FRAMING SOCIAL TRANSITION OF THE TANGKHUL NAGAS: DISEMBEDDING MECHANISMS AND ORAL CULTURE

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In a Tangkhul myth, which explains why the earth is not flooded despite all the rains, Manipur valley is located adjacent to the edge of the world. All the rain water, the myth says, flowed into the valley and then to the rim of the earth, which is bordered by two mountains; sometimes the mountains shift away from each other to create an opening for water to flow out and the wind to blow in (Luikham 28). A common proverb suggests that having seen the valley is a source of pride, an experience worthy of boast: "Like the claim of a quail that perched on a vegetable plant said that he had seen the Meitei valley."[1] And a folksong, which sings praises of a rich man named Shongphung, posits Meitei kings in a faraway land:

> Shongphung is rich, so rich
> He erects stones on every road.
> Shongphung is rich, so rich
> The world all over knows him
> Even Meitei kings have heard of his riches.

The myth, the folksong and the proverb represent Manipur valley (called *Meitei chihui* in Tangkhul) as a distant land. In their imagination, so it appears, the valley marks the limit of the world or the boundary of their "conceived space" to use Henri Lefebvre's term.

From this notion of self-contained world, colonial encounter opened the eyes of the hill peoples, as it were, to the existence of other human races and of the outside world in which hitherto the fabulous land, the Meitei kingdom, paled in comparison to the immense European empires. The experiences like expansion of administration to the hills in 1919, and the journey to France, as part of Manipur Labour Corps[2], forced them to reassess their position in the world. By signalling the need to adopt a new conception of the

world in which they lived, the discovery or rather the revelation led to a major shift of worldview (albeit gradually). The changes in the first half of the twentieth century were so dramatic that they imparted an appearance of easy transition. Primarily seen through the religious prism, the discourse of transformation is overloaded with religious meanings. Christianity is pegged as the instrument that guided the society from "tradition to modernity" and the transition is colourfully expressed in such terms as "from headhunting to soul hunting", and "from darkness to light".

The paper intends to problematize the socio-political changes by bringing in other factors such as the beginning of print culture, introduction of money and the tension between tradition and changes. The thrust of the paper is, however, not so much an attempt to analyse the changes as to set down the contextual and conceptual frameworks. I identify the contact with the outside world as an important catalyst in the process of "disembedding." Till as late as the end of nineteenth century, each village constituted the centre of the world, by the middle of the twentieth century, groups of villages had started to identify themselves as a tribe and later on groups of tribes as Nagas. Besides, disembedding also implies disengagement of individuals from community. Therefore, the paper also looks at the production of spaces.

Village Space and Connectedness to Place

It is generally accepted that Nagas inhabited hilltops in consideration of their strategic location. This seems more like an ontological explanation than an account of lived experience. If security is uppermost in their minds, it hardly makes sense insofar as they had to spend almost half of their lives traversing between the fields (farmstead) and the village (habitation area). If ambuscade was a common technique of warfare, nothing can be more dangerous than negotiating narrow paths from the fields in the evening. Another explanation commonly found in folklore is that mosquitoes made low-lying areas inhabitable (see Hodson 8, 10; Luikham 44; Ngakang 9; Peter 9). In any case, once they had settled on watersheds and made the ridges their home, they were tied to the area of habitation, the woods, the paths and the fields down the streams. In an effort to understand the process of humans' attachment to place, "humanistic geographers" like Edward Relph insisted on adopting a research method called "a phenomenology of place", which preserves an intimate engagement between space, place and

experience as theoretical framework; and Yi-fu Tuan maintained that geographers must take upon themselves the "burden of awareness", that is, the awareness of the ways in which humans experience the world as it is known in the everyday life. Tuan's assertion captures Tangkhuls' relation to land, a feeling that Relph called "insidedness": "Rootedness in the soil and the growth of pious feeling toward it seem natural to sedentary agricultural peoples" (156).

Rootedness was an ideal among the Tangkhuls. As a saying goes, "Home is where one's umbilical cord is buried, one cannot move away from it" (Luikham 41). The belief that one had to be buried in one's birthplace is drawn from a "habit" of an animal: a porcupine is believed to crawl back to its burrow no matter how fatally it is wounded (Luikham 40). If a person died in a faraway land, his head had to be brought back to his birthplace. In an article on Thisham festival, William Pettigrew colourfully described the way in which a head was brought home. It was believed that a person who was not buried in his birthplace journeyed alone to *Kazeiram* (Land of Death). The connectedness with land is closely tied to their belief system. The natural world is believed to be alive with spirits. A house, a field, or a river has a soul. One cannot simply own a land or dispose it. What Bourdieu said of the Algerians may well be applied to the Tangkhuls: "The bond which unites the fellah to his land is mystical rather than utilitarian. He belongs to his fields much more than his fields belong to him" (103). One has to perform certain rituals in order to propitiate the spirit of the land, so that the soul of the owner may become one with the spirit of the land. It was inauspicious for a person to reclaim the land he had abandoned, for the unity of soul once severed cannot be bonded again. In a poem called "Land of the Tangkhul", which became the school anthem, Y. K. Shimray celebrates the landscape and the site of settlement:

> With tall buildings on the hill tops
> And flowers its splendid garments
> With refreshing air, wholesome springs
> How privileged are your offspring (73).

Just as they inhabit the hilltops, their children would occupy high stations in life: "Your hills are always the highest/ …Your children always the tallest" (73).

A village is often assumed as strictly referring to an area of settlement.[3] Far from it, it includes, besides "estate" (the habitation area), "range" (hunting and foraging ground), "farmstead" (agricultural land) and unused land called *ngalei khamor*.[4] Hodson

also noted that "each village possesses a well-defined area which is sometimes demarcated with regular boundary stones and within which the villages possess paramount rights of hunting, of fishing … and of development of cultivation either my making new terraces or jhuming" (105). The territory of a village is concretely identifiable as it is marked with perceptual "imageability" like monuments, paths, and tracts. In fact, any distinguishable part of the surface of land within the territory and any distinctive landmark bear local names. An elderly person would be able to identify all the places by names; a hunter could remember every nook and corner of the land like the back of his hand.

The Tangkhul word for village is *kha*. Sometimes, *ram* is used interchangeably. Whereas Pettigrew translated both *kha* and *ram* as village, Luikham differentiated between the two terms: *kha* as village and *ram* as "country, a village in the country". Although Luikham did not clearly bring out the differences, the etymology of the word "country" may help clarify the terms. Country, according to the Online Etymology Dictionary, refers to "native land" from the old French *contree*. Likewise, *ram* is used in the sense of one's native land or village. Therefore, to say "my village", the Tangkhul use "*iram*" ("*i*" meaning "my" and "*ram*" signifying "village"). My point is that whereas *kha* refers to a village as a political entity with its citizens and territory, *ram* connotes an abstract sense of a village —its "perceived space."

The way in which spatial practices structure everyday life may be illustrated by looking at production of space between village and fields. It may be noted that a good part of a villager's life was engaged with agricultural activities. Put differently, almost half of their lives were occupied with travelling between the village by the ridges and the fields down the drainage area or hillsides in the case of *jhum* cultivation. Obviously, the paths that connect the two spaces were important. Therefore, they bear the marks of commemoration and of testimony to honour. One would find erected monoliths by the sides of paths; these are "stones of Maran or *maranlung*."[5] At a viewpoint, a resting place, one would find a stonework structure called *Wonra*; it was built in honour of a dead person by his family for the dead to rest in their journeys. *Maranlung* are signs of honour and *Wonra* is a signpost to stroll down a memory lane. (A resting place is a fitting space to engage in moments of reminiscence.) Both require constant reminding; they were, therefore, built on the paths that link village and workplace. The paths were scripted with memories. They were spaces where people indulged in gossip, where various

issues were deliberated, and where lovers stole rare moments for themselves.

Residing near the fields would have made their lives much more easy and convenient. Tangkhuls seemed to have deliberately chosen a life of hardship by doggedly maintaining the two spaces. In ancient China, according to Tuan, people moved from city to villages during working seasons. He did not mention if it was existential demands that alone determined the seasonal movement or it had something to do with social aspect. To the self-contained, geographically isolated villages, both village and field provided exclusive spatiality of associations and spaces with different boundaries. Whereas *tang* (*khel*)[6] was the most important structural unit in estate, in fields it was *luikai* (group of fields); whereas *longshim* (*morung*) was a significant institution in village, in fields *yarnao* (age-set) became the most important social group. For the locals, the entire territory of a village constitutes what Lefebvre called "representational spaces": "[Space that is] directly lived through its associated images and symbols, and hence the space of 'inhabitants' and 'users', but also of some artists and perhaps of those, such as a few writers and philosophers, who describe and aspire to do no more than describe" (39). That is to say, the space of a village is an inhabited one. Besides rice cultivation, they were engaged in other activities such as cultivating crops (like arum, sesame, millet, corn, chilly, and tobacco), seeking for food and fruits, laying traps, and hunting. Obviously, all these activities intimately linked them to the land. Put differently, time and space were essentially linked to their immediate location.

Disembedding and its Mechanisms

The idea of their world as a self-contained whole was to change dramatically. Concreteness of experience in familiar village space began to dissipate as traditional social relations and practices lost their grounding. Slowly removed from the immediacies of local context, relations were now being stretched over time and space. Central to the changing worldview is the idea of "gradual movement from the concrete and tangible to the abstract," which Anthony Giddens called "disembedding". He defined it as "the 'lifting' out of social relations from local contexts of interaction and their restructuring across indefinite spans of time-space" (21). Dissatisfied with the conventional sociological approach towards the analysis of "the transition from the traditional to the modern world" in terms of such concept as "differentiation," he pointed out the need to address

" the boundary problem" and "the issue of time-space distanciation" (21).

The contention for the need of rooting the study of changes on cultural-spatial context may be substantiated by the shifting relations of the Tangkhuls and the "Khongjai."[7] When Chassads raided Chingsui village killing 52 in 1880, they were assisted by a neighbouring Tangkhul village called Chattric (Johnstone 185). Similarly, Chassads were again helped by neighbouring Tangkhul villages in their bloodiest attack on Chingjaroi village in which, according to Robert Reid, 286 were slaughtered (78). Local source put it at 297 (*CBC Thotchan* iv). If local accounts were taken as true, about 100 Tangkhuls took part in the raids. A. Porteus, who investigated the event, fined the three implicated villages – Panwi (Paoyi now called Peh), Phungam (Phungcham) and Huining (Halang). Peh headman was reported to have helped the Chassads in reconnaissance four days prior to the attack (Porteus's *Tour Diary*). Similarly, never had Tangkhul villages joined forces in their defense against the Meiteis. On the contrary, they conspired with the Meitei kings in the attempt to subjugate each other. According to S. Kanrei, Humphum manoeuvered the Meiteis to attack Hunphun (45). A letter written by Governor's Secretary expressed regret over "a simple, if barbarous" policy which had been guiding the administration of the Hill Tribes of Manipur, which was, "If any village failed to pay the taxes demanded, other villages were armed with guns by the State and allowed to go in and decapitate as many of the inhabitants as they could" (Reid 88). My point is that Kukis were simply regarded as *khami* (strangers) as though they were from another village and not as the "other". In short, each village was the centre of their world, not merely in a metaphorical sense, but it constituted the self-contained whole of their world.

The transitional process (from the concrete village space to an abstract "imagined community", from their everyday dealings with primary group to secondary social groups in their new conceptualization of identity) was wrought with tensions and the struggles for power were largely enacted in the evolving public sphere. Before taking up the forces of change, I want to discuss "the disembedding mechanisms" intrinsically involved in the development of "modern" institutions – the Church and Naga Nationalist Movement. Giddens specified two types of mechanisms, "symbolic token" and "expert system", to which I want to supplement with another important contributory factor toward the creation of abstract world and molding of a new mode of thought and expression — the beginning of writing and print culture.

Giddens focused on money as a symbolic token which enables transactions abstract and imposition of "standardized grid onto a large area" possible (Ericson 21), because it brackets time and lifts "transactions out of particular milieux of exchange" (Giddens 24). Such mode of deferral would have been unthinkable if it were not for the intervention of the British government as the guarantor of value. For the tribes of Manipur state, it all began with the Political Agent Maxwell's announcement of Rs. 3 as house tax in the hills on the day of the investiture of Churachand Singh as the Raja in 1892 (Reid 73). Eastern and northern Tangkhuls used to trade at Homalin, in Myanmar, which was a day's journey from a village in eastern Tangkhul region called Chatric on foot. Tangkhuls would carry maize covers, cotton, and forest products to exchange particularly for iron.[8] The imposition of tax in money altered the direction of trade and trade partners. Giddens also specified what he called "expert systems" as a disembedding mechanism. "By expert systems", he means, "systems of technical accomplishment or professional expertise that organize large areas of the material and social environments in which we live today" (27). Professionals like lawyers, and doctors are obvious examples. Like symbolic tokens, Giddens maintained, expert systems "remove relations from the immediacies of context" and thus foster the distanciation of time and space (28). Likewise, colonialism introduced mediators between the people and the state like *lambus*[9] and clerks and professionals like *dobashis*,[10] petition writers, educationists, and evangelists. They were soon to become the principle agents of the newly evolving public sphere and form the elite class of the society.

Both the standardization of a medium of exchange and the establishment of expert systems introduced a notion into their relationships strange to them – trust towards stranger, which Giddens called "faceless trust". Life of isolation and lack of contact with the outside world cold have impressed upon a simple attitude in their dealings with people — trust towards people they know (*shimkhur* or kinsmen and *āmā* or friends) and distrust towards strangers (*shingnai* or people who were not related to them and *khami* or people from other villages). This is not to say that they did not have capacity for trust. To be sure, ethnographers noted their naively trusting nature. However, in the purview of their ethical sense and hospitality, one was either a *shimkhur/āmā* or *shingnai/khami* and s/he was treated accordingly. They soon had to learn to break away from this "limited" mindset when colonialism ushered in print culture, perhaps, the most crucial factor in disintegrating the traditional social practices and relations and in shaping the "modern" mind.

Psychodynamics of Oral Cultures

In one of his provocative contentions, Scott argued that hill peoples' "dis-acquisition of literacy" was a logical consequence of a retreat from the state and of adopting the life of fragmentation and mobility. Writing is an indispensable "technology of administration and statecraft" so as to keep records of contracts and agreements, decrees and legal codes, and map out taxable land, and keep the registration of labour and receipts. In the hills, all of these became pointless: "Leaving behind the lowland centers meant stripping down the complexity of social structure in the interest of mobility. In this context, literacy and texts were of no further use and died out as a practice, though not as a memory" (Scott 226).

The myth of lost script commonly found among hill peoples seems to suggest retention of the "primeval" memory for the loss of literacy. Whether or not it was a "loss by design" is another argument. What pertains is Scott's insight that "the practice of literacy is superfluous in the hills." A simple explanation as to why it becomes a superfluous practice could be: writing and print are forms of abstracting from "the situated immediacy of speech". Writing separates utterances from the "utterer" and owing to their relative permanence, they can "travel independently of a given person" (Erikson 17). The quality of permanence, according to Scott, has a disadvantage of reifying certain written text into a standard account and thus paved a way for establishment of orthodoxy (227). Written religion, for instance, has "a clearly delineated set of dogma and principles, and with authorized, 'correct' versions of myths and narratives"; besides, morality became "embedded in written legislation" (Erikson 18).

On the contrary, in what Walter J. Ong called a "primary oral culture", the question of an authentic or a standard account does not arise. Edmund Leach said of the Kachins, "Where there are rival versions of the same story, no one version is 'more correct' than any other" (265; see also Scott 230). Indeed, there is no original version that could serve as a point of reference to ascertain veracity of other versions. When there are griots with rival versions, as Leach said, there cannot be a version which serves as a yardstick. Instead of the content, therefore, status of the story-teller reflects on the authority or credibility of stories (Leach 266). Scott also draws attention to non-diegetic aspects of oral traditions:

> Oral culture exists and is sustained only through each unique performance at a particular time and place for an interested audience. These performances are, of course, far more than the transcript of the

> words spoken; each includes the setting, the gestures, and the expression of the performer(s), the audience reaction, and the nature of the occasion itself. (230)

Hannah Arendt underlined theatrical dimensions of speech and action by analysing dramatic motifs in public action of the ancient Athenian politics. Political action, she said, is embodied in the concept of "virtuosity", which is an excellence attributed to the performing arts "where the accomplishment lies in the performance itself and not in an end product" (153). Tangkhul's traditions have stories of men who performed speech in public discourse. Besides, some rituals showed how an act had to be reenacted so that a private deed might become an honourable one. In such practices, it was not the content of speech but the performance that was prioritized. Performance was not restricted to public sphere. In the days when intelligibility of languages created a barrier to interactions, performance of folksong was used as a means of communication. Even business, as Ong said, is not a simple economic transaction, but "a series of verbal (and somatic) maneuvers, a polite duel, a contest of wits, an operation in oral agonistic" (68) as though one is enacting a scene.

Arts of performance, according to Ong, impart originality to oral narrative. To be original is not to make up a new story, but to manage "a particular interaction with this audience at this time – at every telling the story has to be introduced uniquely into a unique situation" (41). Creative retelling requires deployment of various techniques of performance and reshuffling of formulas and themes. Many ethnologists and anthropologists, however, noted how oral genealogies altered to adjust to new situations or changed social relations (Ong 46-48). Recognition of performance in speech and action opened rooms for play-acting. Owing to the possibility of generating variations, adaptability and deniability, there were many *shārra* (taboos) meant to preempt fabrications and give false witnesses. A common maxim says, "The word is song and the song is word." Commenting on the precept, P. R. Yangkahao noted, "From the traditions of forbearers, one might distinguish the good from the bad and the truth from falsehood." Stephen Angkang saw it as a caveat to refrain from distorting history of a clan and a nation. Without written contract, in the traditional Tangkhul society, words of mouth were the only proof of legal deeds and transactions. And it was only through words that people could be reminded of debts and obligations. Therefore, oath-taking was a serious affair usually conducted by invoking the name of "Heaven and Earth". Taboos reinforced the gravity of oath-taking: "the name of Heaven and

Earth shall not be invoked"; "If a big promise is deceived, a big man dies; if a small promise is deceived, a small man dies"; "Those who saw something and said they did not see would become blind; those who heard something and said they did not hear would become deaf"; and "Those who bear false witness are struck by lightning." When asked why an oath cannot be breached, they would simply say, "The word is the power."[11] Ritualistic words were transmitted by word of mouth since time immemorial. In a way, therefore, they were residue of "the lost words". According to the "myth of lost words", humans and all other living things used to speak the same language. It was the time when humans lived in harmony with nature. One day, a man drowned his wife while helping her ford a river in spate. Her brothers held him responsible and sought for vengeance. So he took refuge among the trees. When the trees refused to give up, they started to fell trees despite protest. Brothers avenged their sister's death but from that day onward, all living things refused to talk to humans and gradually humans forgot the words.[12] My interviewees were not sure if ritualistic words were the residue of the mythical primordial language, but they believed that taking an oath was an act performed before humans and nature.

In "primary oral cultures", sound was singularly important not only because of the belief in animated nature, but words were nothing less than sounds without visual representation. He who sees the blue sky might say that he sees "nothing", but to him who hears a sound in a pitch dark night, the space has "become alive" (Zuckerkandl 283). "May we not assume," Victor Zuckerkandl asked, "that it was the sounds in nature – the sound of wind, of water in all its forms, of electric discharges, the rustling of leaves rather than the sight of their growth and fall – which aroused in sensitive minds the idea of a nature alive in all its parts?" (2). Animistic form of belief system is characteristic of a culture that privileges sound over sight. The invisible was not something abstract, but something that they encountered and responded to in their everyday lives and the intangible was not opposed to the tangible; they were part of the whole of their world. It was natural that god communicated with humans and prophesied things to come not only through signs but also through sounds (not voice because such type of religion does not conceptualize god as an Entity). Therefore, the important type of divination, if not the most common, was "the sound of nature" in which different acoustic expressions of certain birds, animals and insects were believed to indicate future events. Tellingly, "to take vengeance" in Tangkhul is *athut hāngkasang*, which literally means "to speak into vengeance". Taking vengeance was a form of

communicating to the dead. In other words, the act of vengeance is expressed in synaesthetic metaphor of sound. As Malinowski said, among the "primitive society", language was "a mode of action", because meaning of words was believed to be "rooted in the pragmatic efficiency" (297). From this sense of word as necessarily effective, he suggested, began the belief in "magical potency" of words. To sum up in Ong's words: "oral peoples commonly, and probably universally, consider words to have great power" (32).

The condition of orality seems to naturally explain the "primitive" association of words with power. While absence of writing remains an important factor, their experience within the confine of actual spatial field needs to be considered. That is, whether or not spatial experience and conceptualization of the world have a substantive bearing on the condition of orality? With respect to perception of space, Zuckerkandl drew attention to two important differences of visual and auditory modalities. First, whereas sight discloses space by excluding the perceiver from the object, sound discloses space by positioning the hearer at the centre in which the space, as it were, streams into him (291). Ong called this characteristic "the interiority of sound" (70). Second, sight orients an observer towards the object; in the case of tone (unless the sound in consideration is noise) spatial position of its source is inessential.[13] The experiential differences foster specific mode of connection between the self and the world: "The space experience of the eye is a disjunctive experience; the space experience of the ear is a participative experience" (Zuckerkandl 291). Plato's Cave Allegory may illustrate the points. As revealed by the faculty of sight, for the prisoners of the cave, reality was "nothing other than the shadows of artificial things" (515c). In connection with the cave inmates, to the degree that their perception is regulated by sight, their spatial experience is essentially limited to the wall on which images of the artifacts are projected. The Cave Allegory is meant to be read symbolically without advertence to verisimilitude. However, if we could imagine that the prisoners' knowledge of reality is founded on the faculty of sound and not on that of sight, their idea of reality could be markedly different insofar as humans' knowledge of the world is dependent upon perceptual experiences (O'Callagan v; Bregman 1).

Situated on hill tops, each Tangkhul village is walled in, as it were, by the hills on all sides. Before the British occupation of the hilly terrains, each village used to live like a self-contained entity more or less isolated from the outside world. As said, an average person knew the physical features of the village territory like the back of his hand. Every year, they would hunt in the forests, scour the woods for

fruits and foods, till the lands to grow vegetables and crops, cultivate the fields, and fish in the streams and the rivers. As revealed by the eyes, the visible world, say the landscape, held little fascination to the people, perhaps except the month of April when the hills and forests turned green. Therefore, the month between March and April was called *mayo kachāng*, which means a pleasant month. Sound, on the contrary, was a source of fascination and mystery. The sounds of wind would give away its direction and if accompanied by rain the direction of the rain and thereby their intensity. The localization of the sound of thunders towards the beginning of a year would foretell whether the year would be dry or rainy. It is amazing how sound can help elderly Tangkhuls not only identify birds and animals but also determine the state in which they are. In short, their perception of the world was not "visuocentric". As a source of knowledge, auditory system was an equally important modality. To a remarkable extent, they represented the world through the sensitivity to sound. Perception of seasonal changes in terms of sound is a case in point.[14] In a sense, they had a naturally trained sense of hearing. It is not surprising that they learnt hymnal songs with ease much to the surprise of missionaries.[15]

In addition to mnemonic, formulaic and patterned forms of expression, Ong elaborates on the relationship between orality and thought and expression. A primary oral culture, he says, tends to cultivate additive and aggregative modes of expression and thereby rendering redundancy a marked feature of oral expression. Such characteristics enable continuous transmission of body of religious, political, legal, familial regulations (Havelock 370). Copiousness in thought and expression promotes agonistic milieu both in the sense of argumentativeness and exaggerated verbal performance. For instance, proverbs and riddles are forms of "intellectual combat". In order that knowledge might be conserved in memory, conceptualized knowledge needs to be retold. On the one hand, repetition imparts homeostasis and, on the other hand, inhibits "intellectual experimentation." Coupled with the hardship of existence and inherent deficiency of oral literature to handle elaborate and abstract categories, a primary oral culture has a deficit of critical and analytic thinking. For them philosophers are eccentric pariahs. Therefore, an oral culture is often a self-congratulatory culture: towards it own society it reserves uncritical admiration sometimes accompanied by fulsome praise and towards others, it reserves suspicion sometimes accompanied by inflated condemnation. The culture, so to speak, is conditioned by the mode of existence. Orality

cannot efficiently cope with a diverse society spread out on a vast geographical area. Similarly, in a "closed society" enclosed within a limited space, writing is almost redundant and orality plays primary roles in the everyday context of such culture. Despite the existence of writing (chirography) and print (typography) for about a century, it is not surprising that Tangkhul society largely remains an oral culture. Practice of book publication, for instance, is wedded to oral performance in some ways. Tangkhul literatures, in general, and literature on customs and traditions, in particular, abound in plagiarism. Many publications did not mention date of publication as though the contents speak of timeless truth and therefore need not be grounded into the socio-historical contexts.

Oral cultures conceptualize and verbalize knowledge with "close reference to the human lifeworld, assimilating the alien, objective world to the more immediate, familiar interaction of human beings" (Ong 42). Trades were learned through apprenticeship and specialized knowledge transmitted through family lines. On the one hand, the practice perpetuates concentration of knowledge and, on the other hand, it inspires closer communitarian ties. In such cultures, the mode of thought was operational rather than categorical or situational rather than abstract. "That is to say, oral societies live very much in a present which keeps itself in equilibrium or homeostasis by sloughing off memories which no longer have present relevance" (Ong 46). Ong gives numerous cases of "structural amnesia" in which the present demands dictates the past remembrances through oral traditions, or as a chapter title of Edmund Leach's *Political System of Highland Burma* says "myth [is] a justification for faction and social change."

Both Ong and Leach raised the question of whether or not the instrumentality of myth is an inherent feature or a response to social change. If oral cultures tend to maintain homeostasis, how do they account for change? By definition, in a perfectly homeostatic culture, there is no change and without perceptible changes, historical time does not exist. In his characteristic style, Scott suggested, "If an oral history and genealogy provide more room for maneuver than a written history and genealogy, then perhaps the most radical step of all is to claim virtually no history or genealogy at all" (234).

Conclusion

The analysis of the principles of a primary oral culture raises some questions: Was the traditional Tangkhul society characterized by

denial of history and genealogy? How did the coming of writing change the perception of time and space? What effects did writing and other disembedding forces had on individual and village-community? What are the socio-political contexts within which the forces of change like Christianity and modern education operated? My argument is that these questions need to be situated within the contextual and conceptual frameworks of the primary oral culture.

Rather than critically engaging with the theories of diverse thinkers, I have employed them to understand the traditional Tangkhul community. It is, therefore, pertinent to ask how applicable are the theoretical tools to the specific case study. Following Giddens, for instance, I have drawn attention to the social implications of changes in spatial practices and the "stretching" of social relations over time and space. Since Giddens coined the notion of disembedding in the context of globalization, it may be asked if it is applicable to a small-scale society. I think the principles remain equally pertinent. Having dealt with "abstract mechanisms", I want to draw attention to another closely related concept called distanciation through an example. The establishment of sub-divisional headquarter at Ukhrul in 1919 led to a process of system integration in which various "parts" (villages) are combined and coordinated thereby removing the local practices from the "immediacies of context" to an "abstract system". Lawsuit in the sub-divisional court is a case in point. In 1923, 34 offenses were brought to the sub-divisional court.[16] In 1938, that is 15 years later, the number of cases in the court jumped to 753 (471 civil suits, 26 criminal cases and 256 misc. cases).[17] Needless to say, the court increasingly "emptied out" the significance of village courts, the local practices, which were "specific to particular time and space".

Besides the undermining effect on the edifice of traditional moral system, the process of system integration and the introduction of writing facilitated the reconceptualization time and space. As John Thomas has pointed out, Christianity also contributed to the reorientation of time and space:

> The missionary religion was also one that insisted on prioritising spatiality over temporality. The existing moral and spiritual universe of the Nagas was very much centred on land and how a balance was to be maintained among all those who shared that land through principles of reciprocity and respect. (35-36)

The movement from "darkness to light" or "head-hunting to soul-hunting" was not merely a metaphor but a reality, in fact, a necessity to attain the life of eternity in the heaven. In the traditional

eschatological belief, human life continues after death in the underworld and when they die in the underworld, they again go to another underworld, and so on. The future, as they saw it, is a repetition of past; so the eternity is a repetition of life in many worlds. The New Year festival was markedly non-existent in many tribal societies, for the end of a year did not make way for a new beginning, but a repetition of the past.[18] If time is used as a reference point to measure distance (by the time taken to cover a distance or by counting the number of occurrence of a certain action) or area (by the time taken to complete a task), it is not a continuous flow of time that is taken into account, but a period or a particular point of time in which socio-cultural life of the people are intimately woven into. So, the distance between two villages may be put at five cigarette rolls or between a village and field at five rests. Likewise, a year was elaborately structured with festivals, rituals and seasons, because time (like space) was reckoned "for a concrete and specific purpose" in relation to events and routines.

It is from this immediacy of experience tied to the land, emphasis on specific period or point of time, and certainty of their ways of life that the inexorable forces of change began to dislodge individuals and communities as the Tangkhuls moved from their erstwhile isolated existence to an increasingly interconnected world.

Notes

1. In Tangkhul the proverb reads, "*Zaimukna maja tungli ngashan laga Meitei chihui theiya kaji katha.*" Quails, being terrestrial birds, generally live on the ground and *maja* is a vegetable plant. What the proverb says is that a quail perching on a vegetable plant cannot get a view of Meitei valley. It is applied to someone who claims to have seen many things, like Meitei valley, although he spends his life in a village.
2. In 1917, 1200 Tangkhuls were conscripted as labourers and sent to France. Young educated Christians were employed as interpreters, headmen, and mate (leader of a unit of 30 labourers). Upon their arrival, many of them initiated socio-religious movement like the abolition of celebration of Thisham festival, renunciation of many rituals and objects of traditional material culture, and the launching of what is locally called as the great revival of 1923.
3. Manipur State Darbar, for instance, defined "Hill Village Reserves" as "area within ¼ mile radius of any Hill Village" within which they were allowed to cut fuel and wood. "State Forest Reserves" consisted of "a few large forest areas in which there are few or no villages" (D. R. No. 10 (A) 0f 20.7.32). The law remained only in name during the British rule. When Manipur Government passed Pine Forests Control Order which prohibited the use of pine trees without permit and use with payment of fees, there was an agitation in Ukhrul in 1954. Other tribes like Anal took up the issue by demanding withdrawal of the "order for reservation of forest in Anal Naga areas."

4. According to T. Luikham, it is a piece of land which is not included in the jurisdiction of *Luiyan*, which is a body formed by neighbouring villages (131-132). Literally, *ngalei* means "land" and *khamor* means "mold, rotten, or useable" (Luikham, *Transformed Headhunters* 21). The concept and its implications on the notion of territory and boundary disputes are dealt with in detail in the next chapter.
5. Maran is an honour-attaining ceremony in which a rich man lavishly feasts the villagers and friends for many days. Hosting of the ceremony entitled a person to wear certain attire and tattoo pattern in some Naga tribes. Among the Tangkhuls, the host acquired the right to build a certain type of house called *Lengchengshim*, and his wife got a certain pattern of tattoo. The celebration was symbolized by erection of stones mostly practiced by the western Naga tribes like Mao, Poumei, and Angami, whereas the eastern Naga tribes erected post like Khiamniunga, Yimchunger, Konyak, etc. Tangkhuls practiced both the customs.
6. A village is divided into localities called *tang*, also called *khel* in Assamese. Among such Naga tribes as Angami and Mao, each *tang* used to be walled inhabited by a single clan. Among the Tangkhuls, there was no rigid division. In fact, small localities came together to form a *longshim*, which is a dormitory system in which boys and girls from the age of about 7 lived till their marriage. Unlike many Naga tribes, among the Tangkhuls even marriage men can become a member. There were separate houses for boys and girls: *mayarlong* housed boys and *ngalalong* housed girls.
7. Following Meiteis, Tangkhuls also call the Kukis as "Khongjai". According to Thadous, they were so called because the first Thadou village with which the Meiteis came into contact was called Khongsai (Shaw, William 47). Shaw divided the waves of Thadous movement in Manipur into three categories: those who moved along the Barak (who were employed to check the Angamis); those who moved along the hills between the Barak and the valley (who were settled among the "Kacha Nagas") and those who moved along the eastern range (who were used as buffer against the Burmese) (46). The clan head of Haokips called Chassads mostly constituted third category and they were the ones that attacked the Tangkhuls particularly the villages situated along the eastern and northeastern hills of Manipur state.
8. Interview with Ningthar Kashak of Chatric village. Personal Interview. 20 April 2016.
9. *Lambus* were intermediary agents of the government. In Manipur state, they carried out "both the duties of police and of messengers of the State" (Crawford 8). They were paid about Rs. 8 per month, an equivalent salary of a sweeper, yet the hills men perceived them as powerful government agents.
10. *Dobashi* means one who knows two languages. They were the interpreters between the colonial masters and the natives.
11. Arim Shimrah, Thingring Kashung and Nalui Kashung. Personal interview. 1 Nov 2014. To ethnographers' question of "Why is this ritual effective?" the usual reply, according to S. J. Tambiah, is "The power is in the 'words'" (116). The three elders from Peh village echoed the idea.
12. As narrated by Ngahanshai Kapai. Personal Interview. 20 Oct 2014.
13. Wordsworth's poem "The Solitary Reaper" may illustrate the point. As long as the song of the "Highland Lass" is localized, the sound that the poet hears remains a song. The song becomes musical only when "it was heard no more."

14. As Maiya Gachui maintained, Tangkhuls observed seasonal changes in a year in terms of the sounds of birds and animals. In the month of *Tharao* (January) "comes" the seasonal bird called *sampheirok* that heralded the beginning of the year: the month of *Marun* (February) "brings" cuckoo's songs; in the month of *Mayo* (March) "comes" the bird called *hurshung phakhok*; in the month of *Kharam* (May), the cry of an animal called *kharamva* was heard; in the month of *Makha* (June), the woods and forests resounded with the sound of cicadas (2-3). The sounds of nature (birds, animals, and insects) used to be a marker of calendar.
15. A report of William Pettigrew's speech at Minister's Conference reads: "These people [Tangkhuls] are head hunters and dog eaters; very superstitious, degraded and filthy … The faithful labors of Rev. and Mrs. Pettigrew are reaping the reward of remarkable transformation in the character of this people, in purity of speech, and of cleanliness, in development of mind by the power of the gospel. It is also of interest to know that they have capacity for music …" (*Mission Reports*, 18).
16. Administration Report of the Manipur State, 1922-23.
17. Administration Report of the Manipur State, 1937-38.
18. Luira is now considered as the "Tangkhul New Year Festival". It is celebrated in the beginning of a year. However, instead of thanking God before stepping into a new year, it is a time of invoking God before sowing. Therefore, the festival is commonly, and more accurately, described as "Seed-Sowing Festival".

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