in the east:

In very early times it is probable that Buddhism was the form of worship most prevalent in Assam, and that Hinduism was not introduced until a comparatively late date. Previous to the reign of the Kooch Raja of Kamroop, Biswas Singh, in the sixteenth century, there do not appear to have been any Brahmins regularly settled in the province, although a colony from Maithila had been introduced into the district of Rungpoor sometime before. However, when once established, they spread themselves rapidly over the whole country, and soon afterwards the Hindu religion became the predominant faith.31

After rejecting the Hindu origin, thus its connection with the Hindu geography, Pemberton propounds another possible origin, with a different racial geographical connection – he suggested a Tartar origin for the Meiteis. Though his rejection of the Hindu origin of the Meities could be read as a rejection of the earlier orientalist accounts, his proposition of the Tartar connection was also a familiar terrain by the time he was writing. This theory of a Tartar connection had already been propounded earlier to his writing, especially while looking for origin of the communities in the neighbourhood of Manipur. Pemberton was aware of these earlier ‘theories’, which had tried to propound a Tartar origin theory for the neighbouring communities of the Meeteis. He cited Thomas A. Trant’ (spelt as Grant in his work) *Two Years in Ava*, which had already propounded the Tartar origin for the Burmese, in the ‘List of Documents and Works consulted in the preparations of the Report’. While discussing the origins of the Burmans and the Chins their Tartar origin was a commonly established claim. Thomas A. Trant, an officer on the staff of the Quarter-Master-General’s Department, and who participated in the first Anglo-Burmese war, as Pemberton did, wrote,

31 "Robinson’s History of Assam", pp. 44 – 5.
The original inhabitants of these plains [of Burma], were the Kieaans, who now
inhabit the mountains ... Many years had elapsed, when a horde of Tartars poured in
from Thibet, and willingly exchanging their bleak, inhospitable plains for the more
fertile vallies watered by the Irrawaddy, soon overran and conquered the whole
country, except a small portion of Arracan, where the inhabitants still retained their
independence. In the course of time, the invaders intermarried with the original
inhabitants, and became the founders of a new race, ancestors to the present
Burmese.32

In fact, the ‘theory’ of Tartar origin of the Burmese had already been propounded much
before this. Rev. Father Sangermano, a missionary who resided in Ava in 1782, had written:
“[I]f we notice many peculiarities of the Burmese, and especially a certain fierceness of
character not possessed by other Indian nations, we shall be led to conclude, that they are of
Tartar origin: being probably descendants of some tribe of Tartars, who, as we are informed
by history, spread themselves over every part of Asia, especially in the expeditions of the
famous Gengis-Khan.” But quite similar to Pemberton’s rejection of the earlier existing
origin narratives, Sangermano wrote that the Burmese histories and traditions were “filled
with strange hyperbolical accounts, and fabulous narratives.”33

Thomas A. Trant, writing after Sangermano, had also propounded the ‘theory’ of the Tartar
origin of the Burmese, but by claiming it to be a Chin narrative. He wrote,

The origin of the Khyéns is lost in fiction, and of the details of their early history, the
present race know little, except from vague traditions, verbally transmitted from one
generation to the next. They, however, say, that in former days, the plains of Ava and
Pegu were people[d] by their race, and were under the dominion of one of their kings,

32 Thomas A. Trant, Two Years in Ava, from May 1824, to May 1826, London: John Murray, 1827, p. 240.
33 Sangermano, A Description of the Burmese Empire, Compiled chiefly from Native Documents by the Rev.
Father Sangermano, transl. from his manuscripts by William Tandy, Rome, 1833, pp. 36-7.
when a horde of Tartars made a sudden irruption from the northward, and overran the country. \(34\)

The claim of the Tartar ‘race’ as the origin of the various groups was closely connected to a wider and longer network of information and understanding. They were understood to be the portions of the same people who in European history were called the Huns, consisting of “numerous tribes, who wandered about the barren plains of Central Asia, living partly by hunting and partly by plunder”. \(35\) This general European understanding of the history of the Chinese empire, and the Tartars in particular, is linked to the theory of Tartar migration as an origin theory. With such an understanding of wandering ‘tribes’ who threatened the polities of China and other neighbouring territories, a conclusion of their having migrated to various southern areas could easily be concluded. The general understanding that the Tartar descendants populated the areas in the neighbourhood of Manipur was well known to Pemberton. In an abstract of the journal of Captain Hannay, who was sent from Ava to the frontiers of Sadiya to suppress a rebellion and also gather more information in 1835 – 36, (almost the same time as Pemberton published his Tartar origin theory of the Meiteis) he wrote, “Captain Hannay saw a great number of this tribe [Kakhyens] at Kougntoun, where they barter their rice and cotton for salt and gnapee, (potted fish) and describes them, with few exceptions, as perfect savages in their appearance; their cast of countenance forms a singular exception to the general rule, for it is not at all Tartar in its shape”. He goes on to quote Hannay’s description to prove that they were exception to the general rule: “[T]hey have, on the contrary, ‘long faces and straight noses, with a very disagreeable expression about the eyes, which was rendered still more so by their lanky black hair being brought over the forehead so as entirely to cover it, and then cut straight across on a lien with the eyebrows. These people, though surrounded by Shans, Burmese and Chinese, are so totally different from either, that it is difficult to imagine from whence they have had their origin.” \(36\)

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\[36\] R. Boileau Pemberton, ‘Abstract of the Journal of a Route travelled by Capt. S. F. Hannay, of the 40th Regiment Infantry, from the Capital of Ava to the Amber Mines of the Hukong valley on the South-east
Moreover, Pemberton’s account of the Tartars having distinctive physical features was shared by others as well. In these racialised accounts, they were supposed to have physical features with Mongolian eye, flat nose, high cheek bones, fairer and more yellowish colour.\textsuperscript{37} The Tartar origin thesis of Pemberton can, thus, be connected with the theory of migrations of Tartars in the areas around Manipur, especially on the eastern side in the dominions of the Burmese empire. In fact, the origin of the Meeteis from the Tartars had already been propounded before Pemberton’s account. The thesis of the migration of the Tartars was known in the case of the lower Siam region as well. There was an account of an ancient tradition of the incursion “of the Chinese Tartar amongst this peaceful race of people into the southern and fertile country which they inhabited which having been mixed with aborigines of the country, their savage disposition made them get the superiority and they founded the kingdom of upper and lower Siam.”\textsuperscript{38} Some of the Tartars family that made the incursions, in this account, “prepared on leaving by themselves their being intermixed with the aborigines of the plain country took their residence amongst the wood and mountain and in time became more savage which is the race of Chin and Carrain . . . including the Mekely inhabitants the Cassay also being the descendants of the said tribes of Tartars.”\textsuperscript{39}

There seems to be a rationale why Pemberton chose a Tartar theory of origin rather than a Hindu one. The Political Agent to the Governor General in charge of the North-East Frontier had already voiced his doubts about the Hinduness of the Manipuris: “I do not know what Gambheer Sing’s pretension to purity of caste may be but they must be low indeed if he would not feel offended at an engagement being imposed upon him for furnishing beef for Europeans.”\textsuperscript{40} One of the reasons for doubting the Hinduness of the Meiteis continued to be based on the religious motif of cow throughout the nineteenth century as discerned from Major Maxwell, the Political Agent in Manipur’s words: “I notice, contrary to Hindu custom,

\begin{footnotes}
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\item['37'] Robinson’s History of Assam’, p. 40 - 1.
\item['38'] ‘An Embassy to Cochin China by order of His Majesty the Emperor of Ava 1822’ Foreign Department Miscellaneous Volumes 1822, Serial Number 174, National Archives of India (NAI). The writer of this account is difficult to ascertain.
\item['39'] Ibid.
\item['40'] Foreign Department Political Consultation, 1832 July 23, Nos. 64-69, NAI.
\end{enumerate}
\end{footnotes}
the people use cows for ploughing, and some busy-body in the Chirap court has sent round an order, prohibiting the practice; but unfortunately no one pays attention to the Chirap Court’s orders unless countersigned by me. Only barren cows or animals past bearing are utilized; and I think the people are wise to make the most use of these otherwise useless animals." The debate on the Meiteis being pure Hindus reached an interesting climax in the events of 1891 when British declared war on Manipur, which was then an independent State. The intellectuals writing in Bengali newspapers vehemently opposed the annexation of Manipur by the British. Being vaisnavs, the Meetei monarch along with the larger population got all the sympathies and support from these intellectuals. There was a very excited debate on whether the British troops – the Gurkhas, who went with the Chief Commissioner of Assam, demolished the temples, committed sacrilege while attacking the palace in the ‘native’ papers in Bengal. The debate started off with a statement by the king, who was the new claimant to the throne, that ‘humiliating conducts’ had been perpetrated by the troops. The trouble in Manipur was caught up in a moment in Indian nationalism when a section of the high caste Hindu intellectuals were reasserting the tone of Hindu nationalism. The State of Manipur became significant as one of the Hindu States, which had remained independent from colonial power. So, the ‘Hindu’ energies were mobilized to preserve the existing Hindu State as a mark of Hindu civilization against the onslaught of the ‘Christian English’. Within this dichotomous view of the two religions, the Aryan origin claim which had been demolished by the British was invoked in order to criticise the British annexation: “Manipur is a Hindu State; it is the State of Babhrubahan, the son of Arjun, and it is a State mentioned in the Mahabharata, and it has independence from a very ancient time. And the thought that such a State will be consumed in the fire of Englishmen’s wrath, and will cease to be its former self, is maddening to a Hindu.”

41 'Diary of Major H. Maxwell, Political Agent in Manipur', 1895, Manipur State Archives (MSA).
42 "It should also be borne in mind... that no people are such adepts in hurting other people’s religion as the Christians." Dainik-0-Samachar, May 3, Report on Native Papers in Bengal, No. 19 of 1891, p. 505.
43 Dainik-O-Samachar Chandrika, April 20, Report on Native Paper in Bengal, No. 16 of 1891, p. 446

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Indian nationalist as well. It was only in the claiming or the rejecting of a lineage with the Hindus/Aryans that the genealogy of the Meiteis could be established. Whereas for the nationalists, the criticism against the British was registered through the vocabulary of a pan Hindu civilisation. The British were participating in the Aryan origin claim, if only by negating it. As a result, the creation myths or origin narratives from the Meiteis, which they were interested in looking for were only those that were influenced and within the Hindu fold. It is conspicuous that the colonial officials did not take notice of the other Meitei origin narratives.44

As a consequence, the British through colonialism, became the mediators of history by turning this 'lowly' people into a community with a 'proper' narrative of their origin history. The writing on the origin of a community marked the fulfilment of a desire of putting down a narrative in a rationally controlled form as distinct from a mode of entering the past through other means.45 In writing the origins of a subject(ed) population and its subsequent events the colonial project of knowledge production is an attempt to put a closure on 'the past' (in the sense of a cultural representation). By writing them down and maintaining an order of narrative, the symbolic performative role of the past is kept meaningless. From the past as a cultural text it makes an effort to 'textualise' the narration of the past by introducing a racial genealogy of 'history'.

44 For stories of the origin of the universe and the creation of human beings in the pre-vaishnavism period see Bheigya, Leithak Leikharon. There is a brief discussion of many of the texts of this period in Kabui, History of Manipur, Vol. 1.

45 Here I would make a distinction between 'the past' as an accessible moment and the academic practice of history, which looks at the past as an artefact. The basic difference between the two in my formulation is that 'the past' is an accessible moment whereas in 'historical past' it can never be entered. Even the notion of 'entering the mind' has the connotation of going back while 'the past' is about bringing home. For an interesting distinction between 'the past' and 'history' see John Harold Plumb, The Death of the Past, Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1970. But Plumb is more concerned with the relationship and the (ab)use of the past in a society. Plumb's formulation of a differentiation between the two concepts of history and the past is a very interesting one. But the only anxiety that is embedded in this dichotomous relationship is a treatment of history as if it would safeguard its own objectivity without suffering from the subjectivity of the past as a cultural logic. My interpretation of the past is marked with a rendering of telling a tale of the past to invoke it, and make sense within the culture whereas history takes recourse within the logic of rationality and logic, rooted in the European context but which has been exported as universal. For an investigation of the structure of the idea of the past in a non-literate society – Iraqw see Robert J. Thornton, Space, Time, and Culture among the Iraqw of Tanzania, New York: Academic Press, 1980; Richard Price, First-Time: The Historical Vision of an Afro-American People, Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1983.
MULTIPLE THEORIES AND STANDARDISED ORIGIN NARRATIVE

Once the Hindu origin claim had been rejected, there were various theories propounded to locate the origin of the Meiteis. Edward Tuite Dalton reversed the Aryan origin narrative by using, what he claimed to be, a more ‘scientific’ tool of linguistic affinities and physical characteristics. In this thesis, the ‘Manipuris’ are the cause of elimination another Aryan group.

It is highly probable that these hordes overran a country that had been previously occupied by people of Aryan blood known in Western India and to the bards. The present population of Manipur includes a tribe called Meiung who speak a language of Sanskrit derivation. They are now in a servile condition performing the duties of grass-cutters to their conquerors.

Dalton’s theory had claimed a much larger Aryan territoriality in the past, which had been overrun by other ‘races’. In an interesting exchange between ‘race’ and territoriality there was another ‘theory’, which overturned Dalton’s theory. Mr. Taw Sein Kho, a Burmese Lecturer at Cambridge, in a pamphlet on the Chins and Kachins wrote:

Ethnically these tribes belong to that vaguely defined and yet little understood stock, the Turanian, which includes among others the Chinese, Tibetans, Manchus, Japanese, Annamese, Siamese, Burmese, and the Turks. The evidence of language, so far as it has been studied, leaves little doubt that ages ago China exercised much influence on these Turanian races, whose habitat, it is said, included the whole of at least Northern India before its conquest by the Aryans.

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47 Quoted in Bertram S. Carey and H. N. Tuck, The Chin Hills: A History of the People, British dealings with them, their Customs and Manners, and a Gazetteer of their Country, reprint Delhi: Cultural Publishing House, 1983 [1896], p. 2; the text from which it was quoted is not given. Taw Sein Ko was born in Moulmein in 1864 and rose in the British colonial administration service in Burma. A talented linguist and prolific writer, he expressed his views on archaeology, ethnology, Buddhism, law and history in English language journals, books and pamphlets and in Burma, China and Britain. See Penny Edwards, ‘Relocating the interlocutor: Taw Sein Ko (1864-1930) and the itinerancy of knowledge in British Burma’, South East Asia Research, Vol. 12, No. 3, November 2004, pp. 277-335.
One may venture to argue that racial notions of classifications had been warped with territoriality; the claim to a wider territory of the Aryans in people like Dalton’s formulations had found a counterclaim of a Turanian territoriality. But ethnological theory on the existence of one single race of aboriginal group in India, called ‘Tamulians’, from ‘Tartar’ or ‘Tibetan stock’ had become prevalent by the beginning of the 1850s. In refuting the authenticity of the lineage to an Aryan origin, the colonial officials achieved two contradictory points – an assertion of scientific, modern form of knowledge production and an erasure of a ‘prehistoric’ past of the Hindu(Aryan) ‘origin’.

However, the rejection of a Hindu past was not followed by a study or an inquiry of the pre-Hindu past. That past is glossed over by merely formulating an ‘Evolutionary’ ‘theory’ of origin by W. McCulloch. When he was writing in the middle of the nineteenth century on the origin of the Meiteis, he was a part of an already existing assumption on the obscurity of the origin of the Meiteis prior to their conversion to Hinduism: “The origin of the Munniporees is obscure, and the written records having mostly been composed since they became Hindoos, are not worthy of much credit.” Though he accepted those viewpoints of Pemberton on the ‘fallacious’ nature of the claim to an Aryan descent, as it originated “since their conversion to Hindooism”, he rejected the Tartar connection as their origin. But his rejection of the Long Distance Migration theory formulated by Pemberton marks an interesting beginning. The claim to an origin model had to be, now, made verifiable by using


49 On the veracity and scientficity of colonial knowledge one only needs to be reminded of the debunking of the ‘monumental’ work of Dalton’s *Descriptive Ethnology* by John Butler, Political Agent, Naga Hills. As Butler points out, there were various obvious mistakes that were found in the book. The picture of one Aja, Chief of Phusamah one of the villages of the Sopvomah or Mao group, whom Butler knew personally was put up as a ‘typical’ specimen of the Angami Naga. Apart from this confusion there are many that Butler points out. John Butler, ‘Tour Diary of the Deputy Commissioner, Naga Hills, for the year 1870-72’, p. 25, in Verrier Elwin, ed., *The Nagas in the Nineteenth Century*, Bombay: OUP, 1969, p. 616.


51 Though the origin of the Meeteis from Tartar became not so popular ‘theory’ after McCulloch, there were attempts to tell more of a mixture at a dateable past from population movements in war. For such a narrative see James Johnstone, *My Experiences in Manipur and the Naga Hills*, London: Sampson Low, Marston and Co. Ltd., 1896, p. 80.
language, customs, physical features or other means of 'scientific enquiry'. McCulloch, being a Political Agent of Manipur could marshal that claim of authenticity.

Along with an analysis of the existing records of Manipur, McCulloch used the existing customs, languages and the physical features to find out the origin of the Meiteis. He argues that "[f]rom the most credible traditions, the valley appears originally to have been occupied by several tribes", the principal among them being Khuman, Luwang, Moirang and Meitei migrating from different directions. In this narrative, the Khumans were the most powerful and then after their decline, the Moirangs were powerful for a while. But the Meiteis were able to subdue the whole gradually, and "the name Meithei [sic] has become applicable to all." Since the languages spoken by the neighbouring "tribes are in their pristine state", he conceived that "in their spoken language, an indication of the descent of the Munniporees might be found." Thus, he found: "The languages of the Murrings, Kookies and Koupooees, are all very similar, and as the Koomul, &c., the off shoots of these tribes, were, as before said, at different period the dominant tribes in the valley, it might be expected that the present language of the people, united under the name of Meithei, would have a very apparent likeness to these languages, and such is the case." From this, he concluded "[T]here is far more ground to conclude them to be descendants of the surrounding hill tribes." McCulloch substantiate his theory by using an analysis of 'tradition'. According to these traditions, Moirang were brought from the south, the direction of the Kukis, the Khuman from the east, the direction of the Marings, and Meitei and Luwang from the north-west, the direction of the Kabuis. All these tribes, he noted, "have traditions amongst themselves, that

52 The use of language in order to trace the origin of race was already contested by the middle of the nineteenth century: "[I]t is true that through comparative philology we can trace the affinity of languages, and consequently we can prove the contact of races; and perhaps can also discover traces of conquest on the one part, and of servitude on the other; but we cannot, by its aid, prove either common origination or community of descent." G. M. Tagore, 'On the Formation and Institution of the Caste System – the Aryan Polity', Transaction of the Ethnological Society of London, Vol. 2, 1863, p. 378.

53 In the works of McCulloch one finds a close resemblance of 'ethnological' enterprise of using language, customs and more importantly, physical features which had become quite predominant by the 1850s. Pointing out the changes, Peter Pels writes, "these 'anglicising' strategies shifted the emphasis of much colonial intelligence-gathering from foundational texts to aboriginal bodies." Peter Pels, 'From texts to bodies: Brian Houghton Hodgson and the emergence of ethnology in India', in Jan van Bremen and Akitoshi Shimizu, eds., Anthropology and Colonialism in Asia and Oceania, Surrey: Curzon, p. 67. Emphasis original.

54 McCulloch, An Account of the Valley of Munnipore, p. 4.
the Munniporees are off-shoots from them.” “These traditions then, and the composite nature of the language,” McCulloch claims,

appear to me to afford more reason for supposing the Munniporees to be descended from the surrounding hill tribes than from a tartar Colony from China. . . . The ceremony denominated ‘Phumban kaba’ or ‘ascending the throne’ is performed in Naga dress, both by the Rajas and Ranee, and the ‘Yim chau’ or ‘great house,’ the original residence of the Meithei Chief is, though he does not now reside in it, still kept up, and is made in the Naga fashion. 55

Apart from these he used ‘ancestor stories’ related to origin, which showed the connection between the Meiteis and the ‘hill people’. But McCulloch’s model did not tell the ‘real origin’ of the Meiteis; it was rather to show the ‘evolution’ of the Meiteis, in their then present form, from the neighbouring ‘hill tribes’. Or in other words, the Meiteis were said to have ‘evolved’ from the surrounding ‘hill tribes’ but without giving the origin of the latter. The ‘hierarchisation’ of society into a need model of evolution fits well in the way colonial officials imagined the ‘transformation’ of the Meiteis into a ‘higher’ scale of civilization from the more ‘primitive ‘brethrens in the hills’ using ‘conversion’ into Hinduism as the mediation. But even while the new religious association gave the Meiteis some ‘higher’ position, in the scale of hierarchisation in the colonial classification, when it comes to origin McCulloch was already convinced, “there is far more ground to conclude them to be the descendents of the surrounding hill tribes.” 56

Deriving from McCulloch’s work with a claim to evidence through personal observation, 57 it was concluded by the later part of the nineteenth century, as E.W. Dun wrote, that the Meitei

55 Ibid, pp. 4-5. I have used both the spellings of present day usage as well as those, which were used by McCulloch. What is so ironic about using “the most credible traditions”, here, is that while one strand of tradition is being used, another – the Aryan origin narrative is completely rejected. McCulloch’s views on the origin of the Meeteis would become the standard official narrative for a few years though the Aryan connection might get a passing mention. For a narrative in the post-colonial writings, which employs Evolution model see Stephen Fuchs, The Aboriginal Tribes of India, Delhi: Macmillan India, 1973

56 Ibid, p. 4.

57 However, the effect of ‘intimacy’ and experience do not prove useful in British understanding all the time as complains of not being able to increase the stock of knowledge gathering was ever present: “Our closer connection with the Chins and Lushais during the last five years does not appear to have taught us anything
“tribe appears to have absorbed the rest, and are divided into seven families, the members of which do not intermarry, and whose names perpetuate the memory of the original tribal divisions in the form of seven clans.”

From a hypothetical allusion, in which McCulloch was formulating his narrative of origin, in opposition to the earlier ‘theories’, it would be made into a standard, official version, with minor changes and additions in the subsequent works.

In the ensuing works, language became a very important deciding factor in classification and tracing the origin of a group. The use of linguistic classification in the identification of social grouping preceded the magnanimous project of G. A. Grierson. In an interesting move Dalton uses the formulations already put forward by McCulloch to find out the affinity of the Nagas, Kukis and Manipuris: “The linguistic affinities and physical characteristics of the Manipuris clearly connect the present race with the Nagas and the Kukis.” It is worth noticing that Dalton is furthering the ‘theory’ already put forward by McCulloch, though McCulloch did not use the larger denomination like Naga, Kuki through the techniques of race theories.

T. C. Hodson writing at the beginning of the twentieth century uses language more than we knew twenty years ago of the ethnology of the tribes. Yule in 1855 described the Chins and Lushais as ‘of Indo-Chinese kindred, known as Kukis, Nagas, Khyenes, and by many more specific names.’ Colonel Hannay identified the Chins with the Nagas of the Assam mountains and states that they must be closely allied to the Kukis. In 1866 Colonel Phyre classified the Chins living on the north of Arakan as Indo-Chinese.” Carey, The Chin Hills, p. 2. The conflicting claims of the colonial officials was also a major concern in the project of bringing about a well laid social classification. The mode of authentication through observation, personal experience has to be understood within the larger Utilitarian enterprise which ran counter to the Orientalist’s dependence on classical language, teachers, translators, commentators. For more see David Ludden, ‘Orientalist empiricism’, in C. Breckenridge and P. van deer Veer, eds., Orientalism and the postcolonial predicament: Perspectives on South Asia, Philadelphia: university of Pennsylvania Press, 1993. However, the conflicting claims of the colonial officials was a major concern in the project of bringing about a well laid social classification.


59 Though the use of language as a tool of classification had been employed at a much earlier period, it was not influential till the later part of the nineteenth century. G. L. Gordon, A Dictionary in English, Bangali and Manipuri, Calcutta, 1837; N. Brown, ‘Comparison of Indo-Chinese Languages’ Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bengal, Vol. VI, Part II, 1837, pp. 1023-1037; W. Morton, ‘Remarks on ‘a Comparison of Indo-Chinese Languages, &c.’ Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bengal, Vol. VII, Part I, 1838, pp. 56-64; W. W. Hunter, Comparative Dictionary of the Languages of India and High Asia, London, 1868. Most of these earlier attempts to note down the vocabularies were not very much influenced by the obsessive desire of classification, which became the norm by the later half of the nineteenth century. The earlier classification lacked the anthropological zeal with which communities had to be put within neat social boundaries.

60 Dalton, Descriptive Ethnology of Bengal, pp. 48-9.

61 The practice of standardization of a text or an idea was well beyond the noticeable limits. As we see again the words are almost the same as the ‘original’. “From the most trustworthy traditions, the valley appears originally to have been occupied by several tribes, which came from different directions”. Allen, et al.,

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to find out the close connection between the Meiteis and the surrounding 'hill tribes'. The Meiteis in this approach were seen to be an 'amalgamated' community formed by the different groups who were moving towards the valley. The 'evolution' of the Meiteis from the various surrounding 'hill tribes' was now conflated with 'conversion' to Hinduism. Major Maxwell, Political Agent, Manipur, while on his tour noted, "[T]o-day I passed through two villages, called Tanjing and Saiyang. The former is now a Hindu village, having taken the thread and discarded the consumption of pigs and poultry. A few years back the two villages intermarried and enjoyed festivals together. The latter still remains Naga, and has no intention of proselytizing. One way and another, the Manipuris were constantly Hinduising the hill tribes, and, I fancy, came from the same stock."62 The change from the earlier account of the Tartar or Aryan migration to the 'evolutionary' theory could also be read as the closing of geography of Manipur. From an earlier understanding, which definitely put at the forefront the importance of the mobility of the people, the evolution 'theory' merely concentrated and locked the connected geography within the bounds of Manipur.

Interestingly, to solve the problem of confusion there was an approach, which followed what I would call a 'hybrid theory' to explain the origin of the Meiteis.63 In this narrative, the Meiteis, though descended, from an 'Indo-Chinese stock' had been in the course of history mixed with 'Aryan blood', in the words of James Johnstone, "derived from the successive wave of Aryan invaders that have passed through the valley in prehistoric days." But the 'theory', which is based on mixture, does not stop with the mixing up of only two groups: "Since then the race has been constantly fed by additions from the various hill-tribes surrounding the people of the valley, the result is fairly homogenous people of great activity and energy, with much of the Japanese aptitude for acquiring new arts." Johnstone uses 'experiential authentication' to conclude with a mixture of 'evolution model' and short migration to point out, "some time or the other the Naga tribes to the north made one of their chiefs Rajah of Manipur, and that his family while, like the Manchus in China and other

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62 Diary of Major H. Maxwell, Political Agent, Manipur, MSA
63 Abdul Ali uses the all-inclusive phrase “the present inhabitants of Manipur”. The popularity and acceptance of this Hybrid model could, perhaps, be gleaned from his complete acceptance of this narrative. A. F. M. Abdul Ali, Notes on the Early History of Manipur, Calcutta, 1923.
conquerors, adopting the civilization of the country, retained some of their old customs.’ This ‘hybrid’ origin is seen to be their source of extra energy and talent, which the ‘hill tribes’ did not have. In James Johnstone’s opinion, ‘It may be this, or from an admixture of Chinese blood, but certainly the Manipuris have stable and industrious qualities which the Burmese and Shans do not possess.’

However, in this model which blends many of the propositions to find out the origin of the Meiteis there were attempts to put the close affinity between the Meeteis and the ‘hill tribes’ at the ‘source’ of the migration itself: “the Kukis of Manipur, the Lushais of Bengal and Assam, and the Chins originally lived in what we now know as Thibet and are of one and the same stock; their form of government, method of cultivation, manners and customs, beliefs and traditions all point to one origin.” The problem of finding the origin for the neighbouring communities of the ‘Manipuris’ was, thus, ‘solved’ by locating a common origin in a distant place during an unknown past.

The explication of the ‘origin’ of the Meiteis in a hybrid model is a reflection of the problematic space occupied by them during colonial period before the events of 1891. The Manipuris occupied an ethnographic site of anxiety for the colonial officials. Though the epic and the geographical location in the story of the epic are not questioned, the ‘glorious past’ did not shine any more since there is an insinuation of a lost Aryan group who had been displaced by the present groups.

Even though a differentiation in the then present was maintained by tracing the common origin of the different communities, one could venture to argue that it was an attempt to question the authenticity of the Hindu origin of the claim by locating the affinity of the Naga, Manipuri and Kuki in the past. “On the whole the Nagas to the west of the Doyang appear to have affinity with the Manipuri or the Cathay Shans; and the Kukis and the Nagas to the east

64 Johnstone, My Experiences in Manipur and the Naga Hills, pp. 82-98. From this narrative it was easy for the British to look at Pamheiba, whose reign is seen by the British as a historical marker, to be a Naga. The singular connection of the Meeteis with the Indo-Chinese origin, which was prevalent in the early part of the nineteenth century, would be subsumed with a narrative of the whole ‘race’ in the region as Tibeto-Burman migrants of the of the Indo-Chinese. Thus, without mentioning the particular connection of the Meeteis with the Tartar connection, as in the Long Distance model, it would assume its inclusion.

of the same river are of distinct race allied to the Singpho and other pagan tribes further east. If there be any virtue in philological similitude, the comparatively refined Manipuri and dog-eating, dirty, Kuki savage, are very nearly allied. Moreover they can be traced by their own written history to a Kuki origin. By tracing the origin of the different communities as the same, it erases and explains the many differences that had to be encountered in the present. Once the common originality had been established those variations could be rationalized as mediations affected by topographical interventions. In order to maintain the story of evolution there were attempts to put the Meiteis in the evolutionary scale. The acquaintance with the use of iron implements, weaving of cloths implied that in the evolutionary scale they were still, in Hodson’s words, “in the industrial era which immediately precedes that of specialisation of industries.” Despite a colonial desire to put the different groups into a neat order of hierarchy in the evolutionary scale of societies, it was, however, an impossible task. The Meiteis were thought to present “a wonderful scale ranging from people who are still migratory to people who have written histories five centuries old.” The Meiteis occupied an ambiguous position in the evolutionary scale. Though the epic and the geographical location in the story of the epic are not questioned, the ‘glorious past’ somehow did not seem all that glorious, since there is now an insinuation of another lost Aryan group which had been displaced by the present groups.

NARRATING ‘ORIGIN’

The legend of affinity of the common origin among different communities in their origin narratives was pointed out by different colonial writers. Amongst these narratives, there are

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66 Dalton, Descriptive Ethnology of Bengal, p. 48.
68 Ibid.
69 By calling these narratives as myths or legends, I do not either accept the basis on which the colonial knowledge system grounded its basis or reject the rootlessness/fictitious origin. But it is indicative towards an attempt to look at a way of analyzing a collective memory and collective narration to keep alive and make sense of the past. I have used the term myth, here, in the sense of a collective recognizing of a symbolic meaning, within or without religion, as Lutze argues, “mental images arranged in narrative sequences and shared by a community of people” but not as an illustration of the breach with real social incidents. The attempt, however, is neither to treat these as ‘historical evidence’ nor to discard them as mere fiction but to use this as a particular form of organising the past, origin, and its associated linkages with territoriality. In
some themes, which are shared by many communities inhabiting places far apart, of a
memory of events, at a distant past, which is non-dateable in these narratives. The brotherly
relationship as an origin narrative is one of these commonly shared narratives.\(^{70}\) In a Kuki
tradition about their origin, the Kukis and the Mugs are the “offspring of the same progenitor,
who had two sons by different mothers, and the Mugs have the honor to be descended from
the first born.” This tradition of their common origin receives much support, as John Macrae
argued, from the “similarity of the Mug and Kuki languages, many words of which are the
same, and their general resemblance is such that a Mug and Kuki can make themselves
understood by each other.”\(^{71}\) But the affinity of the ‘common origin’ had been severed as the
“Kukis remain Pagans, their elder brethren have become Budhists”.\(^{72}\) It is a story of
separation, intercepted by the forces of religion. According to Hodson, the Kabuis were
“acquainted with the general legend that all Kabuis are descended from one of three
brothers”.\(^{73}\)

In the Tangkhul traditions, their origin is divided into various narratives. In the first group of
traditions, they are connected with the valley. But the location of their origin is not specified,
it is somewhere in the valley and “derive them thence as emigrants on account of the heat
and mosquitoes.” In the second narrative, it provides a link with another tradition, which
makes the Nagas, Kukis, and Meiteis “descended from a common ancestor, who had three
sons who became the progenitors of those tribes.” Though this narrative shares with the
brotherly origin narrative, there is a difference of numbers, since it is three here, instead of
two as we have seen above. Here, the village of Hundung is the centre of their dispersion.
However, there is no direct location of their origin, since Hundung is merely a source of
dispersal. But in contrast to the direction of movement from the first version, it is from the
hills to the valley. Within this tradition, the different versions agree in assigning the primacy
of descent to the Kukis, the next place being given to the Tangkhuls, while the Meeteis are

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that attempt, it may sometimes, intersect with ‘evidential histories’ but most of the time, it evinces different
codes of looking at one’s own past. Lutze, ‘Some contextual and theoretical considerations’ p. 12.

\(^ {70}\) On the stories of two brother origin in the case of the different communities in the Naga Hills see J. H.
Hutton, *Diaries of Two Tours in the Unadministered Area East of the Naga Hills*, reprint Delhi: Gian
Publishing House, 1986, p. 31. The tours were conducted in 1923.


\(^ {72}\) Dalton, *Descriptive Ethnology of Bengal*, pp. 111-2.


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said to be the children of the youngest of these three brothers. The cause of separation is told not so much as a result of friction and fight in this version, but rather a consequence of mobility when the last son wandered off to the valley and found it to his liking. For a while after the separation, there was a bond of relationship, which stopped after the last brother abandoned the custom of sending presents to his brothers in the hills. The third set of narrative is about being earth-born. According to Hodson, this refers to a period “rather later and mainly deals with the growth of new villages and their establishment by emigrants from older villages which suffered from an excess of population.” But the point, here, is not so much about dating or periodising them, but narrating these as different forms of accessing and organising the past.

The shared narratives, or similarities in the structure of the narrative were found to be common amongst different groups. In the narrative, which connects the Tangkhuls with the valley, Hodson wrote, “they sprang from a stone in the police lines”. Hodson, was surprised that the same story and the place was “also claimed by a section of the Marring Nagas, the southern neighbours of the Tangkhuls, as their place of origin.” In this narrative, which connects the hills and the valley, the movement is from the valley to the hills. The reason for leaving the valley is the heat and the mosquitoes, making life in the valley impossible. As a result they migrated to the hills, taking with them fire. But on their way the fire, which they were carrying with them, became extinguished when they were on the ridge between Hundung and Ukhrul. As Hodson writes, “This misfortune was set straight by the timely intervention of the Deity, who taught them to get fire from a stone”. The interesting point in this narrative is the identification of the stone, which was said to have been used for re-making the fire. The maibung, or fire stone, is the abode of, but not, the Deity himself, called the laipham (abode of a deity). One common feature in all the legends about their origin in which movement forms a central theme is the absence of any particular claim to be the original inhabitants of the country they now occupy. Since they have come from another area, which is located outside the present area of inhabitation, there is no definitive claim of

74 Ibid, pp. 8-10. The second version of the origin narrative is sought to be an explanation for the custom called Hao Chongba in a place called Sana Keithel, in the valley in which the Tangkhuls are allowed to loot the women vendors. This practice is seen as taking the ‘due share’ of the elder brother from the youngest brother for failing to give the presents on time.

75 Ibid, p. 10.
territorial possession. Even when some of the places from where dispersal occurred are located, it is not the only narrative, which could then generate claims for possession since some of the other versions have a different claim. Likewise, one narrative of a migration prevalent among one group can be equally shared with another group's narrative.

In a Mao origin narrative there is a variant of the narrative, which connects them with other brothers in the past. Hodson noted this narrative: “Once upon a time there was a jumping match between the three sons of the common ancestor. The Kuki leapt from the top of one range of hills to the crest of the next, while the Naga nearly as good, cleared the intervening valley, but his foot slipped and touched the river. . . . The Manipuri tumbled headlong”. This narrative as in the earlier case of separation among the three brothers through migration between the hills and the valleys, takes the three to be brothers. This narrative follows the common origin narrative of brotherly relationship from being the sons of common ancestor but without pointing out the ancestor. But in another variant, the father of them all was a deity named Asu who had three sons, Mamo, Alapa, and Tuto. The Kukis and the Nagas have descended from Mamo, while the Gurkhas are said have sprung from the loins of Alapa and the Manipuris /Meeteis are the sons of Tuto. The inclusion of the Gurkhas, within the origin narrative interestingly accommodates the changing spectrum of populations inhabiting the territories. In a sense, it shares and maintains an earlier form of narrative but also changes and accommodates the dynamics of change. In both these variants, though the common ancestor and the three brothers origin narrative is maintained, there is no order of the Kukis being the eldest, the Nagas being middle son and the Meeteis the youngest. However, an allusion is being made of this possibility by indicating the strength of the three brothers.

76 Ibid, pp. 11-12. From such a narrative Hodson, seeks to use it as an explanation of the prevailing cultural practices, as he saw them. According to his classification the Kukis “avoids all use of water” because he did not touch water when he sought to jump, the Nagas slipped and touched water, which “limit on his ablutions” and since the “Manipuri tumbled headlong, which explains his fondness for bathing.” At the same time the economic organisation also found a rationale, as Hodson notes, “Asked why they paid revenue to the Manipuris, they said that they grew the cotton on the hills (which is not specially true because the Kukis grow rather more) and sent it down to the Manipuris, who had learnt the art of weaving. In course of time the finished cloth was returned to them, and, not knowing what to do with such long pieces of cloth, the Nagas gave back the greater part to the Manipuris, who wear more clothes than they do. The Manipuris were the Benjamin of the tribes who supported them and have gone on doing so ever since.”
Apart from the migration narrative from one place of the earth to another location, there is
the narrative of being the descendents of ‘earth-born’. In a familiar form the Khongjais bring
their “progenitors from the bowels of the earth.”\textsuperscript{77} It is a story of hyper-migration, not from
one surface of the earth to another, but from the inner to the outer of the earth. Here, it is not
a story of creation but rather of coming into being on the surface of the earth after certain
events, which are outside the control of human beings. Within the familiar forms of origin
narratives, this story also follows a loss of magicality, corruption of human nature through
deception, an intimacy with the non-humans, and the story of origin is linked with the act of
ritual propitiation for the evils that befall at present. In this narrative the existence of various
groups with different languages is also explained. The three grandsons of the progenitor
chief, “while one day all playing together in their house, were told by their father to catch a
rat, that they were busy about it, when being suddenly struck with a confusion of tongues,
they were unable to effect their object.” As a consequence the “eldest son spoke the
Lamyang, the second the Thado, and the third, some way the Waiphie and some the
Munnipore language.”\textsuperscript{78} In this narrative, the brotherly origin and the common ancestorship
are maintained but at the same time the beginning of different groups of people who have
become different in many respects is tacitly explained within the structure in which the
humans are players in the acts of their fissuring out but events, which are out of their control.
Moreover, though it maintains the three brothers narrative, the composition of the brothers is
not the same, as we have seen before apart from the lack of migration as separation. It is an
unexplained occurrence in the middle of a human act, which sets the three brothers into
separate linguistic groups.

There is a Thadou variant of the legend recorded by Grierson. In this version “men formerly
lived in the bowels of the earth.” Here, as seemingly distinct from the stories of brotherly
origin, the “Khongzais and the Meitheis were then friends.” At the same, though it is not
said that they are brothers, the mother seems to be the same, which indirectly suggest the
friendly relationship more in the sense of a ‘good time’ rather than alluding to a non-blood
relationship of friendship. The change from the ‘good old days’ to the ‘turbulent’ present is

\textsuperscript{77} McCulloch, \textit{Account of the Valley of Munnipore}, p. 56.
\textsuperscript{78} Ibid, pp. 55-6.
explicated within a narrative of fight, which started off as a mundane issue: “One day they quarrelled about a cloth, and their mother took a *dao* and cut it into two pieces. The Meitheis began to cut haimang trees and, finding their footprints fresh, many people followed them. That is the reason why the Meitheis are so numerous. The Khongzais went to cut plantain trees and then ascended into the earth. These footprints looked rather old and therefore only a few people followed. The Khongzais are therefore few.”

Hodson adds that the story is not complete in the form that Grierson records as “*[T]he point of the quarrel is not brought out. The Manipuris got the larger-share, and for that reason they now use more cloth in dressing themselves than the Kukis*”. And in the narrative that Hodsons provides us, they are blood-brothers: “*[T]he Manipuris, being the younger, were helped by their mother in the quarrel.*”

Though the origin narrative of the Marings is also about earth-born, there are very interesting differences from the preceding stories. First, it is not merely men, as is the usual case with those, which have been discussed above. Secondly, it is not just two or three people, but a larger group of men and women. In this story they came out of the earth “near the eastern foot of the Hirok range, but in the Kubo Valley, in the higher ground immediately under the hills at a place named Mungsa.” Seven men and seven women emerged out of here. Another interesting distinction that is found in this story is a possible allusion to a lesser degree of gender demarcation for in the story it is told that at the time when they emerged, both men and women wore the same clothes and same hair-wearing pattern. Interestingly, this is also one of the few stories of origin in which women form a part of the narrative. But at the same time the distinctive mark between men and women was maintained since the “males dressed their hair into a horn-like knot in front of the head, the women behind. The females also lengthened their waist cloths, while the men shortened theirs.” In this narrative the origin of being earth-born is combined, as in many cases, with migration. Because of certain reason, which is not stated in the narrative, they left their location in the Kabaw valley and moved to the hills, which are towards the Manipur side, where they inhabited. Another distinctive

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79 G. Grierson, *Linguistic Survey of India*, Vol. III, *Tibeto-Burman Family*, Part III, *Specimens of the Kuki-Chin and Burma Groups*, Calcutta, 1903, p. 71. It is very interesting to note that the story as was collected is put under the heading titled “Specimen II – A piece of folklore taken from the lips of a Kuki-Naga” whereas as noticeable the stories are about two communities the Manipuris/Meeteis and Khongjais/Kukis.

80 Hodson, *The Naga Tribes of Manipur*, pp. 12-13. In this narrative also, the story of origin from the earth is marked on a geographical location in the surrounding areas. This narrative of common ancestorship and schism or separation, was often associated with the existing differences amongst the groups.
 marker is that unlike those narratives which stick to only one source of the nature of the
original place, either earth or water, here, there is an allusion to the Kabaw valley from where
they originated. In another contesting version of the origin of the Marings, the place of origin
is located at the heart of Imphal at a place called Haubam Marak whereas another portion
“took their origin at ‘Laissangkhong’, a village in the valley, some seven or eight miles south
of the capital”81.

Another origin narrative, collected by R. Brown, who was a Political Agent in Manipur, tells
of the origin of the Tangkhuls. “[They] came out of a cave in the earth at a place called
Murringphiy on the hills”. The narrative tells of an attempt to leave the cave by its occupants,
one by one. But a large tiger, which was on the watch, devoured them successively as they
emerged. In order to escape the menace of the tiger, the occupants of the cave, “by a
stratagem – throwing out the effigy of a man they had dressed up – distracted the attention of
the tiger, and took the opportunity of leaving the cave in a body”.82 By the sight of the huge
numbers, the tiger flees.

This story finds its affinity current among many other communities of being earth-born, but
the earth, here, is substituted by cave. But Hodson refutes this narrative to be of Tangkhul
origin as he argues that this legend finds a similarity with a Marring legend and says, “I have
never met it among the Tangkhuls. Murringphiy is in the Marring area, and it is quite possible
that Dr. Brown, in many respects a very careful observer, was misled in this matter.” He goes
on to argue against the ‘migration myth’ of the Tangkhuls since “it is quite clear that these
tribes, especially the Tangkhuls, were settled in the areas they now occupy at an early date,
when the Meitheis, now their masters, were yet wild and untouched by the finer arts of
life.”83 It is this colonial interventionist narrative, which rests on the model of an evolution
that seeks to define the conflict of territoriality and migration. With this move, Hodson tries
to find a way of binding a particular community to a specific location, without any possibility

83 Hodson, The Naga Tribes of Manipur, pp. 10-11. This argument finds an echo from Edward Gait’s work, A
History of Assam, which powerfully argued that the ‘original inhabitant’ of Assam were the Boros, and thus,
the legitimate original population. Interestingly it was published in 1905, six years before Hodson’s The Naga
Tribes and three years before The Meitheis which laid the foundation for Hodson’s viewpoints.
of mobility. From an indication of a possibility in these stories by keeping the location of ‘real origin’ open and also without maintaining as the sole claimant of the area in which a community inhabits, now, with the colonial intervention, there is a desire to tie the people down to a specific location.

What is interesting in the foregoing narratives is that there seems to be an allusion of a practice of keeping records of the genealogy, or events from the ‘original’ moment to the present, orally. Moreover, the way to make sense of the events in the past is not through counting the number of years, but by remembering the geographical spaces, which had been used for cultivation. Instead of the calendrical years of progression, there is reference to a sequential ordering of temporality, closely tied to spatial distribution. The mode of maintaining these narrative forms was a close “attention to their genealogy . . . [by] know[ing] the names of their chiefs in succession, from their leader out of the bowels of the earth up the present time.” It is neither the period of chieftainship of each nor the method of counting years, but “by enumerating the spots where they had annually cultivated”.

The origin narratives can be broadly classified into at least two forms. In the first, they are about the origin of human beings. In the second, there is no reference to the formation of coming into being of the humans but rather it is about how and where the collective identity could be traced back. But the division between the two could sometimes break down, especially when extra-human elements and nature are ascribed to the characters of the narratives. In one of the narratives of the Angamis (or Gnamai as Brown wrote), the source of their origin is not the earth but a water body. But at the same time it maintains the three-brother story, originating from one place and separated at one point of time in the past, which is too far off to recall. According in Brown’s collection: “There is a jheel situated in the

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85 There is a close relationship between space and time to mark events that happened in distant past. But the temporality of recognizing those moments in non-Western society does not have to be through chronology. Here, a memory of events allows the intersection between space and time to make sense of past. For a conceptual development on the two in a non-literate society see Robert J. Thornton, 1980, Space, Time, and Culture among the Iraqw of Tanzania, New York: Academic Press.

Angami country; from this jheel three men emerged, one remained in the Angami country and became an Angami, one went towards North Kachar, and the remaining one towards Manipur. Thus were formed three tribes of hill-men, Kacharima, Angami and Mow.\textsuperscript{87} It may be noted that a similarity among all these legends is that of migration and a sharing of a common origin from where brothers had moved out because of different obstacles, which are beyond the power of human control.\textsuperscript{88} Another point of similarity is their origin as earthborn. A common theme in these stories is the fight between humans as well as non-human interventions. It is by overcoming some of the obstacles, which are outside of human possibility that narrative of the movement is sought to be marked. An important interesting feature in these narratives is despite the geographical markers associated with origin, or migration, there is the "absence of any claim to be the original inhabitants of the country they now occupy."\textsuperscript{89} The case of the Marings is interesting for its distinctive nature as well as the interspersing of the origin narrative with a mobilisation of the origin narrative for a claim to a certain location wherein they no longer inhabit. Moreover, what is noticeable is the mix and composite nature, at times conflicting, of the origin narratives. In some instances there is a combination of many themes in one story.

\textbf{Origin, Evidence, Narrative}

These narratives were not used by the colonial officials to follow the story for its 'meaningful' signs of relationship within the worldview of the particular community. The contesting stories of locating origin of the different groups of people are now sought to be mediated and 'settled' by the British officer. The claim of the British to decide the

\textsuperscript{87} Brown, \textit{Statistical Account of Manipur}, p. 33. In some of the narratives of the Meetei origin, water, again, is also an important element. But it is not in the sense of coming out of the water but rather in the beginning of settlement, it was by draining the water from the valley that humans could settle down.

\textsuperscript{88} In a story, which had been collected in the 1970s among the Maos, there is an interesting story of three brothers. But unlike most of the stories that have been discussed here they originate from a universal cosmic mother. Here, the brothers are not all human beings; rather the first one is the god, the second animal (tiger) and the third man. The separation of the three brothers is caused by the death of the mother and the subsequent separation of the inheritances of the world by the three brothers, impinged with jealousy, sibling rivalry. The story is embedded with a relationship of the power of human beings to control the natural forces and the close ties of kin relationship. For a longer discussion see Brenda E. F. Beck, Peter J. Claus, Praphulladatta Goswami and Jawaharlal Handoo, eds., \textit{Folktales of India}, Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1987, pp. 269-273.

\textsuperscript{89} Hodson, \textit{The Naga Tribes of Manipur}, pp. 8-10.
authenticity of these narratives turns them into 'evidences'. For instance, the Khongjai narrative of origin was turned into evidence for territorial separation of communities, in the way colonial writers wanted to see them.

Although occupants of the hills to the South of the Valley of Munnipore, their traditions do not give the southern hills as the place of their origin, but rather lead them to the belief that it was in the North. I have before noticed the circumstances of the Koupooees believing themselves to be occupying the sites of villages which once belonged to the southern tribes, and as this belief tallies with the Khongjai idea, that they came form the North I might conjecture, the latter had formerly occupied the position now occupied by the Koupooees, but the Khongjais themselves do not even hint this to be the case. 90

The contesting stories of locating the origin of the different groups of people are now mediated and 'settled' by the British officer.

But, McCulloch's records give us an interesting insight to the possibility of some form of popular memory being kept alive in an oral form. He informs us that the Khongjais paid much attention to their genealogy by professing to know the names of their chiefs in succession starting from the time when they moved out of the earth up to then. "[P]revious to Thado, there may be doubt" writes McCulloch, but they recounted those successors of him. But at the same time, the exact chronology of each chief "they cannot tell, indeed, neither they nor any of the hill tribes have any more certain way of counting years, than by enumerating the spots where they had annually cultivated, and it is not to be expected, that in a long series of years, all these could be remembered." 91

In some cases the stories combine a narrative of common origin and migration. But what is more noticeable is that for the colonial writers such a blend suits them to substantiate their classificatory enterprise. In an interesting blend of the two, the Kukis of Manipur, the Lushais of Bengal and Assam, and the Chins are connected to each other. Though, due to the 'original' habit of 'migration', as the British saw it, the Kukis have come to occupy their area

90 McCulloch, Account of the Valley of Munnipore, p. 56
91 Ibid, pp. 56-7.

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of inhabitation. In order to ascertain those claims, use of language becomes an important tool of tracing affinity.

The changes that occur through colonial writings are that from a multiple and often conflicting, possibility of narrating the origin, it is now made to be understood through only one model which seeks to tell of only one plausible origin anchored on the scientificity of looking at the costumes, customs, physical features, language, beliefs, rituals, method of cultivation, etc. At the same time whenever they used these stories, it was to substantiate some other point, about territorial claims, affinity, which served to smoothen the classificatory patterns of colonialism. The rivalry amongst the 'brothers', through which the stories tell as the cause of separation into different groups heightens in complementing the imagery of a 'typicality' of these communities in their characterization of 'warlike' population without any sense of sibling solidarity. If religion was one of the markers to allocate the scale of civilisation, it was also seen as a force which could intercept the affinity of the 'common origin'. The distinction being made between 'plains people' and 'hillmen' is at another level eliminated by invoking the myth of origin in the colonial writings: "The rapidity with which Nagas, Kukis, and Gurkhas are absorbed by and disappear in the Meithei population may afford an explanation of the aetiological legends of origin . . . These people are all of the Tibeto-Burman stock." But at the same time it is expressed more at the level of longing, which is made possible only when evolution is explained as the only way of social mobility. Though the "Chin Hills are peopled by many clans and communities, calling themselves by various names and believing themselves to be of distinct and superior origin" it is by establishing their origin narrative that "all belong to one and the same, . . . Throughout the vast apparent difference in detail of the manners and customs of the tribes, the main Kuki characteristics can be universally traced and may be briefly enumerated".

93 See Brown, Statistical Account of Manipur, p. 16. For an almost obsession desire of classification based on language of the different communities which the British thought was living in a fluid zone of interconnectivity, contestation and mobility see Grierson, G. A., Linguistic Survey of India, Vol. III, Tibeto-Burman Family, Part III, Specimens of the Kuki-Chin and Burma Groups, Calcutta, 1903.
94 For an instance on the Kukis see Dalton, Descriptive Ethnology of Bengal, pp. 111-2.
95 Hodson, The Naga Tribes of Manipur, p. 25.
The affinity of the ‘Naga’, ‘Manipuri’ and ‘Kuki’ was always sought in the past whereas in the present it was the distinction.

A study of the origin narratives confronts us with a seemingly antagonistic vision of consciousness and social relationship, mediated by temporality. On the one hand there is a story that is infused with a strong tie of blood relationship amongst the different communities by virtue of being brothers in their origin. The ‘harmonious’ bonding of sibling affection is contrasted on the other by a picture of rivalry and conflict in the then present, as we are told of village or clan rivalry and ‘internecine feuds’ that pervades all groups. But there is a tension of the coexistence of the two narratives of a happier past and a conflicted present. It could, perhaps, be suggested that invoking a narrative of common origin is a mythopoetical attempt to resolve and diffuse the tense moment of the colonial present by resorting to the past in a space where the power of the colonial state is given no entry. It is resolved outside of the state power (and human intervention) by implying the actions of the brothers in moving at different directions without any consciousness of a causal force. It is in this denial of active human agency in the events, that it abstracts the harmonious past outside of the force of any institutional power. It is the time of ‘innocent’ human acts, which determine the course of events. A narrative of a transformation from ‘good old days’ to an ‘evil time’ is filled with the anxiety of eroding the pristine past of pure form into a contaminated present. However, within that frame rather than addressing the present and its problems, it displaces the conflicts of the present into a timeless past.

The search for origin in the colonial writings can be understood as an anxiety to find out the ‘ownership’ of a particular place, by looking at who has the authentic and legitimate claim. For a people without history and any culture of legal possession, the terms of the claim to possession had to be determined by ‘customary’ claims. In order to settle the claims among different groups of people, (when they are not usurping for themselves) as the arbiter of power, the colonial state needs an understanding of those people who possessed these claims. There was no other way, here, but to find out the origin of the group who had the claim in order to settle this claim. It is in owning the power to resolve and announce the ‘rightful’ claimant that the sovereign authority of the colonial state is established.
The colonial desire to ‘settle’ a population not merely in terms of physically making them immobile but even by seeking to find their history was in contrast to many of the stories which they themselves collected. In a stark pointer to that inconsistency and opposition to those stories, one can see a case of the Kabuis as noted by Brown: “The Kowpoi tribe of Nagas would appear to have occupied the position they now hold in the hills from great antiquity. Their villages are permanent.” But at the same time he also notes, “The Kowpois state that they originally came from a place on the hills to the south of the Manipur Valley, but the Manipuris place their origin at Khebu-Ching, near the Aqui route, north of the Government, road, from when they spread to the south.”

A narrative on the ‘common origin’ was seen as not having much impact on the social order of the present. But on the other hand, some of the cultural practices were found to be defined by it. If there is any lapse in the conviction of these stories, it is explained as a result of the long period of intervention in which lots of intermixing and mutual adaptation had taken place since dialects “exhibiting considerable Kuki influence to the northern dialects which approximate to the typical Naga language” are noticed. The observation of the existence of a common origin and the acceptance of intermixing seem on the face a contradiction.

The point to mark when we notice the ‘recording’ of myths and stories is not merely the ‘codification’, standardization of a narrative through a formatted written text from a fluid oral narration but to look at this instance as the beginning of a new career of the myths themselves. In looking at colonial textualisation as the beginning of another career for these myths, one is not merely concerned with the form of narration but a larger discourse, which sets the agenda for generating a culture of myths – a regeneration of the ‘pre-colonial’ myths in a new form and the introduction of a new colonial myth, which assigns itself to be the authentic and legitimate narrative by covering its mythical elements and positioning itself in the garb of an original purity.

With the coming of the colonial writings what is being introduced was the process of *literization*, not purely a transition from orality to writing, but meaningful only when related with it. This is a process of ‘loss’, separation from everyday reality and community life. As Lutze says,

> Literization has brought about ways of manipulating myth which are possible only when it has lost its universal validity and become art in opposition to reality in the sense of non-art. Once myth is literature, the boundaries within which it originally would be actualized can and will be transgressed, it can be toyed with, be made the subject matter of irony and satire and, eventually, of ‘de-mythification’. At this stage, the original augmentation and glorification of things divine and human will be replaced by their reduction of the banal, the pedestrian, the all-too-human.  

What marks as a major intervention in the way the colonial writers look at the myths and folktales was to make sense in terms of a modern epistemological anchor. The myths, the stories or the origin narratives could not have been understood for its earlier meanings beyond the logic of rationality. There is an anxiety and frustration of not being able to grasp and ‘control’ the existence of a knowledge system of the inferior Other. Therefore, the mystery of the unknown has to be punctured from its mythical locale. Investigating the ‘origin’ of a community is a fulfilment of the anxiety of preservation to possess the remnants of a diminishing or a lost past, to mark the ‘progress’ and ‘development’ of colonialism. The onslaught of colonialism was accompanied with a dream of constructing history. This allows for a subjection of the colonized people, an assertion of control over them by making them immobile. There were variations in the mode of authentication and implication, as one would expect in a field where the rules had not yet become well established. But at the same time, the desire to apportion time for the ‘inferior’ other is impinged with a notion of loss. The non-Western world is always registered with excitement and anxiety of disappearance and co-option into modernity.  

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A study of the ‘myth of origin’ became an enquiry into the locating of the past in colonial writings. Writing the origin and the subsequent history of a ‘subject’ group through historical representation is a means to ‘close’ the fluidity of multiple access and interpretation of past. By standardizing a narrative through a representational mode, history could now be fixed and legitimized by invoking the ‘scientific’ approach and interpreting the ‘folk’, ‘mythical’ exposition of past through the frame of a modern narrative, either through denial or insertion. Running parallel with this historical ‘closure’, the physical immobilization through military operations and other institutions and practices strengthened in fixing the otherwise ‘mobile’ population. If the migratory habits of the ‘tribes’ created anxiety (almost panic) in this scheme, ‘settling’ them down was an exercise of self-assurance.

What is important to note here is to look beyond the mere issue of one authentic narrative history over the other, but to see how in the course of the development of colonialism, a particular form of a narrative became the narrative truth, and therefore was accepted as the official version whereas all the contending histories which had been put forward by challenging or negating these claims were relegated to oblivion within the academic production of colonial knowledge system.101 What I have attempted is to see how the coming of a particular ‘official’ narrative has a history of its own. Even as the history of the making of this standard narrative of origin is studied, one cannot but remember the colonial context in which there is a strong impetus to put down the ‘unoccupied’ and contesting histories within a legible form for the colonisers.102 The multiple origin narratives competed and collaborated with one another. But with the introduction of a more authentic narrative through colonial intervention, the grounds of the possibility of that contestation and conciliation have shifted. From a practice, which is closely grounded with the social, political

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101 In the case of the historiography on the debunking of the claim of Aryan origin of the Meiteis, by portraying it as a ‘futile exercise’ see N. Sanajaoba, ed., Manipur: Past and Present Vol. I, New Delhi; Mittal Publications, 1991. The similarity of some of the arguments between the colonial writings and the current contributions in the debate are very prominent reaching to a level of plagiarism of ideas and information. In any case, both of them share a commonality of allegiance to a notion of irreversibility in the ‘invincible truth’ of ‘scientific’ approach. For an indication of those viewpoints that ascribed to the Manipuris as descendants of the Aryans, mixed with the ‘original inhabitants’ see Lairenmayum Iboongchal Singh, Introduction to Manipur, Imphal, 1960.

102 For a study of the different narratives of origin, closely entangled with the course of their political and social formations over the centuries, in the case of Shahsevan, one of “Iran’s major nomadic people, living on the sensitive frontiers of Azarbajian”, see Richard Tapper, Frontier nomads of Iran: A Political and social history of the Shahsevan, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997, pp. 35-84.
and economic realities of a particular context, they are interpreted for the purpose of authenticity and verifiability. Colonial enterprise of a search for 'true' origin was intrinsically about territoriality; a particular origin narrative was a mechanism of laying down the geographical co-ordinates of constituting the history of the group.