Meenaxi Barkataki-Ruscheweyh and Andrea Lauser
Georg-August University of Göttingen

Editors' Introduction

Performing Identity

Politics and Culture in Northeast India and Beyond

This essay introduces the reader to the politically complex and geographically strategic but relatively less studied region of Northeast India and connects the seven articles contained in this special issue by showing how they explore different aspects of the performance of national, ethnic, and cultural identities. It suggests new ways of understanding and interpreting history, ethnicity, and cultural concerns in the region. Although politically a part of India and hence of South Asia, Northeast India lies in the northwestern periphery of Southeast Asia. It is home to many distinct communities from both east and west and is an area of incredible ethnic, religious, and linguistic diversity. The resultant friction among these groups as well as with the mainstream Indian population has led to assertions of ethnic identity amongst many minority groups in recent years, some going as far as threatening to secede from the Indian state. It has therefore become imperative to understand the dynamics of ethnicity and cultural identity movements, as well as the underlying political considerations. Rather than filing cultural traditions into simplistic dichotomous categories, this set of articles consider these traditions to result from interactions between people and ambient contexts, as well as the changes in power relations over time. Identities, as asserted in this region, are more persistent and more inherent than just mere responses to the world beyond.

KEYWORDS: culture—ethnicity—religion—Northeast India—politics and performance of identity

Asian Ethnology Volume 72, Number 2 · 2013, 189–197

This special issue seeks to explore different aspects of the performance of national, ethnic, and cultural identities in the politically complex and geographically strategic region of Northeast India and will hopefully contribute to a better understanding of such processes in other parts of the world as well (Clifford 2001). The region broadly referred to as Northeast India comprises eight Indian states—Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, Sikkim, and Tripura—and is part of South Asia, bordering Southeast Asia. Included in the Southeast Asian borderland region of Northeast India are the adjoining hill areas of Myanmar, Bhutanese Himalayas, Chittagong Hill Tracts, and the Indo-China border in Arunachal Pradesh. Although it has long been recognized by experts as a hot spot of linguistic, cultural, and ethnic diversity, the region has remained relatively unknown to the world beyond.

The region did not even find a place on the Indian national stage until the mid 1980s. Labeled as "backward" and "remote" and thought to be inhabited mostly by "tribals," this region remained largely forgotten despite bringing huge revenues to the state from its oil, coal, and mineral reserves, as well as its tea production since the British colonial era. Several movements asserting regional identity and seeking redress and recognition, and some going so far as threatening to secede from the Indian state, have raised the level of awareness of this region in the last few decades. But given its strategic location in a geopolitically sensitive region, entry restrictions for foreigners and also for Indians from other parts of India into most of the northeastern states were in place till very recently, and this has been one of the principal reasons why the region has not received more scholarly attention.

However, the level of interest and the number of scholars working on the region has gone up significantly in the last couple of decades (de Maaker and Joshi 2007).[1] The work on the Garo community in Meghalaya by anthropologist-turned-linguist Robbins Burling (2003), the documentation of oral traditions in Arunachal Pradesh by folklorist Stuart Blackburn (2010), the studies in Tibetan Buddhist rituals and practices by anthropologist Toni Huber (2008), the rethinking of borderlands by historian-anthropologist Willem van Schendel (2002), and many others[2] have led the way to serious scholarship on the region (Bal 2007; Karlsson 2011; Cederlöf 2013). Furthermore, scholars from the region like political scientist Sanjib Baruah, whose seminal books (1999; 2005) initiated the process

of reexamining and reinterpreting the burning issue of rampant "Assamese subnationalism," as he chose to call it, are looking at the region in a scholarly, grounded, and unbiased manner (see also HAZARIKA 2000; DUTTA 2012). Younger scholars both from within the region and beyond have also contributed immensely in recent years to the increase in knowledge and understanding of the region (SAIKIA 2004; LONGKUMER 2010; SHARMA 2011; MISRA 2011; WOUTERS 2012; LYNGDOH 2012).

It was with the intention of bringing together such scholars that an interdisciplinary workshop titled "Performing Identity: Ethnicity and Ethno-nationalism in the Southeast Asian Borderland region of Northeast India" was organized at the Department of Social and Cultural Anthropology, University of Göttingen, 15–17 December 2011.[3] This special volume includes seven articles on different aspects of some issues crucial to the region.

CONTEXTUALIZING THE THEME

In recent years there have been many movements among ethnic groups in Northeast India asserting identities and claiming "indigenous rights." While these can be seen as processes of "coming of age" of these groups (and some even as processes of integration into transnational discourses),[4] they cannot be understood independently from the role of the state, as many of these movements have also been shaped by factors like state intervention and insensitive government policies. Other processes like religious conversion and change of lifestyle and world view brought about by changes in agro-ecology and increasing population pressures have also contributed, while improvements in education, infrastructure, telecommunications, and media accessibility have had a significant impact on the levels of awareness and of interconnectedness between different groups in the region (see, for example, the essays contained in OPPITZ et al. 2008; BARUAH 2009).

Micro-level analyses informed by historical data of contemporary struggles in Northeast India help to articulate what a specific identity for these ethnic groups could really mean, imply, or be a consequence of. Moreover, studying the performative aspects of these phenomena and looking at identity assertions as manifested, not only in mass uprisings but also in festivals and other public events, could also give a more emic understanding of the situation. Furthermore, there is a growing need not just to have a better comparative understanding of the commonalities and differences in ethnic identity assertions in the region, but also to find more "grounded" relevant theoretical perspectives with which to make sense of the situation.

Instead of using essentialist arguments uncritically, the contributors to this volume have used empirical (ethnographical) micro and context analyses in order to revise classical theories and/or argue out of their empirical field. The more detailed and multilayered the empirical view, the more urgent the need to reconsider the understanding of culture, tradition, ethnicity, and religion as conceptual tools. It is not about agreement on a single definition: it is more about conceptualizing them in relational, processual, and dynamic terms rather than viewing them as concrete, enduring, and delimited entities.

This conceptualization often finds expression in terms of situative actions, in performative representations and festivals, in institutional structures and political projects and, sometimes, in accidental events. It implies thinking of long-term transformations such as ethnicization, ethnogenesis, and nationalization consistently as social, cultural, and political processes. In this sense identities are not given indefinitely, but are always being reinterpreted and restructured. They are acquired through strategic negotiations and remain in a dynamic, changeable relationship with national, ethnic, and religious belonging.

The contributors to this volume accept the "reality" of ethnicity and nationality. To think about them processually does not mean to understate or falsify their power and relevance in any way. Nation-states use pseudo-ethnic ideologies in the representation of an "imagined community." And ethnicities draw their authority on the basis of alleged "natural" roots, but on critical deconstruction prove themselves to be historically positioned narratives and/or carefully cultivated strategies of social action and negotiation. National, ethnic, and religious identification offers efficient and strategically valuable arenas for self-assertion. However, sometimes more persistent forms of belonging, even some more intrinsic levels of meaning, may become evident in the process. For how else can ethnic groups claim to "feel they belong to a coherent and perennial entity"? (Ramirez 2007, 92).

Stuart Hall describes the quest for cultural identity as the "double movement of containment and resistance" (Hall 1990, 228). It asks for a constant oscillation between the understanding of tradition and translation, and of continuity and difference. He talks about two axes or vectors, simultaneously operative: the vector of similarity and continuity and the vector of difference and rupture. Cultural identity is positioned, and remains always in a context (in time or in space, in respect of the past and of the future). "It is a matter of becoming as well of being" (Hall 1990, 225), or in other words, a dialectic entanglement of both indigenous "roots" and traveling/migratory "routes" (Clifford 2001, 477). The relationship of cultural identity and ethnicity to the past is an essential one. It is not a simple, living relation, but one that is politically constructed in history, "an act of imaginative rediscovery," termed "new ethnicity" by Hall (1996).

Rather than viewing tradition in dichotomous terms such as authentic versus inauthentic,[5] we take an approach in which tradition is seen as "context-bound articulation" (Hermann 2011, 7). This makes it possible to view cultural traditions as resulting from interactions between people—their ideas, actions, and objects—and the ambient contexts and power relations between past and present. In the same way, rethinking other simplistic dichotomous models (like those of center-periphery models, hills versus plains, or uplands versus lowlands) with respect to the Zomia region in general and Northeast India in particular, might lead to richer ethnographies. This is because viewed through a wide historical lens, people may have been both plains people and hill dwellers at different points in their history; "hills-plains-hills-movements" may have also taken place (Wouters 2012).

The above arguments inform this volume. The seven articles herein are very different in their themes and theoretical positions, and they each look at different areas and

different communities living in the region. Yet each of them illustrates how some of the notions mentioned above play out on the ground and suggest new ways of understanding and interpreting history, ethnicity, and cultural concerns in the region.

Miriam Wenner studies the Gorkhaland movement in the hilly northern tip of West Bengal bordering Northeast India and suggests a new way of understanding regional aspirations. She proposes that we understand the relationships between region and nation as emerging simultaneously. She argues that movements for new states are mainly about regionalizations and boundaries contested by groups attempting to create their "own space" and should be understood as such rather than in the context of ethno-nationalism or developmental aspirations of regional groups. Her analysis shows that multiple actors involved in such statehood movements legitimize their demands by strategically creating "imaginative geographies" of the area claimed, thereby constructing ethno-scapes and producing a common idea of a "homeland" that is then used simultaneously for framing as well as for movement mobilization. Instead of challenging the mainstream ideology of the nation-state, these movements thereby reproduce its main principles at multiple levels of society.

The idea of an "imagined nation" is carried over from the Gorkha community in West Bengal to the Garo community in Meghalaya in the next article, where Erik de Maaker explores the idea of the Garo nation as iconically represented by their Wangala dance. He shows how Garo Wangala dancing has developed into a powerful mediatized expression of the Garo community by linking national- and state-level performances to village-level celebrations.

This notion of the mediatization of identity and instrumentation of culture to further identity aspirations is explored further by Meenaxi Barkataki-Ruscheweyh who looks at festivals and how identity is "performed" and in the process (re) invented at these events. She argues that the small Tangsa community in Arunachal Pradesh and Assam have fashioned their identity, in so far as is manifest in their festivals, in a form that not only enables internal consolidation but which also bolsters the social and political position of the Tangsa in the wider world around them.

Remaining in Arunchal Pradesh, the next article describes a reformist movement called the Donyi-Polo movement. Similar, in some ways, to the Heraka movement of "religious modernization" described by Arkotong LONGKUMER (2010, 46), the article by Sarit Kumar Chaudhuri traces the historicity of the movement among the Adis and Nyishis (two major tribes of the state) and investigates how the movement has actually led to the institutionalization of tribal[6] religion under the influence of Hinduized religious ideas and symbols and resulted in a sort of reinvention of their cultural and religious traditions, thereby bringing in new forms of tribal transformation to the tribal-majority frontier state.

Ethnic groups and the fluidity of ethnic identities are the themes of the article by Philippe Ramirez. In a detailed anthropological evaluation of clan organization, he investigates the relationships between social structures and ethnicities in Northeast India. Clans common to several tribes, or conversions from one tribe to the other, point to the existence of common institutions enabling the circulation of people across ethnic boundaries. This somewhat surprising yet compelling analysis

throws up many questions regarding the rigid ethnic identity assertions and the general ethnogenesis in the region.

Relations between different ethnic groups are also the theme of the penultimate article which takes us beyond Northeast India to the eastern border of Southeast Asia. Many ethnic groups living in Northeast India at present have come from the east, and many still have strong cultural and affinal links with people living in countries like Myanmar, China, and Thailand (see, for example, Burling 2007). Hence this region is as much a part of Southeast Asia as it is of South Asia. Guido Sprenger seeks to analyze center-periphery relations that structure both upland and lowland socialities in the region. His article offers a comparison between the Rmeet of Laos with the Yao/Iu Mien, an ethnicity that has migrated from Southern China across Laos to Thailand. It proposes that at least two types of center-periphery relations can be found among these groups, one characterized by replication and mimesis, the other by complementation and contrast.

The final article by Bengt G. Karlsson is a pointed commentary on how thinking of this region, especially of the northeast, through existing categories might not always be enough. Offering a crisp introduction to the very influential work of James Scott, Karlsson goes on to discuss ethnicity and the state in Northeast India from the vantage point of James Scott's recent book (2009). He argues that although Scott's notion of Zomia opens up new ways of thinking about Northeast India, one still ends up thinking of the hills from the perspective of the valley and in so doing misses aspects of the hill societies and ways of being in the world that cannot be reduced to a state-effect (see also Wouters 2012). If one looks more closely at these other aspects, more persistent forms of identification and a sense of belonging might come to the fore. Rather than just trying to escape from the state, people in the hills also hope for another, different, state.

It is precisely to mark this important fact—that identities are more persistent and more inherent than just mere responses to the world beyond—that Karlsson states and which Erik de Maaker's article illustrates, and to acknowledge that ethnic formations sometimes work in ways that have little to do with political considerations (as Ramirez's article shows) that we decided on the title "Politics and culture in Northeast India" rather than "Politics *of* Culture in Northeast India." Since these processes are also relevant to a larger region beyond Northeast India, as Sprenger's contribution demonstrates, we have extended the title to "Politics and Culture in Northeast India and Beyond."

Taking stock

What we have presented in this volume is only a small but hopefully representative sample of the diverse questions that are being asked and the many issues that need to be addressed in the region. These articles show beyond doubt that although there is much that is already known about the northeast, there is still a lot of work that remains to be done, new lines of inquiry that need to be pursued, and many older projects that need to be reworked in view of new knowledge and more

recent empirical findings. And to do that, many more scholars have to come together to interpret the past and to understand the present of the region. There is still a long way to go until all the details have been gathered, and have been fitted together coherently to make sense of this complex yet fascinating mosaic. We sincerely hope this volume will prove to be not just an incremental addition but also a catalyst in taking this project further.

Notes

* We, the guest editors of this special volume, would like to thank the editors of *Asian Ethnology* for agreeing to our proposal and to all the contributors for accepting our invitation. We are grateful to professors Sanjib Baruah and Barend J. Terwiel for being there for us whenever we needed them. Thanks go to Friedlind Riedel who helped with the preparation of the manuscript, as well as to the referees. This volume developed from the Göttingen workshop and we would also like to thank all the participants, our sponsors, and those who helped with the organization, especially Karin Klenke, Marion Gimbel, and Jelka Guenther, for everything they did to make that event a success and this volume a reality.

1. We do not mention here the solid body of work on the region done by the many colonial administrators and ethnographers, nor the significant work of anthropologists such as Fürer-Haimendorf and Verrier Elwin, and restrict ourselves to scholars who are still actively working and writing about the region.

2. Mention must also be made of Stephen Morey, George van Driem, Francois Jacquesson, Mark Post, Scott DeLancey, and others in the field of linguistic studies.

3. See http://www.uni-goettingen.de/de/215003.html (accessed 10 September 2013).

4. The majority of the often enduring and deepening conflicts in these borderlands generally pivot on "sons-of-the-soil" claims, invoking notions of autochthony to legitimize occupational rights to lands and regional autonomy (Vandekerckhove 2009). Given the dialectical entanglement of the global, the transnational, the national, and the local, many of these conflicts link up to the globalized discourse on indigenous rights, which has been particularly powerful since 1993 (the United Nations' "Year for Indigenous Peoples"; see for example Bal 2007).

5. Handler and Linnekin (1984) discuss a paradox within the ideology of tradition where preservation leads to alteration and reinvention.

6. Although the use of "tribal" and "tribe" are not value neutral their usage is commonplace in India and also part of the official vocabulary. See Bal (2007) and van Schendel (2005) for a critical discussion of the "invention of tribes" as a colonial effect of British policy and the consequent "tribal discourse" as a process through which uplanders became socially construed as collectively backward and sharing characteristics that are fundamentally different from those of "civilized" people; see Wouters 2012.

References

Bal, Ellen
2007 *They Ask if we Eat Frogs: Garo Ethnicity in Bangladesh.* Singapore: IIAS/ISEAS Series on Asia.

Baruah, Sanjib
1999 *India Against Itself: Assam and the Politics of Nationality.* Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.

2005 *Durable Disorder: Understanding the Politics of Northeast India*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press.

2009 *Beyond Counter-Insurgency: Breaking the Impasse in Northeast India*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press.

Blackburn, Stuart

2010 *The Sun Rises: A Shaman's Chant, Ritual Exchange and Fertility in the Apatani Valley*. Leiden and Boston: Brill.

Burling, Robbins

2003 Tibeto-Burman languages of North-East India. In *The Sino-Tibetan Languages*, Graham Thurwood and Randy LaPolla, eds., 169–91. London: Curzon Press.

2007 Language, ethnicity and migration in Northeastern India. *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies* 30: 391–404.

Cederlöf, Gunnel

2013 *Founding an Empire on India's North-eastern Frontiers 1790–1840: Climate, Commerce, Polity*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press.

Clifford, James

2001 Indigenous articulation. *The Contemporary Pacific* 13: 468–90.

de Maaker, Erik, and Vibha Joshi

2007 Introduction: The northeast and beyond: Region and culture. *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies* 30: 381–90.

Dutta, Nandana

2012 *Questions of Identity in Assam: Location, Migration, Hybridity*. Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications.

Hall, Stuart

1990 Cultural identity and diaspora. In *Identity: Community, Culture, Difference*, ed. Jonathan Rutherford, 222–37. London: Lawrence and Wishart.

1996 New ethnicities. In *Stuart Hall: Critical Dialogues in Cultural Studies*. David Morley and Kuan-Hsing Chen, eds., 441–49. London: Routledge.

Handler, Richard, and Jocelyn Linnekin

1984 Tradition, genuine or spurious. *The Journal of American Folklore* 97: 273–90.

Hazarika, Sanjay

2000 *Rites of Passage: Border Crossings, Imagined Homelands, India's East and Bangladesh*. Delhi: Penguin.

Hermann, Elfriede

2011 Introduction. Engaging with interactions: Traditions as context-bound articulations. In *Changing Contexts: Shifting Meanings*, ed. Elfriede Herman, 1–19. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press.

Huber, Toni

2008 *The Holy Land Reborn: Pilgrimage and the Tibetan Reinvention of Buddhist India*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.

Karlsson, Bengt G.

2011 *Unruly Hills: Nature and Nation in India's Northeast*. Hyderabad: Social Sciences Press and Orient BlackSwan.

LONGKUMER, Arkotong
2010 *Reform, Identity, and Narratives of Belonging: The Heraka Movement in Northeast India*. New York and London: Continuum.

LYNGDOH, Margaret
2012 The vanishing hitchhiker in Shillong: Khasi belief narratives and violence against women. *Asian Ethnology*. 71: 207–24.

MISRA, Sanghamitra
2011 *Becoming a Borderland: The Politics of Space and Identity in Colonial Northeastern India* (Transition in Northeastern India). New Delhi and Abingdon, Oxford: Routledge.

OPPITZ, Michael et al., eds.
2008 *Naga Identities: Changing Local Cultures in the Northeast of India*. Ghent: Snoeck Publishers.

RAMIREZ, Philippe
2007 Politico-ritual variations on the Assamese fringes: Do social systems exist? In *Social Dynamics in the Highlands of Southeast Asia: Reconsidering Political Systems of Highland Burma by E. R. Leach*, Francois Robinne and Mandy Sadan, eds., 91–108. Leiden: Brill.

SAIKIA, Yasmin
2004 *Fragmented Memories: Struggling to be Tai-Ahom in India*. Durham: Duke University Press.

SCOTT, James C.
2009 *The Art of Not Being Governed: An Anarchist History of Upland Southeast Asia*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.

SHARMA, Jayeeta
2011 *Empire's Garden: Assam and the Making of India*. Durham: Duke University Press.

VANDEKERCKHOVE, Nathan
2009 "We are sons of this soil:" The dangers of homeland politics in India's Northeast. *Critical Asian Studies* 41: 523–48.

VAN SCHENDEL, Willem
2002 Geographies of knowing, geographies of ignorance: Jumping scale in Southeast Asia. *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 20: 647–68.
2005 *The Bengal Borderland: Beyond State and Nation in South Asia*. London: Anthem.

VON FÜRER-HAIMENDORF, Christoph
1962 *Naked Nagas*. Calcutta: Thacker Spink and Company. (Originally published 1939)

WOUTERS, Jelle J. P.
2012 Keeping the hill tribes at bay: A critique from India's Northeast of James C. Scott's paradigm of state evasion. *European Bulletin of Himalayan Research* 39: 41–65.