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Ethnic Conversions and Transethnic Descent Groups in the Assam-Meghalaya Borderlands

This article reports several findings that run against the conventional picture of Northeast India as a set of sealed ethnic compartments. The adoption of individuals or groups originating from a different ethnicity is far from being a marginal phenomenon and is actually often institutionalized. Through purification rites, people get ethnically converted. The process is often linked to interethnic marriages and facilitated in the long term by the existence of equivalences among the surnames associated with different ethnic groups. Equivalences allow for repeated interethnic marriages while preserving the structural specificities of each social system involved. As people move from one community to another, they adopt new cultural features and a new surname, but on a broader scale, prescribed alliances and relations of exogamy are preserved. The possibility of ethnic conversions opens up several fundamental questions on the ethnic and cultural genesis of the region. And as they are in certain instances manipulated or contested within the political arena, ethnic conversions remain a true contemporary issue.

KEYWORDS: Assam—Meghalaya—Karbi—Tiwa—Khasi—social structure—ethnic conversion

THE WORK presented here is part of a long-term investigation of interethnic connections in Northeast India, with the aim of offering alternatives to the essentialist visions that underlie the dominant depictions of this culturally complex region (RAMIREZ 2007; 2011; 2013). The focus will be on the phenomena of ethnic shifts through “ethnic conversions”—these are intimately related to cultural representations of descent groups (clans) spanning across ethnic boundaries.

Cases of “ethnic conversions” or “ethnic shifts” have been invoked within recurring debates that assume a critical importance in anthropological theory, as they pertain to the ontology of social and cultural groups that anthropologists aim to describe (GIL-WHITE 1999, 808–12). While most scholars now agree that ethnic identities do not necessarily relate to cultural distinctiveness, disagreements arise concerning whether or not these identities are rationally or emotionally motivated. In line with the seminal works of LEACH (1954) and BARTH (1964; 1969a), circumstantialists have insisted on the instrumental nature of ethnic affiliation: people would adopt identities that meet their own material and political interests (COHEN 1974; ELLER and COUGHLAN 1993). This sometimes led to radical theses attributing ethnicity to a colonial fiction and altogether rejecting its anthropological relevance (AMSELLE 1998). Primordialists, developing ideas first formulated by Weber and then Geertz, contended that whatever their accuracy, the beliefs about a common descent, on which ethnic sentiments are based, represent “primordial attachments” (WEBER 1968, 389; GEERTZ 1963; STACK 1986; GROSBY 1994). The debate has often been flawed, failing to clearly distinguish between what ethnicity actually represents as a social process and what it represents in the eyes of the actors.¹ As BRUBAKER (2004, 49) puts it, “On the primordialist account, it is participants, not the analysts, who are the real primordialists, treating ethnicity as naturally given and immutable.”

Instances of ethnic conversions found in the available literature most generally pertain to the last stage of what authors describe as acculturation. Rationally or unconsciously, people moving into a new cultural environment gradually acquire some features of the dominant group and start to identify with it. Often, the foreign origin of converts remains marked by a special status or label within their host group. Barth has recorded cases of ethnic changes in Pakistan where, by following geographical movements and adopting the way of life of the dominant eth-

nic group, minority groups have finally chosen to identify with the latter (BARTH 1964; 1969b, 123–25). Haaland has described a somewhat similar phenomenon in Darfur, on the interface between Fur sedentary groups and Baggara nomads. Fur families who became Arabic-speaking nomads came to identify themselves as and be identified with a specific Baggara sub-tribe (HAALAND 1969, 65).

Similar cases of long-term assimilation are known in Northeast India, the most common being Assamization.² This region hosts, however, more radical forms of “boundary transcendences.” Not only do people cross the boundary, but they do it suddenly, entirely, and via institutionalized means. After they are converted, no explicit trace of their origin remains. Such processes are apparently paradoxical if one considers the strong ethnic essentialism prevailing today in Northeast India. Even more paradoxical is the coexistence of this ethnic essentialism with the belief that for each descent group of a tribe a “similar” group exists among each of the neighboring tribes. The cases presented here aim to illustrate that ethnicity and descent pertain to two distinct though interconnected levels of organization.

In 2003 I visited a Karbi village in the immediate vicinity of Guwahati and asked what kind of villages were to be found thereabouts. Several villagers responded: “Now we have only Karbi and Bodo. In the past there was a Garo village but a few years ago they all converted to Karbi. They were alone in this area so they could not marry.” The idea that in a period of all-encompassing ethnic assertions an entire village could shift from one identity to another was in itself very striking. But at the time I considered this merely as a quirky, isolated case.

It was only seven years later that passing by that village, which we will fictitiously call Santipur, I took the opportunity to find out more. Elderly villagers admitted they had been Garo in their youth. As few Garos are settled in the area, I asked them to say something in their parents’ language. It turned out not to be Garo, at least not standard Garo; the language had some structural similarities with Garo, noticeably the word order, but the lexicon—as far as the sample collected is concerned—displayed greater similarities with Khasi. According to the elders, their former language is still spoken in several villages in the hills inside Meghalaya. It is from there that they came some twenty-five years earlier to settle in the lowlands their parents used to cultivate, in an area dominated by Karbis and Bodos. After a while, they found that “nobody wanted to marry their girls,” that is, no boy was willing to opt for a matrilineal marriage, which was the standard practice among them. At the same time, the Karbi chief (*bangthe*) of Khanaguri, the locality Santipur is a part of, came and offered to make them Karbi. They gathered to discuss the matter and accepted.

The whole process was recounted to me as if it had been a very simple and ordinary occurrence. Seven Karbi *bangthe* from the neighboring areas were summoned. The Garos made a contribution to the community in the form of a pig. They all then had to stand on the other side of the river on the outskirts of the locality. They had to pass under an arch (Kh. *bir*) and then cross the river. This rite was called *khāṭ kora*, an Assamese locution meaning “penance,” but which local English speakers translated to me as “purification.” Last, but not least, each of

the former “Garos” was admitted into a Karbi clan. Asked about how the adopting Karbi clans were chosen, they replied, “This was done according to our former titles. Rongsho became Rongshon, Nongmalik became Nongphlang, Langdo became Teron, Langdoyang became Phangcho, Pator became Ingti, and Lado became Timung.” Those familiar with Garo society will immediately notice that these “Garo” titles do not all sound Garo, but nevertheless there seemed to exist a sort of implicit series of pairings or equivalences between assumed Garo titles and Karbi clanic titles.

My later investigations revealed that both ethnic conversions and title equivalences were widespread indeed, at least within all the foothills running along the northern borderlands of the Meghalaya plateau. This area is characterized by the plain-hill divide, the boundary between the States of Assam and Meghalaya, and the coexistence between three ethno-linguistic entities, Karbi, Khasi, and Tiwa, each of them corresponding to Scheduled Tribes recognized in both states. There, conversions and equivalences are seldom evoked spontaneously. But they are often alluded to. Tiwas of Assam would, for instance, point out that some Tiwas of Meghalaya “look like Khasis.” “They marry Khasi girls and take Khasi names: Amsong [Tiwa title] becomes Memsong [Khasi title], Puma becomes Umbah or Memba, Maslai becomes Mathlai, Mithi becomes Mukti. But actually they are Tiwa.” Similarly, I was told about Tiwa villages having become Karbi after converting to Christianity. Before visiting the Garo-turned-Karbi village, I took such statements to be imaginary, being just claims related to local ethno-political issues. I discovered later that they were grounded on actual and relatively common facts, reported by those concerned: “You know, although we are Tiwa, we can marry any Karbi or Khasi except those who have ‘similar titles.’ So Mithi [Tiwa] cannot marry Muktieh [Khasi] or Ingti [Karbi]; similarly, Hanse [Tiwa] cannot marry Khyndeit [Khasi] or Hanse [Karbi] and so on.” Even when provided with this actual evidence of a regulated exogamy across different tribes, I remained sceptical, suspecting some invention by a local missionary to encourage marriage among his multiethnic flock. Only after having recorded the same accounts in distant localities and finding no clue of missionary influence in this matter, I realized that I had put my finger on a well-rooted and possibly ancient practice.

I started to systematically inquire about such phenomena in each locality I visited, and I soon realized that, indeed, in a large number of localities from Guwahati down to North Cachar, almost all elderly villagers knew about it. The principle lies in a rule of equivalence between surnames that theoretically belong to different ethnic groups. A surname in one ethnic group is said to be “identical” to a surname in another group. Depending on the place, the lists given to me differed. They usually contained no more than three series, but many convergences appeared from one place to another. TABLE I shows 9 of the 34 triplets collected.

One may notice that a single title in one group may correspond to several in another (for example, Teron to both Amsih and Amsong). This will be explained below. Let us emphasize that these equivalences were recorded not only among multiethnic villages but also in monoethnic ones. Title equivalences involve two

KARBI	TIWA	KHASI/KHASI BHOI
Ingti	Mithi	Muktieh
Ronghang	Malang	Markhap
Hanse	Maslai	Khymdeit
Ronghang	Malang	Muksher
Be	Kholar	Lamare
Ingleng	Madar	Syngkli
Timung	Puma	Umbah
Teron	Amsih	Paraphang
Teron	Amsong	Mynsong

TABLE I. Surname equivalences on the Ribhoi and Karbi-Anglong borderland.

practical aspects: first, people who have “similar titles” are forbidden to marry; second, when individuals shift from one ethnicity to another they adopt a title “similar,” (that is, equivalent) to their former title. At first sight, this last point is relatively difficult to address. It is easy to understand that sexual relationships are forbidden between people perceived as belonging to “similar” descent groups, as the similarity is, moreover, often expressed in terms of uniqueness: “Our clan is the same; we are from the same clan.” For instance, it seems less obvious why, when people “convert from Tiwa to Karbi,” a memory of their Tiwa clan affiliation remains. Then the question becomes this: to what extent do they convert, and just how far do they leave one society for another?

We have seen that when Santipur people become Karbi they undergo what is conceptualized as a “purification.” In several northeastern cultures, “purification” should be understood as a “transformation” and, as a matter of fact, the first phase in the conversion of Santipur people—“crossing the river”—is characteristic of a “rite of passage,” a bodily and/or social transformation. This purification may no doubt be likened to that in traditional Hinduism, as well as to universal concerns about social pollution (DOUGLAS 1966, 123). Its function, however, is somehow opposite of Hindu purification, although it may be compared to that of the Sudhi movement, which in the late nineteenth century aimed at the conversion of Muslims into Hindus.³ Indeed, it concerns the dangers of introducing a foreign substance or of overstepping a limit. Yet whereas Hindu purification reestablishes a limit after removing the external polluting agent, here the purification as transformation enables it to move into the ingroup. In Karbi-speaking villages neighboring Santipur, a similar rite is performed in at least two other instances. One is Dehal puja, the annual sacrifice to the locality’s tutelary deity. The sacrifice itself is preceded by another “purification” (Kb. *kapangthir*) that requires all householders to walk in a procession to the very same river at the village’s boundary and pass through the very same arch before returning to the village. The second instance is incest. The way incest, once punished by death among Karbis, is handled has evolved towards milder forms.⁴ If a sexual relationship between two members of

the same clan is disclosed, the partners are taken across the river. There, they are “purified.” They come back and pay a fine.

In cases of incest, purification may be followed by what I would call “genealogical rectifications.” The boy might be allowed to change his clan, which would enable him to marry his erstwhile forbidden lover. And if the incestuous couple gave birth to a child, the latter might similarly be adopted by a family belonging to a different clan (see FIGURE 1). Thus, in the Karbi context, thorny social problems may be resolved by clanic shifts. This may help to understand how the Garos readily “converted to Karbi.” But a question immediately arises: was their adoption into Karbi clans a condition for their adoption as Karbis, or did they become Karbi as a consequence of being adopted into Karbi clans? One could legitimately brush aside the question as being irrelevant. “Clan” and “ethnicity” may be considered external categories that are analytically distinct but practically inseparable. To belong to one of the five Karbi clans would mean being Karbi, in the same way that being Karbi would necessarily mean belonging to one of the five clans. Furthermore, to address these phenomena with questions such as “How did the Garos become Karbi?” naturally introduces an ethnic bias, while the same phenomena could have been investigated by just asking, “How did the Langdo become Teron?” Nevertheless, the mutual determination of clanic belonging and tribal belonging cannot be asserted so easily precisely because of the existence of equivalence rules. If Garos were to fully become Karbis through a rite of passage, that is, through a transmutation of alien bodies, what would be the point of caring about their previous clan affiliations? We should be careful not to switch too quickly from “titles” to “clans” on the grounds that Karbi *kur* are understood as “clans” by anthropologists and English speaking and/or educated informants. A title does indeed point to a clan, but not necessarily to the whole of it. When Santipur people converted they changed their *kur*, their “designation.” What is less obvious is whether they changed their clan in the sense of an aggregate of related individuals forming a body.

It has to be emphasized that in Tiwa, Karbi, and Khasi societies, recruitment into a descent group operates at the level of a cluster of kindred houses forming a ritual entity. In genealogical terms, this corresponds to a lineage, or more often to a lineage segment. Titles and/or surnames point to much larger entities, at the levels of clans and sub-clans. In Khasi society, the ritual entity corresponds to a corporate and often localized matrilineage (*kpoh*) bounded around funerals and ancestor cults (*ka niam iap*). In Tiwa and Karbi societies, lineage ritual entities (Tw. *mahar*, *wali*; Kb. *deng*) display a typical form, which is found among other northeastern societies, like the Dimasa (*daikho*). They are defined as descent groups attached originally to particular “areas” with specific ritual procedures and deities, or in other terms, “ritual areas,” though this is not to be understood in a strictly spatial sense.⁵ Reference to a ritual area discriminates among different lineages of a single clan or sub-clan, each worshipping a specific deity (Kb. *peng*; Tw. *maharne mindei*; Dm. *jarne mdai*) residing in each house. Thus, among Tiwas and Karbis, precise descent is defined by the conjunction of a title and a ritual area.

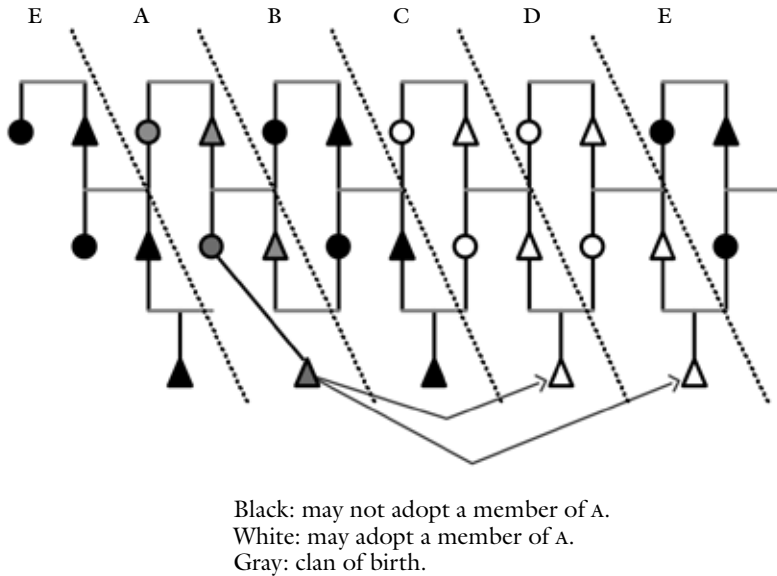


FIGURE 1. The “four clans rule” in the Karbi-speaking area of Rongkhang. In this example, a member of clan A might be adopted neither by that clan’s wife-givers (B) nor by its wife-takers (E).

Procedures allowing non-Karbhis to become Karbi, though seldom applied, also exist in places exclusively inhabited by Karbi-speaking communities. And this is not a recent phenomenon. During the 1821–1826 Burmese invasion of Assam, many Assamese families fled to the hills and subsequently became Karbis. In the early twentieth century, the sub-divisional officer of North Cachar Hills reported that foreigners used to be admitted among Mikirs (Karbhis). They were adopted into a *kur* after having been “purified” (STACK 1908, 23). The detailed description I collected in the Karbi polity of Rongkhang, on the eastern fringes of the Meghalaya plateau, gives some clues as to the links between surnames, clans, and Karbi-ness. Rongkhang is considered by many Karbis as the hub where their ancient culture has been preserved, and Rongkhang dignitaries are reputed to be the most knowledgeable in the realm of traditional rituals. Conversions take place in the middle of an annual ritual, *Peng karkli*, when the lineage deity (Kb. *peng*) is worshipped. On this occasion, new members are introduced to the *peng*: newborn babies, adoptees from other Karbi lineages and clans, and non-Karbhis. In the case of conversions, three different rites apply:

- 1) *Deng pharlo* (“changing the *deng*”): This rite is performed when an individual moves within the same clan from one ritual area (*deng*) to another. This will involve worshipping a different *peng*. The rite is very simple. The lineage elder (*kurusar*) attaches a white thread to the convert’s wrist (*bon kekok*, “thread-tying”) and splashes him with sacred water.
- 2) *Kur pharlo* (“changing the *kur*”): This rite allows a shift between two clanic surnames. The general form is the same as *deng pharlo*, but a divination (*vo*

sangtar kelang) has to be performed beforehand to ensure that the rite will be accepted by the deity. *Kur pharlo* is rarely performed, the reason given being that “the four clans must be different”: the new father’s mother’s clan must be different from the original MB’s clan, MBW’s clan, and MM’s clan (FIGURE 1).⁶ The convert is given a new first name that corresponds to the name of the (new) ancestor he is recognized as being the reincarnation of (*menchi*, name-soul).⁷ These last two rites are performed either for children born of an incestuous relationship, of no known father, or of a widow after she remarries into a different lineage or clan. In both rites, the same formula, *deng kepon* (“taking a ritual area”), is recited by a singer (*lunsepo*). It takes the form of a request made on behalf of the mother’s brother to his sister’s husband: “This child has been found to have no known father. He is the ‘son of *hambi* seed and grasshopper’ [that is, children’s games].⁸ Please take him into your family, he will be a great man and will make your name famous.”

- 3) *Bang kur kepon* (“taking a different [kind of] *kur*”): The third rite is more sophisticated and concerns the adoption of a non-Karbi, *bang saikona aso* (“son of an outsider”). The adoptee is given a new father and mother. Three cocks are sacrificed: one to Hemphu, the paramount god, as a preliminary “purification”; one as *sangtar kelang* (“omen-look”), just as when a new baby is born, to foresee his future; and one on the roof of the house, whose blood is left to run down the main pillar to prevent any illness entering the house, known as *arlo avur* (“inside-illness”). On behalf of the new MB, a *lunsepo* singer introduces the adoptee to Hemphu: “He doesn’t know his lineage [*jeng*], neither his clan [*kur*] nor tribe [*khei*]. He came to ask me about his lineage, clan, and tribe. We have brought him to complete your work, to complete the world. I will throw this *khap* [split bamboo section], tell me what you decide.” If the omen proves positive, the adoptee passes through a rolled mat and his new mother pretends to carry him on her back, while a song is being sung: “The one hundred gods have gathered and created him, they have sent him in a boat on the river.”⁹

The three procedures clearly consist of adoptions/conversions on three levels of transmutation: from lineage to lineage, from clan to clan, and from no-clan (that is, alien) clan to (Karbi) clan. There is no one-to-one correspondence, however, between the types of rite performed and the actual situations dealt with. The child of an unknown father, thus of unknown descent, is adopted in the same way as the child of a deceased father with a perfectly identified *kur*. The adoption of a natural child supposedly born of a Karbi father is in any case not as problematical as the adoption of a non-Karbi. The issue with a natural child is mostly to find it the right place by taking into account the existing affinity relationships of its mother’s clan.

The rite for a non-Karbi differs in its focus on bodily transformation—passing through a mat and being carried by the mother—and in its concern for external dangers. The foreignness of the non-Karbi is explicitly asserted—the plea to Hemphu describes him as “ignoring” his tribe. And it is no coincidence that in this case

the deity addressed is Hemphu, the paramount deity of Karbi and creator of *kurs*. There is no doubt that the content of the rite pertains to an essential limit in terms of the transformation involved and the dangers involved in crossing it. Nevertheless, even in Rongkhang, which is supposed to represent the sanctuary of Karbi traditions, adopting a foreigner, although a very rare case in practice, is an acceptable possibility, sanctioned by an institutionalized rite.

Equivalence rules, ethnic adoption, and interethnic matrimonial relationships appear to be structurally linked. Amazingly, they have rarely been reported in literature on Northeast India.¹⁰ The only mentions of clan equivalences are to be found in two monographs on the Nagas in the 1920s. HUTTON notes that a Sema clan “often identifies itself with a clan belonging to a neighboring tribe,” but, aside from some exceptions, Hutton dismisses it as “entirely superstitious” and motivated by the mere interest of enjoying protection from related clans when visiting alien villages (1921a, 134–35). MILLS asserts that the system of “inter-tribal corresponding clans” exists in all Naga tribes (1922, 92). People formulate such correspondences in terms of “being the same,” “being one.” Mills provides a few examples consisting of three to four tribe equivalences among Lhota, Ao, Sema, and Rengma Nagas. As among the Karbis, Naga equivalences are linked to the local integration of alien elements: “A Sema who comes and settles in Are [a Lhota village] becomes a Lhota and joins the clan corresponding to his old clan. If he or his children go back they slip into their old clan again.” However, except among the Changs, “who keep old customs very strictly,” equivalent clans may freely marry because “they are regarded as being so widely separated... that there is no harm in intermarriage” (MILLS 1922, 92). Mills expressed the same skepticism as Hutton towards clan equivalences as these rarely fit in with the seamless genealogy of Naga clans they were both eager to reconstruct. This attitude is all the more surprising since both of them provided many examples of groups being absorbed or merging with others or of individuals moving from one clan to another.¹¹

The Naga material shows that surname equivalences in the Meghalaya-Assam borderlands may not be an isolated or recent invention and moreover may have been part of a larger, ancient interethnic apparatus. Equivalences do indeed possess some very practical aspects, but they should not be viewed merely as artificial devices that would only be used by matchmakers and village heads in the pursuit of local strategies. One day, near a Karbi village, I met an elderly Karbi lady working in her field. I was accompanied by Joden Maslai, a Tiwa friend from Umswai valley, some fifteen kilometers from there. We started to talk to the old lady, and after a while her husband came towards us with a basket on his back. He put the basket down and asked, “Who are you people?” Joden replied, “He is a foreigner studying our culture, and I am Joden Maslai, from Umswai.” The old man, obviously a bit deaf, turned to his wife, frowning. “Joden what?” Thereupon the lady shouted, “He said his name is Joden Hanse!” That was enough to satisfy the old man. Thus, within less than a second, she had been able to translate a Tiwa surname, Maslai, into its Karbi equivalent, Hanse. This very brief experience taught me how equivalences could, after all, be an ordinary skill, used in ordinary interactions. Although

Tiwa and Karbi villages are not far from each other in this particular area, and their inhabitants constantly interact, interethnic marriages are not that frequent, and no ethnic adoption is known to have taken place recently. The old couple told us that a few local girls had been married to “Langlu” boys (that is, Tiwa) some years ago, but that no Langlu girl had ever come as a wife to live in the village. So what might be the practical use of such a skill? The man and his wife readily gave us a series of six surname equivalences and admitted that more existed but that they could not remember them. Thus they obviously had not “learned” them in case somebody married a Tiwa and they apparently had no list to help convert the Tiwas of neighboring localities into Karbis. They simply identified a particular Tiwa as belonging to a clan called Maslai in Tiwa and Hanse in Karbi at a basic cognitive level. Such an operation could be perfectly qualified as a “translation” enabled by a “linguistic competence,” the kind of translation done by an interpreter or someone bilingual.

The practical aspects of surname equivalences in matrimonial relationships is particularly visible in “ethnically landlocked” localities. One of them is Dantiyalguri (pseudonym), a small Tiwa-speaking village of seventy-three houses, a long way to the east of the Tiwa mainland and completely surrounded by Karbi, Bodo, and Assamese settlements. Situated on the first flatlands below the hills, Dantiyalguri is one of the very few Tiwa-speaking villages of the plains, but like all Tiwa villages of the plains, descent is largely patrilineal and marriage patrilocal. The first woman I spoke to in Dantiyalguri was the village head’s (*gaombura*) sister-in-law. She introduced herself as Kathe Mithi—Mithi being a typical Tiwa surname. After a while, when discussing local marriage practices, she told me she was born in the neighboring “Karbi village” of Borgaon and that her title was Ingtipi. The feminine suffix “-pi” qualifies Karbi women’s surnames, and Ingti is one of the five Karbi clans. Kathe generally uses her Tiwa surname while in the village and her Karbi surname when introducing herself to Karbi speakers. Dantiyalguri is remarkable in that more than a third of the men bearing Tiwa surnames are married to “Karbi-born” or “Bodo-born” women. In both cases, the young wife is systematically given a Tiwa title. The procedure differentiates however between a Bodo and a Karbi girl. A Bodo girl will be free to choose any title except, of course, her future husband’s. It may be the title of a friend or that of any household she has sympathy for. The village elders may possibly influence her choice since they ensure that incoming girls are well distributed among the five Tiwa patronymic groups locally represented. A Karbi girl, on the other hand, will be given a title equivalent to her original Karbi title: Ingti will become Mithi, Teron will become Amsi, and so on according to five equivalences. For the rest, whether Bodo or Karbi, the new non-Tiwa wife will simply be presented publicly to the whole village and a thread (*sut*) will be attached to her right wrist by her adoptive lineage’s elder and/or priest, *borjela*.

The descent structure of Dantiyalguri is made up of five patronymic groups that correspond to five Tiwa clans: Sagra, Amsi, Mithi, Kajar, and Puma. When translated into Karbi surnames following local equivalence rules, these equate to Terang, Teron, Ingti, Inghi, and Timung (that is, the five maximal Karbi clans). Thus, in

KHOLARWALI	Kholar, Madar, Lumphuid, Dilar, Mithi
MASLAIWALI	Maslai, Sakra, Samsol, Agari, Damlong, Melang, Khorai, Hukai, Malang
PUMAWALI	Puma, Phamsong, Tarphang
AMSONGWALI	Amsong, Amsi, Amp

TABLE 2. Hill Tiwa phratries.

terms of descent groups, Dantiyalguri society looks like a microcosm of Karbi society. None of the Tiwa-Karbi marriages that I recorded in the neighboring villages contravened Karbi clan exogamy by involving two spouses of equivalent titles, and neither did they transgress standard Hill Tiwa exogamy rules based on the grouping of Tiwa clans into four main phratries, or clusters (see TABLE 2).¹²

Interestingly, when describing the way interethnic marriage takes place, informants never evoke anything like a “combination” of “Karbi rules” and “Tiwa rules.” Instead, they merely give examples without seeming to care much if the surnames are Karbi or Tiwa. Forbidden matches between titles present in the locality are perfectly well known. On the contrary, possible exogamic links with locally unrepresented titles are barely known or unknown. This strongly highlights the very local and very practical significance of equivalence rules.

The Dantiyalguri case shows that equivalence rules comply with *both* Karbi and Tiwa exogamic clusterings. It is indeed tempting to check how far this is verified elsewhere. The result is striking. In FIGURE 2 I have depicted the exogamic relationships recorded among Karbis, Tiwas, and Khasi-Bhois in the hilly part of the Assam-Meghalaya borderlands. Surnames have been grouped according to the ethnicity they are commonly identified with. Two types of exogamies have been superimposed here: endoethnic and interethnic. Interethnic equivalences between two surnames are represented by black lines; exogamic relationships within each ethnicity are shown by vertical. Endoethnic exogamic clusters constitute sets whose number and nature differ considerably. These are the five major or maximal Karbi clans, the four main Tiwa phratries, and a large number of Khasi phratries (*teb kur*, “bound matrikin”) and clans (*shi kur*, “one matrikin”). As there are a great many Khasi phratries, I have retained only the Khasi entities involved in recorded equivalences.

The diagram clearly shows that surname equivalences are part of a global and very consistent panethnic system linking together exogamic units that are specific to each ethnic group. Endoethnic exogamic units strongly converge. The Tiwa phratry on the upper part of the diagram (Mithi-Madar-Dilar-Lumphuid-Kholar) is linked to two Karbi maximal clans (Terang, Ingti), hence the four Tiwa phratries match the five Karbi maximal clans. However, there is no apparent cross exogamy, and the three other Karbi clans (Inghi, Timung, and Teron) are still marriageable by any Kholawali member. Thus, the exogamic relations between Karbi and Tiwa surnames can be reduced to four panethnic exogamic units. Khasi-Tiwa and Khasi-Karbi interethnic exogamies comply to the same principles. Although the very seg-

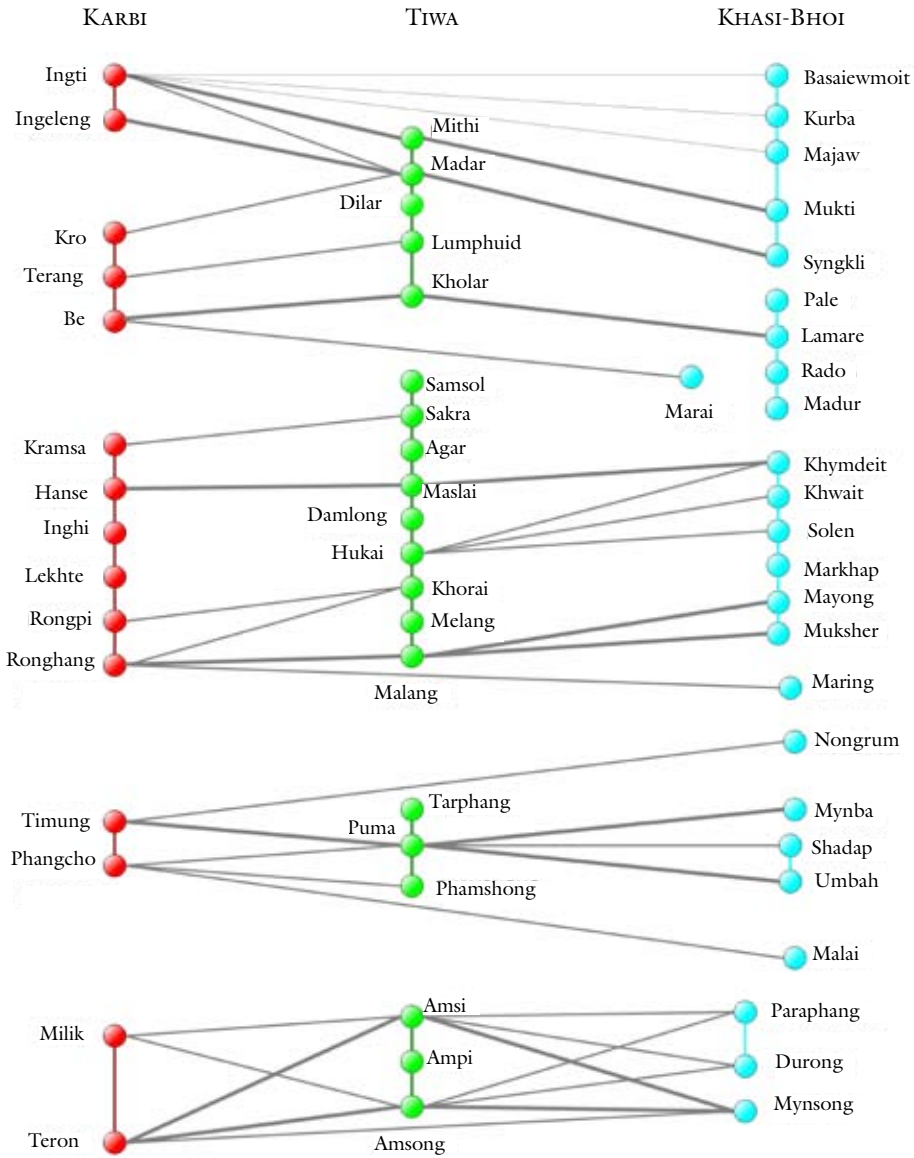


FIGURE 2. Endoethnic and interethnic exogamies among Karbis, Tiwas, and Khasi-Bhois of Assam-Meghalaya borderlands. Dots represent patronymic groups; lines represent relations of exogamy. This diagram highlights the convergence of exogamies within ethnic groups (same color clusters) and across them. Thick lines represent triadic relations which were explicitly mentioned as such. All other relations are in thin lines.

mented nature of Khasi descent groups is reflected in their relations to Tiwa and Karbi phratries, Khasi units that are exogamic to Tiwa units remain exogamic to the corresponding Karbi units.

Several questions arise about the conditions that make such a sophisticated system possible. Two questions are central here: first, how did the system appear and maintain itself? And second, do the three different structures influence each other through interethnic marriages? I will confine myself to suggesting some embryonic answers.

When documenting the recent reification of Kachin ethnicity in Northern Myanmar, contrasting it with the “perennial nature of the clans and lineages,” François ROBINNE described how the wife-giver/wife-taker paradigm (*mayu-dama*) contributed to the coherency of the Kachin sub-groups (2007). Different local sets of clans could take part in the overall system on the basis that not only “homonymous clans” but also “common clans with different names” were acknowledged. This situation is all the more comparable with the one we are describing here, since clan equivalences extend beyond the Kachin social and cultural space. They include the neighboring Lisu and Chinese communities, which do not practice *mayu-dama* exchanges. “The *mayu-dama* system has an inclusive dynamic that imposes upon the groups that neighbor the Kachin in Kachin State.” When a Lisu or a Chinese boy marries a Kachin girl, his clan becomes a “wife-taker” of the girl’s clan. This *mayu-dama* relationship constitutes the first small structure that will affect future marriages in the local area and contribute to the spreading of clanic correspondences (ROBINNE 2007, 291–93).

The Kachin situation allows us to believe that in the Assam-Meghalaya borderlands, the structural repercussions of only a few interethnic marriages and/or a few interethnic adoptions may have sufficed to produce the coherent equivalence system in existence today. A statistical analysis of interethnic marriages does not reveal that they would be oriented by a single principle spanning the three social systems. Nevertheless, the existence of prescribed exchanges in only one of them—the Karbi—could logically have led to the emergence of transethnic exogamy rules.

A majority of the ethnic conversions I have recorded actually consist of Karbi-ization cases. However, the number of Tiwa and Khasi ethnic conversions are not negligible, although they seem less dynamically related to transethnic exogamies. Dantiyalguri is the only locality where I recorded substantiated and current instances of adoptions into Tiwa clans, and we have seen how Dantiyalguri, though a very meaningful example, constitutes a very singular society. In the more “typical” Hill Tiwa villages of the Umswai Valley, I was told about the possibility of clanic adoptions, including that of non-Tiwas. Authorization has to be obtained from the politico-ritual head of the locality, the *loro*, as well as from the *khul min-dei*, the lineage deity residing in each house. While investigating the same area fifteen years before me, Gohain reported that if a non-Tiwa marries a local Tiwa girl, he will be adopted by a clan (*khul*) or phratry (*mabarsha*) that is different from his wife’s.¹³ However, neither Gohain nor I was able to record any current case, and the possible matrimonial outcome of interethnic marriage remains unknown.

Upland Khasi social rules allow for the adoption of a girl into a matriline, *ting kur* (“adopt matrikin”), and according to Nongkynrih, this concerns mostly non-Khasi girls (NONGKYNRIH 2002, 40). The descendants of an adopted girl are integrated in the lineage with the consent of the elders from all the sub-lineages (*kur*, which NONGKYNRIH calls “collaterals”; 2002, 40) and are considered for all intents and purposes as any other member identified by a specific surname. Here, adoption seems to erase all of the foreigner’s links with his native society and is thus not likely to affect or be affected by the local matrimonial network.

Although most of the examples of ethnic conversions we have given were motivated by matrimonial issues, it has to be mentioned that ethnic conversions and surname equivalences somehow found new life with the spread of Christianity in the Assam-Meghalaya borderlands in the last sixty years. This process has provoked substantial demographic movements, as new converts were often expelled from their native villages and regrouped themselves into multiethnic settlements. In many of these localities, individuals culturally in a minority often started to speak the dominant language to their children and—even more noteworthy—translated their erstwhile surname into an “equivalent” title.

I end with a case-in-the-making that might provide us with more clues on the possible conditions in which equivalences emerge. This relates to the borderland between Karbi-Anglong and Jaintia hills and a community of about eighty houses that identify themselves as having Sakechep ethnicity. Their neighbors are ethnically Karbi, Khasi-Khynriam, Khasi-Pnar, and Nepali. Sakechep, numbering some twenty thousand in all, are found mostly in the North Cachar hills and in Tripura, the only state where they have the benefit of Scheduled Tribe status, under the designation “Halam.” They speak a Kuki language; this is, however, the only Sakechep locality in Karbi-Anglong or the Jaintia hills. Here, all are Christian, and mostly Presbyterian.

Interethnic marriages have become common over the last twenty-to-thirty years, and mostly to Karbis. The Sakecheps I met asserted that they could marry members of any *jāti* (As. caste, tribe, kind), but not Nepalis, “because they are not Christian.” On the other hand, they invoked the matrilocality of Khasis—all of them Christian—to explain why there were very few marriages with them: Khasi families are not in favor of marrying out their girls and, similarly, Sakechep boys do not like the prospect of leaving their own family. Over the same period that the number of marriages to Karbis has increased, more and more Sakecheps have taken Karbi surnames. The reason given by converts is that it facilitates their social life in Karbi-Anglong district, particularly by allowing them to access public jobs. Some informants were able to provide me with a list of equivalences between six Sakechep surnames and six Karbi surnames. This confirms that conversions are recent, as local Sakecheps possess eleven titles, corresponding to eleven exogamous groups, and Karbis have only five exogamous clans. Thus, either the system is not yet “locked” as is the case in the Karbi-Tiwa interface areas, or it is being shaped differently. No conversion ritual was reported to me, which is not surprising in a Presbyterian environment. Whether or not such rituals exist, one has to be discreet on the matter.

There seems to be no consensus yet on the legitimacy of identity shifts between Sakechep and Karbi surnames. When discussing the topic among Sakecheps, I encountered angry reactions from several men who strongly objected to the possibility of both conversions and surname equivalences. “A Sakechep cannot become a Karbi! How can a jackfruit tree produce mangoes?” The fact that equivalences have recently appeared in the Sakechep area may naturally explain why they have not been internalized as in other areas.

The idea that dissimilar surnames might be nevertheless considered as identical, and moreover that people from different tribes might be “similar,” is not generally accepted in present-day Northeast India. This is in tune with the current ethno-essentialism, but perceptions might have been different in older days. The regions where transethnic representations remain today are characterized by sustained interethnic matrimonial links, which are themselves partially determined by specific demographic and political configurations. The demographic balance among neighboring groups has a direct bearing on matrimonial opportunities and strategies. This operates in a non-linear manner, however, and a minority situation might encourage either assimilation or, on the contrary, a fallback into ethnic endogamy. Only a particular balance at the local level, translated in terms of mutual interests, may open up to recurrent interethnic marriages and the emergence of transethnic exogamies. In this respect, equivalences do not merely represent vestiges of long gone structures. They remain one of the paths that societies might still follow in a multiethnic context.

In the model I put forward here, conversions and equivalences are hardly the product of conscious manipulation. They essentially result from the adaptive behavior of individuals and small groups to multicultural environments. Within certain sections, particularly in the Assam-Meghalaya borderlands, they may have been internalized enough to become a cognitive property, which many actors consider unremarkable, even totally natural. This is not how they are always perceived, even in that very area. Some believe that ethnic conversions threaten their own tribe’s position, and that the next tribe is winning by “stealing their own people.” This sentiment might be exacerbated by territorial disagreements between states and the competition among Scheduled Tribes or would-be Scheduled Tribes over reservations. A recent article on “The Problem of Nagaisation in Manipur” requested the Manipur Government “impose a ban on ethnic conversions” (THADOU 2008). In the background are obviously claims by Naga movements that areas inhabited by Nagas in Manipur be attached to a “Greater Nagaland.” For Thadou, the recent conversion of some Kuki-speaking groups living in Manipur to a Naga identity is part of a politically motivated Nagaisation process. He stigmatized a central government’s envoy for having described “changing loyalties among members of small tribes in Northeast India as a natural phenomenon.” He argued that instead, “the unethical phenomenon of ‘ethnic conversion’ may be described as a de-humanized condition in which the victim is brainwashed... to the effect that he loses all inhibitions to totally change his entire outlook on tribal life and values.”

NOTES

1. See GIL-WHITE (1999, 802–808), who propounds a cognitive model which resolves the primordialist-versus-circumstantialist entanglement.

2. See for instance CENSUS OF INDIA (1891, 225); BARUA (2002, 40)

3. However, the Suddhi movement (Sk. *suddhi*, “purification”) launched by the Arya Samaj, like the recent Hindu nationalists’ initiatives against Christian and Muslim conversions, were formulated in terms of reconversions (back into Hinduism) rather than conversions *per se*. For a comparative study of these movements, see JAFFRELOT (1994; 2011)

4. In certain Tiwa localities, death for committing incest was also the rule (GOHAIN 1993, 94). In others, a rite of “purification” was sufficient. Among the Khasis, incestuous couples were banned from the village (GURDON 1914, 123).

5. Studies of Tiwa and Karbi descent are made particularly complex mostly because of two aspects: first, the same area names may be used to discriminate entities of different orders (geographical, ritual, genealogical) that do not necessarily coincide; and second, lineages are recognized by area names regardless of the residence of their members. For examples, see STACK (1908) and GOHAIN (1993), and on similar issues in Dimasa society, DANDA (1978) and RAMIREZ (2007).

6. A Karbi woman remains in her father’s clan after marriage. The “four clans” rule actually reflects ancient marriage rules based on preferential cross-cousin marriage (MBD with FZs). In addition to her own clan, a woman should not marry into the clans of her father and mother’s spouse givers. It is interesting to note that although the rule is seldom applied to marriages nowadays, it is still taken into consideration for changes of clan, at least in theory. In practice, an illegitimate child might be adopted either by his stepfather if his mother marries, or into the clan of his *lok* (FZH), that is, the clan into which he should have been born had his mother married her cross-cousin.

7. Newborn babies are considered to be reincarnations of a deceased person from their patriline.

8. “Son of *hambi* seed and grasshopper” (*hambi polong aso*) refers to two common children’s games: playing with grasshoppers, and large beans known as Snuff Box Sea Beans (*Entada rheedii*; Kb. *hambi*; As. *ghilā* > *ghilā khel*).

9. This refers to the Karbi clan creation myth in which one of the six original brothers fell into the river.

10. On similar phenomena in other parts of the world, see for instance BARBEAU (1917); SCHLEE (1985); and TOULOUZE (2003).

11. For example, see HUTTON (1921a, 161–62; 1921b, 117–20) and MILLS (1937, 12, 14, 16).

12. One or two additional phratries may be found in some localities but these pertain to rarely represented clans. The distribution I recorded does not match the list published by GOHAIN (1993, 41) that obviously contains some inconsistencies.

13. See GOHAIN (1993, 46). Obviously, being adopted by another *khul* belonging to the wife’s phratry or by an altogether different phratry makes an important difference if local matrimonial exchanges are taken into consideration.

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