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# International Conference Negotiating Ethnicity: Politics and Display of Cultural Identities in Northeast India. Vienna, 4-6 July 2013

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hotels close to the old town of Heidelberg.

The inaugural session began with a welcome speech given by Professor Dr Hans Harder, Executive Director of SAI, Heidelberg. This was followed by further introductory speeches from IALS president John Bray and conference convenor Dr Juliane Dame. Day One's panels covered research in urban development, climate change and water management, political change in border regions, and livelihood strategies. Keynote speaker and head of the SAI's Department of Geography, Professor Dr Marcus Nüsser, gave the final day's presentation entitled *Landscape Changes on a Himalayan Scale*. Day One concluded with a welcome drinks reception at SAI.

Day Two's sessions focused upon Buddhist studies, the first of two historical perspectives panels, and presentations examining cultural change, and identity and belonging. The day ended with a memorable site seeing tour of the charming baroque architecture of Heidelberg's old town. One group was given a city tour of Heidelberg's old town and the castle perched on the slopes of Mount Königstuhl above the Neckar River. The tour included a cable car ride and a walk down to the Old Bridge across the Neckar (where the guide informed those present that Prague was "seventy castles" to the east). A further group trekked along the *Philosophenweg* or Philosopher's Way (apparently, Goethe's favourite place for strolling and contemplation), and through the forest to enjoy the natural landscape and scenic views of Heidelberg city and the Neckar. The group was welcomed at a local ecological micro-brewery at Klosterhof Neuburg, a former Benedictine monastery, on

the outskirts of Heidelberg for a short introduction on the process of brewing. The first group joined the second at Klosterhof of Neuburg for dinner at the brewery's restaurant.

Day Three consisted of panels discussing Ladakh's history of art and architecture, the second historical perspectives panel, and a panel discussing Ladakh's cultural and trade connections with neighbouring mountain regions. The Biennial General Meeting of the Association took place after the final session, followed by the conference banquet with South Asian cuisine on the menu. Day Four's panels examined cultural change and contemporary society, health and society, and language and culture. The panels were followed by the closing ceremony and farewell.

The IALS would like to express gratitude to the conference convenor Juliane Dame and her associates for the wonderful arrangements in Heidelberg that ensured the conference's success. We would further like to acknowledge the financial support granted by the German Research Foundation, as well as the South Asia Institute and the Heidelberg Centre for the Environment. The IALS plans to publish papers from the conference in the *Revue d'Études Tibétaines*, the *Tibet Studies* journal, and in further special edition publications currently under discussion. It has been proposed to host the Seventeenth IALS Conference in the Western Ladakhi town of Kargil in 2015.

Andrea Butcher, University of Exeter

## ***International Conference Negotiating Ethnicity: Politics and Display of Cultural Identities in Northeast India***

**Vienna, Austria  
July 2013**

This international conference was a collaboration by the Institute of Social Anthropology and the Phonogrammarchiv of the Austrian Academy of Sciences, the Doctoral College, "Cultural Transfers and Cross-Contacts in the Himalayan Borderlands," the Department of South Asian, Tibetan and Buddhist Studies of the University of Vienna, and the Indian Embassy in Austria. The main objective was to bring together young as well as advanced scholars from various disciplines to examine recent transformations of cultural identities and ethnicity in relation to inter-ethnic and inter-state relations, borders, politics, agency, migration and diasporas, globalization, and tourism in Northeast India (as politically defined).

The majority of scholars travelled from India; others came from Europe, North America and Australia. H.E. Mr Ambassador Ramachandran Swaminathan, the Indian Ambassador to Austria, delivered the first welcome address emphasizing the importance of scholarship of Northeast India as well as collaborations with scholars working in the West. Other welcome addresses were given by Dr. Phil. Univ.-Doz. Michael Alam (Vice President of the Austrian Academy of Sciences), Univ.-Doz. Dr. Helmut Lukas (Vice Director, Institute for Social Anthropology, Austrian Academy of Sciences) and Prof. Martin Gaenzle (the Deputy Head of the Department of South Asian, Tibetan and Buddhist Studies, University of Vienna, and

Speaker of the Doctoral School/Initiativkolleg, “Cultural Transfers and Cross-Contacts in the Himalayan Borderlands.”)

To open the conference and emphasize the main tropes, Prof. Sanjib Baruah presented the keynote address on the scholar Christoph von Fürer-Haimendorf who was a Viennese and London educated anthropologist and one of the first scholars to work among the Naga. Two introductory papers were also presented by Bianca Son who discussed the construction of identities during the colonial era and Sara Shneiderman who examined the existing and changing concept of “ethnicity.”

Over three days, forty-three papers on thirteen panels were presented. The first panel, chaired by Satyabrata Sinha examined the role of migrations, trans-border networks and solidarities in identity changes in various areas of Northeast India, namely Meghalaya (contribution by Duncan McDuie-Ra), Sikkim (Uttam Lal) and the Chittagong Hill Tracts (Farhana M. Hoque).

A panel chaired by Martin Gaenzle on the *Sacralisation of Culture; Ethnicity and Rituals*, included papers by Meenaxi Barkataki-Rusheweyh on Rangfraism amongst the Tangsa of Assam, and Jenny Bentley on ritual practice within the Lepcha community in Sikkim and West Bengal. A panel on colonial and post-colonial knowledge of Northeast India in the building of identities chaired by Bianca Son included two contributions discussing the colonial construction of ethnicity and kingship in Northeast India by Debojyoti Das and Milinda Banerjee. A panel on *Display and Performance of Cultural Identities in Northeast India*, chaired by Erik De Maaker, included

contributions from Marion Wettstein (South Asian, Tibetan and Buddhist Studies, UVienna) and Mona Chettri (Anthropology, SOAS).

The panel *Arts and Medias*, chaired by Alban von Stockhausen, included contributions by Teiborlang T. Kharsyntiew on “Fashion Subculture” in Gangtok and Shillong, Akshaya Tankha on “Visual Culture and Governmentality in Nagaland” and Iris Odyuo on “The impact of Globalization on Naga Art.” The panel *Narratives, Myths, and Oral Traditions*, chaired by Guntram Hazod, included papers by Irito Achumi (Sociology, JNU, New Delhi), Alban von Stockhausen, (South Asian, Tibetan and Buddhist Studies, UVienna), Faguna Barmahalia (Folklore Research, Guwahati University) and Rekha Konsam (Sociology, Delhi University).

Philippe Ramirez chaired a panel on cultural identities, which addressed the main themes of the conference. Presentations were delivered by Lavinia Mawlong (Centre for Development Studies, Berlin), Erik de Maaker (Cultural and Social Studies, University of Leiden), Timour Claquin (Anthropology, Université Lumière Lyon 2), and Dolly Kikon (Anthropology, Stanford University). Duncan McDuie-Ra chaired a panel on the interactions between tourism, development and its impact on cultural identity changes, which included contributions by Mirza Rahman on tourism and development in Cherrapunjee and Mawlynnong and Rune Bennike on the influence of the colonial past in shaping the present position of Darjeeling.

A panel on gender and identity was chaired by Shahnaz Leblhuber; presentations were delivered by Soibam Haripriya (Sociology, Delhi University) and Rusievan Shangpliang

(History, NEHU, Shillong). The panel, *Religious Shift and Identity Formation*, chaired by Mélanie Vandenhelken, included papers by Glen Chua (Socio-Cultural Anthropology, University of Toronto), Ketholenuo Mepfhu-o (Historical Studies, JNU, *in absentia*) and by Philippe Ramirez (Centre d’Études Himalayennes, CNRS). In the panel on *Separatism and Insurgencies*, chaired by Sanjib Baruah, contributions were delivered by Townsend Middleton (Anthropology, University of North Carolina), Rakhee Kalita (Cotton College, Guwahati, *in absentia*), and Sanjoy Hazarika (Jamia Millia Islamia University, New Delhi).

Jürgen Schöpf chaired the panel, *Language and Identity Formation*, which included contributions by Mark Turin on “Linguistic Identities and Mother Tongue Attachment in Northeast India,” Serdihun Beypi on “Language Change in Karbi (Assam),” Pascale Dollfus and François Jacquesson on Sherdukpens’ (Arunachal Pradesh) strategies of survival, and Tim Bodt on the Momba of Arunachal Pradesh. The last panel, *Ethnic and Indigenous Politics and Cultural Identities Changes*,” chaired by B.G. Karlsson, included contributions by Sanjay Barborra on the “Politics of Autonomy in Assam,” Kaustubh Deka on Bodoland, Cornelia Günauer on “The Art of Electioneering in Meghalaya,” Mitul Baruah on “Floods, Riverbank Erosion, and the (Re-)Production of Hazardous Geographies in Assam,” and N. William Singh on the Young Mizo Association (YMA) in Mizoram.

The conference also included two photo exhibitions. Chin in Mizoram was presented by Steven Rubin. Shahnaz Leblhuber exhibited photos of the Mizo in Mizoram. A screening of a documentary film on boat clinics on the Brahmaputra River in Assam by Sanjoy Hazarika, an American war propaganda film of 1943 presented

by Jürgen Schöpf, and an animation film of a Naga folktale by Tara Douglas were also included. Several conference participants also toured the Phonogrammarchiv, a research institute for audiovisual archiving and restoration.

The conference was successful in that it was interesting, informative and thought provoking. Future collaborations among several scholars are planned. Therefore, another conference on Northeast India is planned by the Centre for North East Studies and Policy Research (C-NES) in New Delhi for early 2015.

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***IASTAM (International Association for the Study of Traditional Asian Medicine) Conference: Beyond Integration: Reflections on Asian Medicines in the 21st Century***

**Sancheong, South Korea  
September 2013**

Since its conception in 1979 and through the initiative of key members such as Charles Leslie, Joseph Alter, Ken Zysk, Paul Unschuld, and others, IASTAM has developed into a forum in which medical practitioners and scholars meet to create a platform for a fruitful debate on Asian medicine. In its “antagonistic pluralism,” to use Volker Scheid’s term, IASTAM conferences encourage discussions on the often contentious and political aspects of traditional Asian medicine, which finds naturally fertile ground to instigate ideas where

practitioners, scholars, and scholar-practitioners meet. Scholars from the humanities, who form a large part of the researchers attending IASTAM conferences, tend to contribute critical perspectives and awareness about the historical process of the medical practices, which medical practitioners sometimes lack and often appreciate. “At IASTAM conference I learn what was not taught in the TCM curriculum back home,” was the answer of an Australian acupuncturist to my question of why she attends IASTAM conferences. “They fill the gaps about history and social contexts that inform our day-to-day practice, but are not taught,” she concluded, summing up what many practitioners seem to have felt: that the conference is not an “epistemological carnival” as some critics predicted in the past, but has surfaced as a major get-together that pushes contemporary debates on Asian medicine forward. This became evident from the level of presentations by the distinguished key-note and plenary speakers, but also in the seven panels running parallel over the four fully-packed conference days.

IASTAM provides the platform in which academics also learn from or even are active medical practitioners, where people share how their theoretical analysis of the past still has meaning in present practice. An inspiring example of this combination is Vivienne Lo, IASTAM council member, who gave the Basham Medal Lecture. There she openly sketched an auto-ethnography, which she called “An Archaeology of Medical Time,” on how her study of Chinese medical history informs her acupuncture practice and how the former lets her discover the past in her present practice. Taking the example of the development of “lucky hours”

and Chinese prohibition texts and the movement of *renshen* through the body, she took the audience on a journey through her personal discovery of the magic of the past in the present, giving examples of how her integrative academic approach resonates in her practice. She emphatically concluded that “if we deny that experience we deny the power of the medicine.”

The Korean Society of Medical History along with IASTAM proved itself a generous host, providing a professional venue at the Samsung Human Resource Development Centre in the green and hilly area of Sancheong, three hours drive south of Seoul. A dedicated group of volunteering Korean medical students tirelessly cared for the endless needs of the more than one hundred participants.

South Korea well exemplifies how government structures can actually support diversity in traditional medical practice. Standardization and strict government quality control of traditional Korean medicine does not necessarily lead to a reduction of diversity or a homogenization of medical practice. As Volker Scheid, the previous IASTAM president, commented during the closing ceremony: “Korea has strong institutions that do not strangle diversity of medical practice.”

Korean medicine, which at previous IASTAM conferences was still only marginally represented, came to the forefront, not only through the many presentations and medical practice exhibits at the venue (e.g. facial rejuvenation acupuncture), but also through the conference field trip to the World Traditional Medicine Fair & Festival in Sacheong and the tour to Kiom, an R&D venue that creatively seeks to combine traditional Korean