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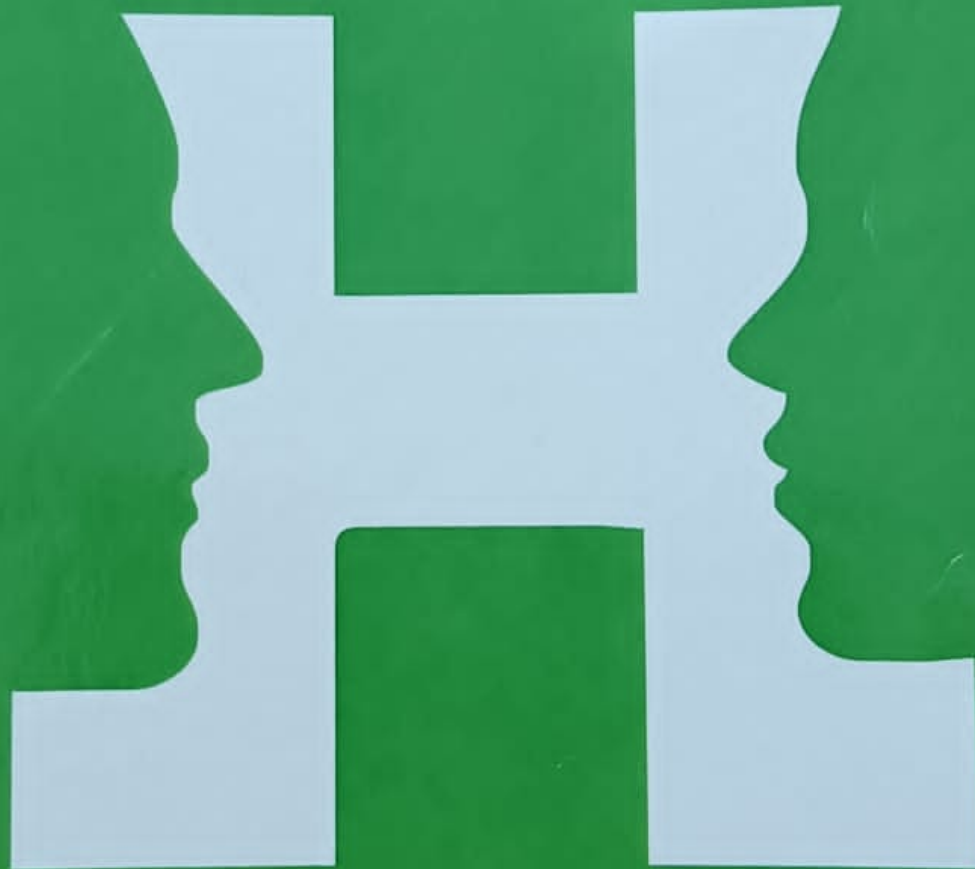
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Guest Editors

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31.

Reclaiming Cultural Roots: A Comparative Reading of Chinua Achebe's Igbo and Northeast India's Select Tribal Community

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Introduction: Chinua Achebe is the Nigeria's most visionary story teller who re-reads the history of Nigerian colonization starting from the very beginning of colonial missions to the stir of independence. He is not just revisiting the history but is trying to educate his folk what the real story was and how they messed. As the colonial rule had established its cultural authority by insisting on this racial superiority, Achebe's effort in re-inscribing the pre-colonial Igbo culture is not just a romantic remembering, but its political intention ranges up to shattering the Eurocentric stereotypes regarding Africa by regenerating the culture. For Achebe, it is the only way of escape for his people who are left in cultural turmoil. Both the African and European cultures should function in corresponding terms, for Nigeria is a multi-cultural country by the time Achebe started writing. Achebe aims at bringing in an affirmative mood in the ever hostile relationship between the Nigerian clans and the White Europeans.

Every tribe has its own distinct and unique traditions in terms of wedding, funerals, festivals etc. The North East of India is an umbrella term covering the states of Arunachal Pradesh, Meghalaya, Manipur, Assam, Tripura, Nagaland, Mizoram and Sikkim. These States, in turn, are home to over 200 small and large tribes with their own uniquely distinctive customs and rituals. These tribes came here from diverse regions, some of them from the plains of India; some from the Sino-Tibetan area; some from the regions of Burma and Thailand and some of them with Indo-Mongoloid and Proto-astrioloid roots. Describing the distinctive rituals of all the tribes would be a lengthy process but one can consider the main tribes such as Bodos, Khasis, Jaintias, Nagas and Ahoms as being representative of their ideologies.

Redefining Tribes:

According to Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary, 'tribe'¹ means a group of people or of related families who subsist together sharing the same language, culture and history. A tribe is viewed progressively and traditionally as a group of distinct people dependent on their land for their livelihood and follows the same ways of life for many generations. In India, the Constitution does not have

a definition of a tribe or Scheduled Tribe. The Article 342 deals with Scheduled Tribe do even not specifically prescribe criteria essential for their status. It merely deals with the process of declaration of tribes or tribe as Scheduled Tribes by the head of the country. However, political pressures and administrative factors have come into play in claiming Scheduled Tribe status in different parts of the country and this has been clearly manifested in the case of North East India's Tribal community. There are an estimated one hundred and fifty million tribal individuals worldwide. The distinction between tribal and indigenous is important because tribal people have special status in international law.

Tribe is a challenging term due to its roots of being defined by intruders during the period of colonialism. Some opine that it conveys a negative meaning or feeling of timeless unchanging past. To avoid such implications, the term is very often meant by 'ethnic group' instead. In India and North America, tribes are polities that have been granted legitimate recognition and partial sovereignty by the centre and states.

The Dynamics of Identity Structure:

Tribal communities have a likeness with nature and their religious practices as well as rituals are interconnected with nature. This blending of people from all directions has created unique customs, taboos and rituals that mesmerize outsiders. The tribes may follow Hinduism or Christianity but they have not lost the ancient rituals and traditions. A taste of some of the rituals and customs goes in this way that many of the tribes of the North East are matriarchal and a husband usually has to stay with his wife and family, especially if the wife happens to be the only daughter. This is common among the Karbis in Assam and Khasis in Meghalaya. Women have a greater say in their marriage, divorce and social matters and so a case of bride burning is rare in such regions. Contrary to them are the Nagas and Mizos who are strongly patrilineal, to the extent that even a female does not inherit the property if she is the sole heir. Further, North East Tribes hold fish as sacred (even if they eat them). Dimacha and Assamese tribal grooms must gift fish to the bride and fish figures prominently on the menu in a feast.

In the same way, the Igbo are a profoundly religious people who believe in a benevolent creator, usually known as *Chukwu*, who created the visible universe (*uwa*). Opposing this force for good is *agbara*, meaning spirit or supernatural being. Different regions of Igboland have varying versions of minor deities. Below are some of the most common:

Ala – the earth-goddess, the spirit of fertility (of man and the productivity of the land) *Igwe* – the sky-god. This god was not appealed to for rain however, that was the full-time profession of the rain-makers, Igbo tribesmen who were thought to be able to call and dismiss rain

Imo miri – the spirit of the river. The Igbo believe that a big river has a spiritual aspect; it is forbidden to fish in such deified rivers

Mbatuku – the spirit of wealth

Agwo – a spirit envious of other's wealth, always in need of servitors

Aha njuku or *Ifejioku* – the yam spirit

Ikoro – the drum spirit

Ekwu – the hearth spirit, which is woman's domestic spirit

In some situations Igbo people say '*Bekee wu agbara*' (the whites are the spirits). Apart from the natural level of the universe, they also believe that it exists on another level, that of the spiritual forces, the *alusi*. The *alusi* are minor deities, and are forces for blessing or destruction, depending on circumstances. Igbo further believes that the spirits of one's ancestors keep a constant watch over you. The living show appreciation for the dead and pray to them for future well-being. It is against tribal law to speak badly of a spirit. The funeral ceremonies and burials of the Igbo people are extremely complex. There are several kinds of deaths that are considered shameful, and in these circumstances. No burial is provided to Women who die in labour, infants who die and those who commit suicide. Their interment consists of being thrown into a jungle.

Achebe's all the five novels offer insight into the purely structural or syntactic dynamics of European colonialism and its visionary exploration of the *pre-colonial Igbo people*.² Achebe offers to the European reader the very cultural roots of the Igbo people, all their customs, beliefs and historical past, in a wonderfully unbiased approach. It is true that Achebe is extremely sincere in the cultural portrayal of the Igbo society. The texts being written nearly half a century after the period in which the novels are set may have allowed the author this impartiality.

Tribals in North East India and the Igbos:

The North Eastern Region in India is perhaps

one of the most vibrant and complex areas both ethnically and politically. To unravel the dynamics of identity structure in North East India is a very complex issue. From being initially associated with the narratives of land, identity and culture to struggles formulated around competitions for opportunities and constitutional benefits, the process of identity structure or restructuring of the NE Tribal community has gone across difficult landscapes. The struggle of repositioning to adapt to changing realities has off and on brought myriad fragments of discontent within and across the community. The Kuki-Paite clash in Manipur, Bodoland struggles and Dimasas- Hmar conflict in Assam, Kuki-Naga quarrel in Nagaland are all well-known and historical and profound both socially and politically.

There has been a considerable change between the nature of what constitutes an Indian tribe and the very nature of tribes over the course of centuries. The Indian constitution has recognized tribal communities under Schedule 5 of the constitution as 'Schedule Tribe' and there are almost seven hundred and above different tribes living in India. Among them, the lion shares of the population are STs and they form the largest fraction of the total population in Lakshadweep and Mizoram followed by Nagaland and Meghalaya. As per the provision of the Article 330 of the Indian constitution, forty seven seats are reserved for the STs on the proportionate basis of ST population.

A comparative reading between tribal communities of North East India and that of Africa like the Igbo community is prompted by the nineteenth century explorer's imagination of a bewildering colonized geography which extended from Africa to the north-eastern frontiers of India and beyond.³ Like the Igbos, the tribes of Northeast India undeniably benefits and at the same time suffers from contact with the British culture. For instance, the missionaries followed the heels of their colonial government providing the needful political stability and indirectly abetting its civilizing missions by running schools thereby supplying clerks to reinforce its administration. The traditional centres of power (chiefs or headmen) were dethroned by the rolling power of the new elites. As a matter of principle, the Christian faith leaves little or no room for the traditional culture to exist side by side with the new faith as the latter was considered unclean or unreal. This notion has been retained till today by many Christians of the region. Besides, we find some other similarities of the tribal communities in their rituals, habits and festivals etc.

As the *yam* is very important to the Igbo as the staple crop, the *Ahu* paddy was the

principal product for the Misings in Northeast. There are celebrations such as the New yam festival (Igbo: *Iwaji*) which are held for the harvesting of the yam. During the festival, yam is eaten throughout the communities as celebration. Yam tubers are shown off by individuals as a sign of success and wealth. Rice has replaced yam for many ceremonial occasions. Similarly, the oncoming of the *Ahu* season is marked by the celebration of *Ali-aye-Ligang*. For the Misings this is a festival of prayers and dance and as believe goes the symbolic sowing of handful of seed into the womb of mother Earth is celebrated as an occasion for the beginning of agricultural life. In old days, there were no fixed date for this occasion, but later on, the first Wednesday of the month of *Fagun* (Indian Assamese calendar) is considered the auspicious day for the festival. The Mising people thus simultaneously celebrate this day all over the Mising dominated areas with enthusiasm and merry making.

One can also juxtapose the Igbo experience with that of the Mizos of North east India. In case of both the tribes, colonization and Christianity is the major socio-political, religious and historical realities, although experienced differently and viewed from slightly different perspectives. R. Vanlawma's autobiographical records of the political history of Mizoram in *Ka Ram leh Kei (My Country and I)* can be cited here to see how a cultural history of a people can be recreated through a reclaiming of the past. As insiders, both the authors expressed their concerns mainly with their own tribe or nation. Vanlawma like Achebe sought to bring all the Mizos under the same political and geographical umbrella which had been separated by national and international boundaries both during and after the British rule in both the regions.

Like the Igbos, the Mizos of Northeast India were fond of giving local names to the white people with whom they come into contact. The Mizos use the term 'sap' as an honorific title for all the white people and 'vai' for all outsiders including Indians and Englishmen. Achebe's dream echoes in terms of Mizo unity stretches beyond the boundaries of present Mizoram. It includes all the Mizo-occupied areas in Manipur and Tripura in India, and Burma, Bangladesh and Chittagong Hills.

Like Achebe, Vanlawma aims at objectivity in presenting his facts while at the same time admitting rooms for subjective views and opinions overriding facts. In his preface to the first edition of his book, he writes:

"This book is intended to reflect the common view of the general public. So saying this, my own view cannot be dismissed in some instances. For this

reason some commonplace events may also be looked upon as a serious matter."⁴

The contemporary cultural and political experiences of the Igbos and the Northeast tribal particularly Mizos share lot of similarities as well as differences, but the, differences are only in terms of degree or intensity. One could draw on Achebe's vision for understanding a possible reconciliation between a past and a present. Achebe shows the path of reconciliation through the various images, stories and concepts that he uses in the novels. And one such image is that of

'the path' running through a mission school compound. So, the imagery of the path is significant in order to underline the unstated wishes of Chinua Achebe in his novels. The benefits of western culture, instead of putting a stop to all the traditional cultural practices, should give the chance to mingle with it and get itself transformed in the process of cultural interaction whereby the positive effects of both cultures be retained.

Conclusion:

In fact, the Mizos, Khasis and Nagas of the North eastern region of India also experienced a loss of their original script, adopted Roman script, faced conversion into Christianity and still suffer from an ambivalence resulting from a conflict between indigenous cultural values and values brought in by the new faith.⁵ This is the predicament of all tribal communities of the world particularly those colonized in their own land. Achebe's works embody his experience and that of his forefathers, examining in a sustained way its significance in terms of individual lives and cultural history. Achebe was both a cultural nationalist and a teacher. He explained the cultural claim of his people to a largely hostile world and as a teacher

instilled dignity into them. Achebe in his *Trilogy* consistently highlights the importance of group solidarity within the Igbo society and the formation of the Umuofia Progressive Union matches with Lushai Association in Shillong, Meghalaya, which truly hint at the importance of cultural preservation. The erring members of the society like Obi, Mizo, Khasi reap the benefit of the opening path afforded by the union. The study, therefore, indirectly provided the alternatives for the man-made ills that contaminated the Igbo society and the Nigerian nation as that of the tribal society and the Northeastern region in India.

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