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Margins and borders: politics and ethnicities in North-East India¹

Philippe RAMIREZ

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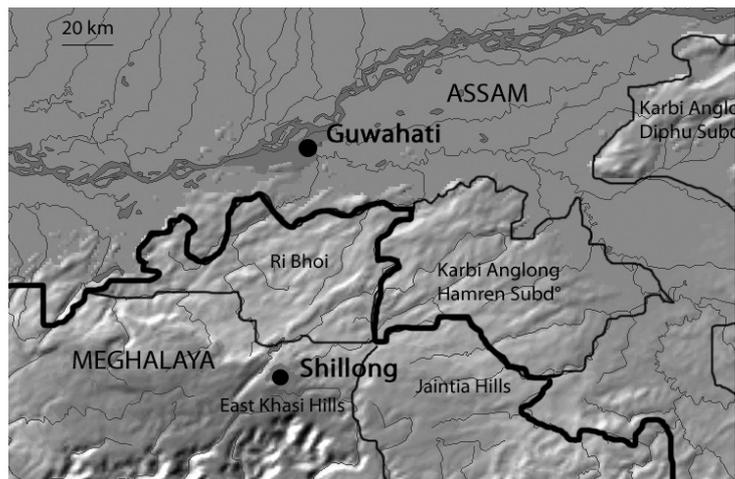
Both the affirmative action policies of the Indian State and the demands of ethno-nationalist movements contribute to the ethnicization of territories, a process which began in colonial times. The division on an ethnic basis of the former province of Assam into States and Autonomous Districts² has multiplied the internal borders and radically redefined the political balance between local communities. Indeed, cultural norms have been and are being imposed on these new territories for the sake of the inseparability of identity, culture and ancestral realms. The presence of certain ethnic or cultural minorities has become problematic. States have come into conflict over ethnic-minority enclaves in their respective territories. This underlines a major issue that we hope to document in the following pages through actual cases: does the ethnic balkanization of the North-East correspond to the realization of old sovereignties? Did pre-colonial North-East India look like an assemblage of "tribal countries", each with a clear-cut territory, a homogenous culture and a unique ethnicity?

These issues do indeed emerge if one considers current data. In several communities in the North-East the strict correlation between culture and identity is far from being firmly established and the very question of ethnic affiliation may not arise at all. It may be argued that migratory blending over recent years has blurred traditional settings. We will make the opposite assumption, suggesting that such social forms pertain to ancient social identities which attribute less importance to ethnicity. These phenomena will be illustrated using the case of a hilly region divided between Assam and Meghalaya [Map 1].

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Most of the field data presented in this article have been collected under ANR project "Language, Culture and Territory in North-East India". Thanks to Morningkey Phangcho, Raktim Pator and Belinstone Khwait.

² States of Nagaland, Meghalaya, Manipur, Tripura, Mizoram. Autonomous Districts of North-Cachar Hills and Karbi-Anglong, Bodo Autonomous Council. On the history of these successive divisions, see for example Baruah, 1999.



Map 1: State and District Borders, 2009

Four "tribes" historically coexist in this area: the Khasis, the Pnars (Jaintias, Syntengs), the Karbis (Mikirs) and the Tiwas (Lalungs). All are listed as Scheduled Tribes in at least one of the seven States of North-East India. However, for each tribe, the extent to which it obtains advantages associated with this status varies from State to State, and in Assam it furthermore depends on whether this involves plain or hill dwellers. Giving accurate figures about Scheduled Tribes might be a rather delicate issue, one of the reasons being that they are often referred to using outdated terms which are rejected by the groups in question. The problem is naturally more complex for non-scheduled tribes and sections. Nevertheless, the following estimates may be put forward for 2001 (official name between quotes; official Scheduled Tribes figures in bold):

	Meghalaya	Assam Hills	Assam Plains
"Khasi-Jaintia" (Khasi+Jaintia+Pnar)	1,100,000	13,000	
"Mikir" (Karbi)	11,000	353,000	200,000
"Lalung" (Tiwa)	1,000	10,000	171,000

In order to roughly set the scene, it could be said that the Khasis, Pnars and Karbis constitute fairly distinct entities in particular areas – though not everywhere – to the west, south and east respectively, where they have obtained "Autonomous districts" (Khasi Hills, Jaintia Hills, Karbi-Anglong); their population however extends well beyond these districts. As for the Tiwas, they largely coexist with the Khasis, the Karbis and the Assamese castes, the main group in the Plains. Now, cultural belonging as well as identities are far less clear-cut within a large region at the interface between these ethno-linguistic areas. Here, often within the same village, one may come across speakers of different languages, different descent systems and barely expressed ethnic identities. We shall try to show how the atypical character of these communities pertains to particular relationships between culture, territory and political affiliation in which ethnicity plays a minor role.

It should be quite clear in the following pages that we consider the ethnic group as a real entity, exclusively founded however on identity assertions. Its limits are simply defined by the sum of individuals who claim to belong to it.³ Indeed, many north-eastern groups satisfy this definition: it does not imply that belonging to an ethnic group is compulsory; and it does not imply that the representations associated with the ethnic groups are real.

Every winter, Jonbil Fair (*Jonbil melā*) is held 50 km east of Guwahati. The Fair is famous among the Assamese for being one of the last places where barter is found. The event takes place three days before Magh Bihu, a key event in the Assamese ritual year.⁴ *Jonbil melā* is extremely rich in anthropological meaning. Our focus here will only be its geographical and political context. At certain times of the day the *melā* looks rather like the usual, modern fair where neighbouring villagers come to purchase household goods and to have a ride on the merry-go-rounds. However, a number of other activities take place, some of them typical of Magh bihu celebrations throughout Assam (collective fishing, cockfights), while others are more out of the ordinary, like the famous barter. Hill-dwellers come to exchange edible roots (taro, turmeric, ginger...) for dried fish and

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This conception closely matches the one used by F. Barth (1970: 13-14): "To the extent that actors use ethnic identities to categorize themselves and others for purposes of interaction, they form ethnic groups in this organizational sense".

⁴ Magh Bihu corresponds in other parts of India to Makara Sankranti or Thai Pongal.

sweet pancakes (ass. *pithā*), the typical delicacy eaten at Bihu. The reasons for this bartering are obviously ritualistic rather than economic, as most visitors would find the same products at a similar price on markets closer to home. What is taking place at *Jonbil melā* might be the staging of a time when such goods were at the very heart of exchanges between the hill people and the plain people.



Fig 2: Hills and plains: roots (turmeric) exchanged for (dried) fish. *Jonbil melā* 2004. (photo by Samiran Boruah)

The fair is sponsored by a local ruler, the Gobha Rājā, nowadays considered to be the "King of the Tiwas". However, it is neither strictly a State ritual nor a territorial ritual. It is neither essentially related to a single tribe, although the geographical setting of the *melā* assigns a prominent role to the hosts, the Tiwas and the Gobha Rājā. Visitors present the *rājā* with various free contributions which are considered as "taxes" (*kar*). Not all of them identify themselves as Tiwa and, as we shall see, their status of "subject of the *rājā*" is a matter of interpretation. They originate from an area hardly definable in either ecological or administrative terms, straddling the borders of Assam and Meghalaya, as well as the plains and hills. Neither do visitors to the *melā* seem to correspond to any clear cultural community: if languages alone are to be taken into account, they are speakers of Khasi, Tiwa, Karbi and Assamese. As for ethnicity, their heterogeneity is all the more puzzling, with some villagers even asserting no particular ethnic identity: when questioned about their "tribe", they give a clan name.

The ritual territory defined by the origin of the barterers appears to be complex. How do we go about uncovering part of its foundations? We will first turn to the mythology and historical data related to *Jonbil melā*. We will then examine its visitors' villages of origin to check to what extent the heterogeneity of the public attending the Fair does not simply reflect the anthropological heterogeneity of the region.

The political significance of the Fair has evolved significantly over the last twenty years with the rise of the Tiwa movement whose political and community bodies have become the true patrons of the event.⁵ The symbolic characters staged nowadays are Gobha Rājā, a number of his own vassals, and the heir to the Ahom dynasty (*svargaden*), which ruled over Assam. Everyone recalls that only a few years ago, the *rājās* of Khyrim and Jaintia were also present at Gobha Rājā's side. The reason for the visit by these two

⁵ Jonbil mela is run by the Tiwa Literary Society (Tiwa Mathonlai Tokhra) and the Tiwa Autonomous Council. Demands for autonomy date back to 1967 under the auspices of the Lalung Darbar.

hill rulers is less obvious. Was it only a question of diplomacy or simple courtesy? Local representations depict Gobha, Jaintia and Khyrim as much more than mere neighbours. A number of narratives draw a triangle of special relationships between them.

A common story portrays the *rajas* of "Gobha, Jayatā and Khoirām" (Gobha, Jaintia and Khyrim) as three brothers born on a mountain called "Thin Makhlang" or "Timophlang", the first from the ground, the second from a stone and the third from a hollow tree.⁶ Very few people in the plains know the exact location of this place, but according to the inhabitants of the Tiwa hills, it would be situated in Meghalaya, on the ancient border between the three States.⁷ Similar narratives show the three characters jumping out of a pond. Gobha is sometimes the eldest, sometimes the youngest brother.⁸ In some instances, Jayata and Khoiram come to *Jonbil melā* to find the Bihu delicacy, *pitbā*, in order to celebrate the corresponding festival in the hills, Rangsi.

Among Hill Tiwas, there are still traces of meetings between Khyrim and Gobha



Fig. 3: Mokoidharam, site of an ancient market.
(photo by Ph. Ramirez)

kings. At Kutusi Mokoidharam, not far from the three borders, a set of twelve monoliths stands right on the trail down from Nartiang (Jaintia hills)⁹. Some Hill Tiwas explain that when Rājā Khrem (Khyrim) came to pay a visit to Gobha Rājā, he used to stop at this place where a market was held. Such a narrative is in fact of valuable historical importance in that it underlines the fundamental role of trade in the former chieftainships. One may even argue that the *raison d'être* of these States was the protection of trade and markets. It is well known that the Khasi States drew most of their

revenue from market taxes (*ka kbrong ka dan*)¹⁰ and most disputes between States, as well as with the British, concerned the control of or access to markets.¹¹

The image of chiefs coming and going over the hills to ensure the smooth running of markets and of them taking their share might give an idea of the nature of the Hill States. It is not at all clear whether very defined and close borders separated these chiefs' "territories". The oral tradition itself sometimes confuses various rulers: It is quite common to hear Tiwas speaking of "Jotyā-Khairam", i.e. "Jaintia-Khyrim", a generic term referring to the higher hills of the plateau. And this pattern seems to have been used more widely than merely around Gobha. According to one of the myths of origin for neighbouring Dimoria, the latter's rajas are supposed to have descended from one of

⁶ Gogoi, 1986: 150. Several variants may be found with slightly different characters. One of those we have recorded associate Gobha with Jayta-Khairam and Myllem, a State founded in mid-eighteenth century.

⁷ Tini Mawphlang combines an Assamese term: "the 3" with a Khasi compound: "grass stone".

⁸ Singpal Sarma, *Dainik Assam*, 1994

⁹ There are actually more than twelve monoliths. This arbitrary number may give an indication of the political importance of the place. In the indigenous histories of this part of Asia, politics are often organized on a duodecimal basis. Cf. Izikowitz (1962) on the Tai.

¹⁰ Gurdon, 1906: 67. According to Bareh (1967: 42), the collection of these "trifling dues" was one of the characteristics that distinguished the Khasi chief, the *syiem*, from the common people. In Sohra, markets were part of princesses' dowries (Bareh, 1967: 86).

¹¹ for example Syiemleh, 1989, p. 67.

four brothers: "Gubha, Dimorua, Khoiram and Milim", whose cradle was "Thimuflong". Another narrative published by Gohain conjures up for us the components of the former political system.

"When the Khorang clan (Khoiram) of the Jaintias wanted a bullock for their religious festival, they would go to the Magro clan of the Lalungs living in the Jaintia habitat with a betel-nut and liquor [...] Next morning, the chief [of the Magro] would hand over a rope to them [...] They would go to the Gobha raja with liquor and a betel-nut and the latter would say, 'Go to the field and select a young bull'. [They used to pay] one rupee and four annas to the cowherd, but no price was to be paid for the bull".¹²

Proper nouns must not be taken for granted for they appear to confuse clans and States. Instead, it is the structural features which are noteworthy here. One rapidly perceives the social landscape of this paradigmatic narrative: a network of economic and ritual relationships among clans, and between clans and States, which transcended the limits between hills and plains or even made possible exchanges between hills and plains. This is in tune with the patterns above which focused on the association of several chiefs all placed on the same footing.

Historical documents about the region portray a less egalitarian and peaceful image of the relationships between these three rulers. However, they confirm the existence of a regional politico-economic system based on trade between the hills and plains. For three centuries, two major powers competed against each other in the area: the Ahom rulers, dominant in the plains, and the Jaintias controlling the eastern Meghalaya plateau. The region is mentioned in the Assamese chronicles (*buranjā*) dating from the seventeenth century onwards. At that time, and until the advent of British Rule in 1826, the Ahom sovereigns almost entirely controlled the Brahmaputra Valley, yet hardly any of the highlands. They sent some military expeditions into the hills (1707 especially, in the Jaintia hills) but never occupied them. They nevertheless maintained multiple trade relationships with the hills and mountains, whether with Bhutan or Tibet, the Naga, Khasi or Garo Hills.¹³ As a matter of fact, they entered a system and networks which pre-existed them long before. In this system, the "gates" leading to the hills, the *duars*, were much sought after strategic points.¹⁴ The *duars* themselves provided access to major trade routes, but the nearby hills also concealed some resources valued by merchants from the plains, such as salt, lime, lac, wax ...¹⁵ Ahoms attempted to control the *duars* by gaining the allegiance of local leaders, to whom they granted the status of *rajā*. In this venture, they competed with other States, namely Jaintia and Khyrim, which also claimed suzerainty over the same chiefs.¹⁶ In the early eighteenth century, the affiliation of the rulers of Gobha, Neli and Khala shifted from one to the other. They seemed to have seldom been fully independent, but played on rivalries to protect themselves, possibly lending simultaneous allegiances to two or more suzerains.¹⁷

When the British arrived on the scene, Khyrim and Jaintia had been in mutual conflict

¹² *Ibid.* "Khorang", or Khoiram as Gohain notes, would not designate a "clan" but Khyrim State; similarly, Magro is a village on the border between the hills and plains.

¹³ Mackenzie (1884: 9-10), Blackburn (2003: 33-35), Baruah (2002: 442).

¹⁴ On the southern *duars* during British Rule, cf. Syiemleh, 1989: 9, 67.

¹⁵ See, for example, Pemberton, 1835: 215.

¹⁶ Hamilton 1807 (31-33) provided a list of foothill States around Guwahati before British Rule.

¹⁷ Devi, 1960: 125, 130.

for several years, a situation which affected exchanges through Gobha.¹⁸ The image of a peaceful coexistence between the three kings was nevertheless maintained, unless it actually only emerged afterwards. The intimacy among the three kings, which is tangible in the folk narratives, would reflect a very fluctuating situation in which the area fell either alternatively or simultaneously under the authority of several States. In 1829, when accounting for the difficulties in preparing a map of the Khasi hills, David Scott provided a very significant clarification: "throughout these mountains peculiar spots are to be found belonging to one chief, although surrounded with the territory of another, and that two or more of them are occasionally found exercising authority in the same village."¹⁹ One point in particular must be stressed; the possibility that an area may have been simultaneously subjected to several authorities. It could have led to an intermingling of different cultural models imposed or inspired by the respective elites of the dominant States.

The region where the three rajas mingled roughly consists of the north-eastern corner of the Meghalaya plateau: low hills (200-800 m) covered mainly by slash and burn regrowth vegetation and bamboo groves. To the west and south lies Meghalaya. Formerly part of Assam, this Indian State was created in 1972 for the benefit of Garo and Khasi-Jaintia Scheduled Tribes (ST). Except for its capital Shillong, the whole State is classified as a "Tribal area" under the 6th Schedule of the Indian Constitution. The task of settling customary affairs, as well as a section of local government, has been handed over to three Autonomous District Councils: Garo Hills, Khasi Hills and Jaintia Hills. To the East lies the State of Assam, and more precisely the Karbi-Anglong Autonomous District (1970), realm of the Karbi ST, under the same 6th Schedule. To the North, the plains of Assam, which on this side do not include any official "Tribal area", but where the Tiwa (plain) ST demands its own Autonomous District.²⁰ This territorial arrangement stems from a series of processes initiated on the arrival of the British and which today continue along the same lines.²¹ The conviction among numerous observers is that these political territories no doubt correspond to ancient territories inhabited "from the beginning" by stable, well defined and unique populations. It is unclear whether such a representation existed in pre-colonial times, but it seems just as firmly rooted among the ethno-nationalist elites as it was among British rulers. Thus, the oriental part of Meghalaya, known since colonial times as the "Khasi and Jaintia hills", is believed to be the ancestral territory of the Khasis and Jaintias. Associated with the image of a specific ethnic territory is that of a homogenous population. Today this perception is dominant among people claiming a Khasi and/or Pnar identity. Certainly, the Khasis do acknowledge some cultural differences among themselves. The most common classification recognizes four localized groups: in the highlands, the Khyntiam, to the south the War, to the east the Pnar and on the northern

¹⁸ Pemberton, 1835: 221.

¹⁹ Phillimore, 1954, p. 52.

²⁰ In Assam there are 23 STs, two Autonomous Districts, 6 Tribal Autonomous Councils and the new Bodoland Territorial Area Districts. Meghalaya has 17 STs and three Autonomous Districts. The administrative settings are not, however, entirely similar in both States. Contrary to the Autonomous District, the Tribal Autonomous Council does not rule any particular territory and does not fall under the Constitution of India.

²¹ Current tribal areas roughly correspond to the "Partially excluded areas" established by the Government of India Act, 1935, chap V.

and eastern fringes, the Bhoi. However, for a majority of the first two groups, there is no doubt about their original unity.²² They are all thought to descend from the "Seven huts" (Hynniew trep). Among certain ethno-nationalists, the mere evocation of differences among the Khasis is perceived as an unacceptable attack on the unity of the group.²³ Among the Pnars and the Bhois, the matter is more a subject of debate, although the Khasi identity is widely accepted.

As early as the beginning of the twentieth century, Gurdon – author of the first monography on the Khasis – portrayed a very ambiguous image of the northern-belt people, whom the "other Khasis" called "Bhoi" and considered with some disdain. Gurdon claimed they were mostly Mikir – these days the common designation for Karbi – and that the term Bhoi was “a territorial name rather than tribal”.²⁴ Several decades later, despite the area opening on to the outside, Bhoi's specificity does not seem to have diminished. It was formally recognized in 1992 with the creation of Ri-Bhoi district (lit. "Bhoi country"). The recent attempt to rechristen it "Northern Khasi District" and the strong reaction which ensued prove that a century later the classification of Bhois as Khasis remains problematic, both for external observers and the Bhois themselves.²⁵

Let us consider the north-eastern corner of the Meghalaya plateau. The anthropological complexity of this area makes any description arduous. Cultural, linguistic and ethnic diversity is not only widespread, but neither does it assume the same aspect nor does it appear to the same degree everywhere. A comparison of two zones might be made. In the first zone, villages are generally monolingual and mono-ethnic. In the other, several languages are spoken in the same village and ethnic identities are either complex or barely determined. On the one hand a compartmentalized mosaic, on the other a continuum of blends. (cf. map)

²² A famous saying, the origin and age of which is not known, is frequently quoted to support this vision: u khyriam, u pnar, u bhoi, u war ki dei u paid khasi ba iar : "Khyriam, Pnar, Bhoi, War, all belong to the large Khasi group".

²³ Such a stand is not limited to the Khasi elites. For a discussion on similar representations among the Garos, see Burlings 2007.

²⁴ Gurdon, 1906, p.4.

²⁵ In 2004, the very powerful Khasi Students' Union demanded that the district be renamed "North Khasi hills", claiming that the term Bhoi was derogatory. The Confederation of Ri-Bhoi People (CORP) successfully opposed this attempt, arguing that the locals had always been referred to in this way and in provocation they retorted that the name of the State itself should be changed, since Meghalaya is a "foreign" name ("Abode of the clouds" in Sanskrit). "North Khasi Hills" is still used by the KSU.

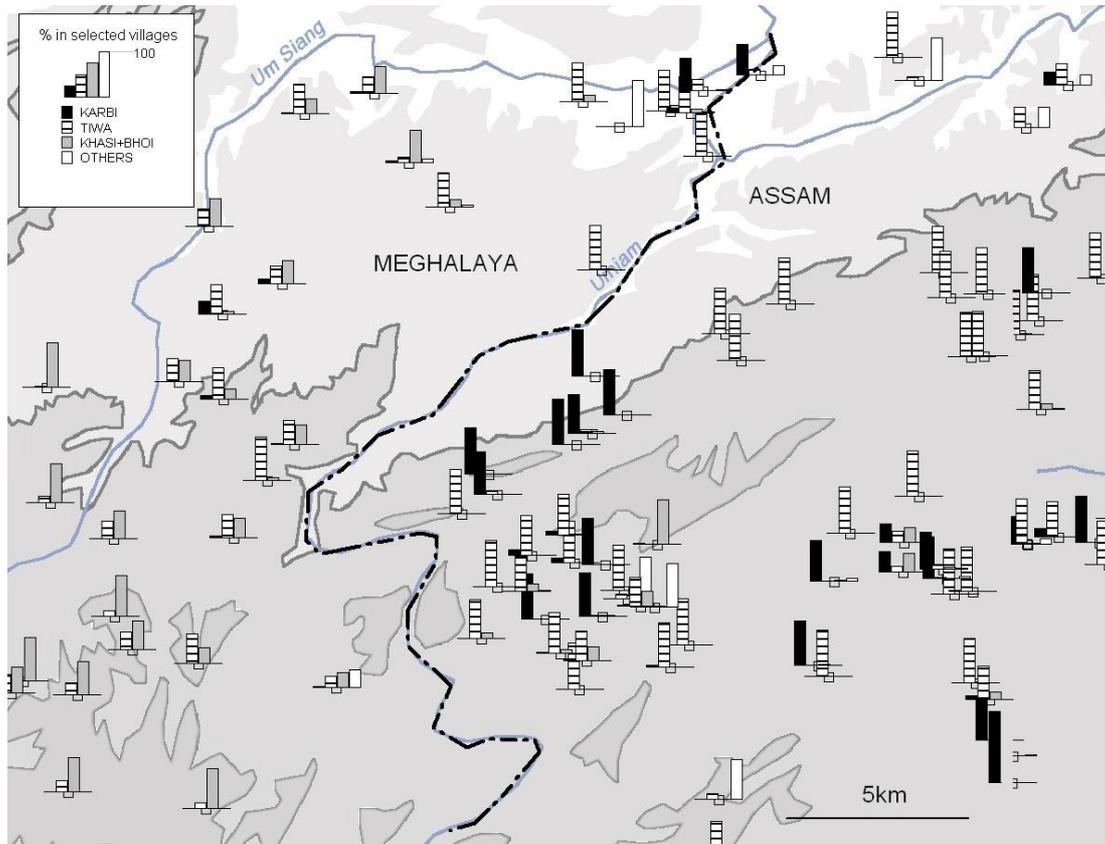


Illustration 4: Multiethnicity in sample villages of Meghalaya-Assam border (© Ph. Ramirez, CNRS)

We do not intend to go into the reasons for these differences which may have been shaped by the interplay of Christianisation and Scheduled Tribe policies.²⁶ Suffice to say that, in some parts, the limit between the two zones follows the border between Ri-Bhoi and Karbi-Anglong, i.e. between Meghalaya and Assam. Thus, in this area, the Assam-Meghalaya border neither corresponds to a limit between two ethnic territories, nor two mono-cultural areas, but between different types of heterogeneity. We will presently consider the first zone, the east of Ri-Bhoi district. Here, the linguistic landscape is more multicoloured than in other parts of Meghalaya. Although the local dialect of Khasi, Bhoi Khasi,²⁷ prevails both as the mother tongue and lingua franca, Karbi and Tiwa are spoken in some fifteen villages, to which one must add an atypical Assamese parlance used ironically not on the Assamese border but well inside the hills, in the Marngar locality. One must bear in mind that these languages belong to three entirely distinct families: Mon-Khmer (Khasi), Tibeto-Burmese (Tiwa, Karbi) and Indo-Aryan (Assamese).

Similarly, clanic affiliations are also more complex than elsewhere in Meghalaya, a fact that has a very significant impact on ethnic identity. As in many parts of India, ascribed identity is most generally a result of the perception of patronyms, or "titles". In tribal systems, these correspond to clans or to local clan segments. The general paradigm in North-East India is that a particular title indicates one and only one ethnic affiliation. This is not the case, however, in the area we are dealing with, where the ethnic connotation of names varies according to several factors, depending on the informant and the local or social context in which information is given. Thus, the same group might be referred to as either Bhoi, Khasi, Khasi-Bhoi, Karbi or Tiwa. The most interesting cases are provided by multiform titles: for example, people called Umbah in Meghalaya and those called Puma in Assam, see themselves as one and the same. Along the Assam-Meghalaya border, they assume several identities, sometimes in a combined manner. In Assam they introduce themselves as Tiwas, in Meghalaya either as Bhois or Khasis, and sometimes Lalungs.²⁸ By contrast, the Assamese Tiwas living some distance from the border claim that the Umbah are exclusively Tiwa; similarly the "mainland" Khasis might insist that the same Umbah are "pure Khasis" instead. And this is only one example among many others.

²⁶ See Ramirez, 2009, for examples of cultural diversity in the area.

²⁷ Bhoi Khasi differs from standard Khasi (i.e. Cherra Khasi) mainly in the position of the verb which is situated before the subject. For more on this dialect, see Nagaraja, 1993.

²⁸ "Lalung" is now perceived as derogatory by the Tiwas in Assam, although it is generally not the case in Meghalaya.

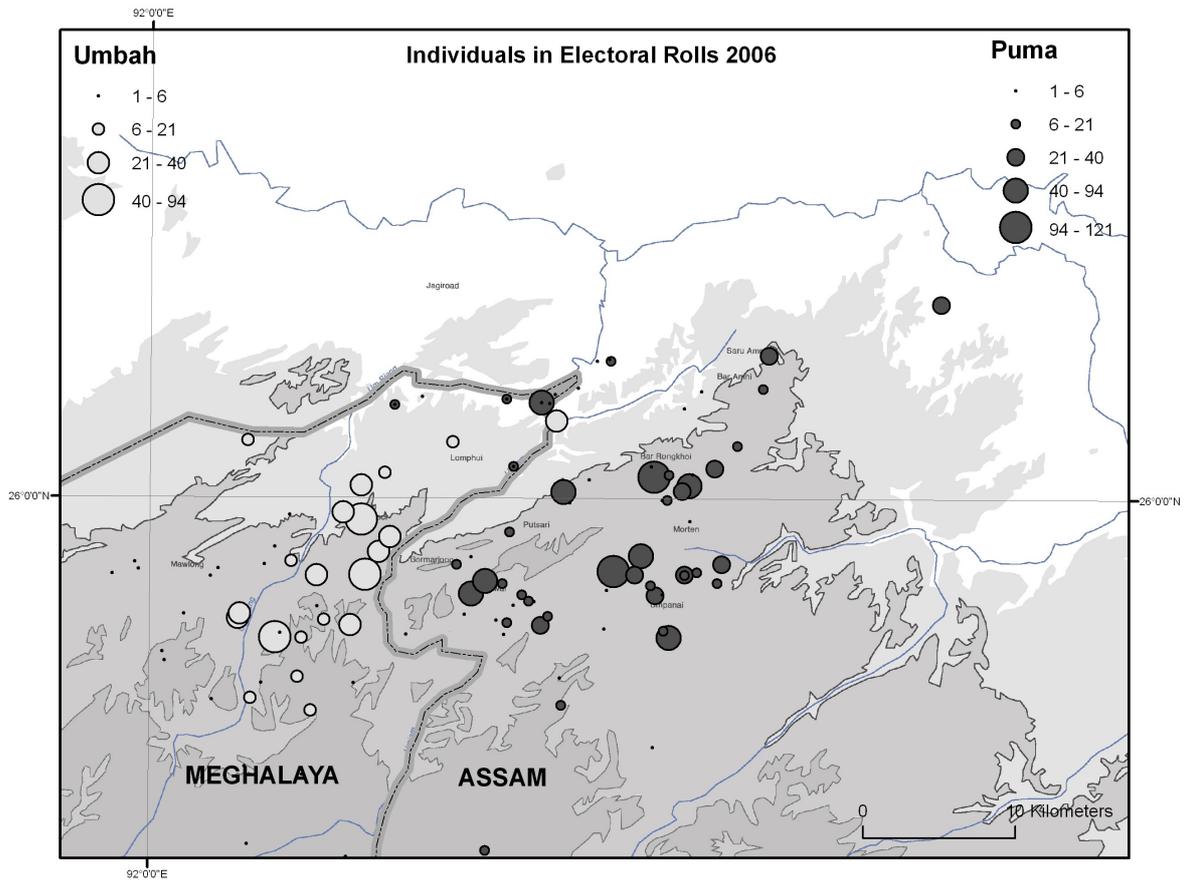


Illustration 5: Fig. 5: Borders, spellings and identity: the example of Puma (red) versus Umbah (green), Meghalaya and Assam Electoral Rolls, 2006.

Might one further qualify the inter-State border, in this particular area, by suggesting that it corresponds far less to a real cultural break or gap than to a transition between two ways of perceiving the intermediate groups? Dominant perceptions would impose a clear break where cultural variations are elusive. As we shall see, this would be accurate only if two further details were provided. Firstly, it seems that the cultural variations in question do not evolve in a linear way along a continuum, but through a mosaic of micro breaks. Secondly it must be stressed that dwellers in the border zones do not adhere easily to the dual categorizations emanating from the politico-ethnic centres.

The fundamental social unit in this part of Ri-Bhoi, as in the entire Khasi Hills Autonomous District, is a community of villages called *raid*. This administrative unit is part of the "traditional" political system in force within the Autonomous District: the States, *hima*, under the authority of a kingly person, *syiem*, are divided into a number of *raids*. *Raids* are ruled by representatives of clans, *basan*, and in Ri-Bhoi they are presided over either by a vassal chief called *syiem raid* or a *lyngdoh* priest. However old and whatever the origin of its inhabitants, the *raid* is one of the main references in social identity. Every *raid* formerly came under the authority of the Tiger-god Ryngku (Khla Ryngkhu) who punished crimes and to whom an annual sacrifice was offered. According to the *syiem* of Khyrim, all the *raids* in north-eastern Ri-Bhoi placed themselves willingly under his predecessors' authority in order to seek protection from the Jaintia tyranny.²⁹ As a matter of fact, it seems that Jaintias occupied the region several times during the seventeenth and nineteenth centuries. When the British arrived, it was under Shyllong and when the latter split a few years later (1853), the local *raids* were divided up between Myllem and Khyrim along a line running north-south.

The present *raids* display several attributes of modern administrative units, including a delineated territory. However, one might question how long this form has actually been in existence. The *raid* should be compared with other comparable institutions in the vicinity. In Karbi-Anglong, whether in the Karbi-speaking or Tiwa-speaking areas, some politico-ritual networks are found to be spatially discontinuous (see *infra*). In other words, the sum of links between a centre and its dependencies does not form a continuous spatial entity but rather a network interlaced with other similar networks. We suggest that this open and discontinuous pattern is older than the form the *raids* display nowadays. The Khasi hill *raids*, which remained real political bodies, would have been "territorialized" under the effect of modern administrative models. On the contrary, in the parts directly annexed to Assam in 1835, in which Karbi-Anglong falls, the same type of polities, deprived of their political functions would have kept the original morphology.

Nongkhap, or Nukhap *raid* (pop. 1700 in 2001) in north-eastern Ri-Bhoi is attached to Khyrim. It is fairly representative of the multiethnic village zones of Ri-Bhoi and more precisely of those that maintain close links with Assam. The etymology of "Nukhap" is very significant in this respect: *khap* is a Khasi term meaning "border", *nu* means "new" in Assamese. According to a local account, Nukhap remained uninhabited

²⁹ Interview with Syiem Khyrim, Feb. 2006. The date is not remembered exactly, but it must be remembered that it was before the partition of Shyllong, i.e. before 1853.

up until "300-400 years ago", before immigrants arrived from Assam and placed themselves under the protection of Syiem Khyrim. Why did they come? It is said that the first inhabitants were Karbi and that they reached Nukhap while fleeing "the Bodo king of the plains".³⁰ According to the head-priest (*lyngdoh*), his own family arrived from the Jaintia hills in 1618 after the Jaintias had overcome a "local tribe". Another informant described migration to Nukhap as a return to their origins: "We are people from the hills. We couldn't stay any longer in the plains". Without going into detail, it is worthwhile noting that such an association between tribal identity and the hills is gaining momentum in North-East India, while a large majority of tribals live in the plains. In keeping with a widespread model in Meghalaya, the existing villages of Nukhap claim to have come from a common founding village, Nongbah (Kh. "great village").³¹ From Nongbah Nukhap came the founders of the *raid*'s four villages. They were met by immigrants from Tiwa-speaking villages situated on the Assamese side. Nongbah Nukhap was finally abandoned after "the conversion". The *raid* experienced large-scale Christianisation in the first half of the twentieth century.³² All villages are now exclusively Presbyterian or Catholic. Following an initial period, when Christians were expelled from villages and regrouped, the remaining "pagans" (*jyntir*) had to choose in turn between conversion and exile. Beside the distribution of settlements, conversion had an obvious impact on culture and ethnicity. The influence of catechists preaching in the Khasi language and using Khasi books might have been decisive. Culturally, Christianisation might have taken the same path as a large movement of "Khasi-isation" generated by other factors such as the creation of Meghalaya and mass schooling. It might not be a generalised phenomenon in Ri-Bhoi, but in Nukhap the linguistic situation has evolved significantly over the last two generations. Bhoi Khasi has now become the only mother tongue, even though twenty years ago Karbi and Tiwa were still spoken in some houses. Today, these languages are understood nowhere in this *raid*. By contrast, just a couple of kilometres to the East, still within Meghalaya, in a fringe devoid of roads and teachers, Tiwa is the only language known to everyone.

In Nukhap, Khasi-Assamese bilingualism is associated with exchanges both upstream and downstream. Though a dependency of Khyrim, the largest Khasi State, Nukhap seems to be much more oriented towards Assam than Meghalaya. People only go to the district headquarters, Nongpoh, to settle administrative matters. Before the Jagiroad-Umsning road had been built (1975), villagers used to exclusively venture to markets in the Brahmaputra Valley: to Tapatuli and Jagiroad for rice and areca nuts, and once a year to *Jonbil mela* to barter roots for fish. Today, after each monsoon, Nukhap people still go down to Hariaburi, famous for its dried fish that keep a long time.

In border communities naturally turned towards the plains, the creation of Meghalaya has paradoxically weakened the links with Khasi States. The *syiems* had an obvious economic interest in the hill-plain borders: they used to exploit forest resources and to collect taxes on markets in the foothills, both through the local agents they appointed. The complete closure of forests and the drawing of a new boundary, together with the

³⁰ According to present-day knowledge, the Bodo, although the largest tribe in the plains, have never formed any State, at least under this designation. "Bodo king" might refer either to a Koch or Dimasa/Kachari ruler.

³¹ Nongbah's are root villages but not always the very first settlements. They are often ritual sites.

³² Most conversions took place between 1910 and 1960.

building of inner roads have noticeably reduced the Upland States' business opportunities in this area, land tax being non-existent in the Khasi hills. Thus, the little we know of Nukhap's history tells us mostly about outside contributions and exchanges.

The main feature which distinguishes the Bhoi *raids* from both Assam and the Upper country is the feeble assertion of any ethnic belonging. Nukhap inhabitants are hardly expansive on this topic. The label "Bhoi" is accepted by everyone. This acceptance may be a recent phenomenon, because in the early twentieth century the term was deemed pejorative in the eyes of the Bhois themselves and later remained a synonym of "ignorant" in the Khasi language.³³ More than elsewhere, the social context of speech is the decisive factor in assessing identity: when speaking with a Khasi speaker from the Upper country one calls oneself "Khasi Bhoi". On meeting an Assamese person, Karbi or Tiwa origins will be stressed instead. And "Bhoi" seems to be the name favoured when dealing with foreign anthropologists. There is no hidden strategy behind such opportunism. It truly reflects the social representations, which in this area are characterised by the conjunction of multiple ethnic affiliations. In Nukhap, social identity could be summarised in the following manner: one belongs first to a *raid*, within which one's original ethnic belonging is still remembered, yet not deliberately displayed. In the *raid*, language and customs are fairly uniform and are linked at the upper level to a large entity, "Bhoi", which is primarily defined by stressing the differences with the "Khasis", i.e. the "other Khasis": Khyriams, Pnars and Wars. On the other hand, cultural dissimilarities with groups residing in Assam, which are objectively more obvious, are not often pointed out. The reason might be that the scene on which ethnic identity is of relevance for the people of Ri-Bhoi is first of all Meghalaya, to which political belonging is widely assumed; in this respect cultural differences with Assam are not problematic. Finally, belonging to a traditional State (*hima*), be it Khyrim or Myllem, does not seem to correspond to any sense of identity, and this seems the case in the larger part of the Khasi hills.

The anthropological features of Nukhap are typical of many but not all *raids*. To the north, the border *raids* are, like Assam itself, compartmentalised into villages or hamlets asserting a single identity: "Khasi", "Karbi" or "Tiwa" – but not "Bhoi", as far as we know. Often, but not always, the original languages have survived with the Bhoi language. Here we reach the historical fringes between the highland and plain States, where political allegiances have been complex. In Myllem State for example, the geographical specificity of this belt has been acknowledged, and is still recognized by the Khasi Autonomous Council. According to law,³⁴ Myllem is divided into two parts: the "Highlands" (*ri-lum*: "land of the hills") and the "Lowlands" (*ri-them*), which come under different administrative structures. In Ri-Bhoi, the Lowlands are distributed among sixteen chiefs: three *lyngdoh raids*, eight *syiem raids* and five *bangthe raids*, each recruited from a particular clan. Two of the *syiems* are entitled "*syiem kuba*", which might well refer to the family of the Gobha raja, considered nowadays in Assam to be the "Tiwa king". One of the *raids*, Marngar, forms a linguistic isolate surrounded by entire Khasi and

³³ Cf. the dictionary edited by Nissor Singh, 1906: 11.

³⁴ Cf. Law passed by the Khasi Autonomous District Council in 2007: "Appointment and Succession of Syiem.Myllem".

Karbi-speaking zones, where a very peculiar form of Assamese is used.³⁵ Local people also assert a peculiar identity, both Khasi and Marngar, this latter ethnonym being found exclusively in these nine villages. Finally, the "*bongthe raids*" are specific to Myllem State. *Bongthe* or *bangthe* is the Karbi term for "big man", "chief". In Myllem, the clans into which *bongthe* are recruited have Karbi-sounding titles: Rongchon, Rongpei, Teron, Timung.

The five *bongthe raids* lie adjacent to Dimoria Kingdom, a foothill State sought after for decades by the Jaintias, the Khasi States and the Ahoms. It is now within the formal borders of Assam and its chiefs claim to be Karbi. The issue of sovereignty over Dimoria is not part of the several litigations between Assam and Meghalaya, but "Dumria" is however still mentioned in the official list of *syiem raids* under Myllem.³⁶ Moreover, the Khasi collective memory recalls the Khad âr bongthai, the "Twelve bongthai" confiscated by the British, never restored and still in Assam.³⁷ Conversely, parts of Myllem's *raids* are still considered by the Dimoria Rājā to be his own tributaries. One example is Marmain, or Marme as pronounced in Karbi.³⁸ All inhabitants of Marme bear titles generally identified as Karbi. The Karbi language is still widely used, although in sharp competition with Khasi and Bhoi. Most inhabitants are Christian. It is unquestionably the Karbi identity that dominates here, at least nowadays. People claim to be "Dumrali karbi", literally "Karbi of Dimoria", the generic designation for Karbis from the plains. Almost no reference is made to the Bhoi identity. According to Marme leaders, who are particularly active in promoting the Karbi cause in Meghalaya, the locality was previously part of Dimoria, which was only recently annexed to Myllem and thus to Meghalaya. Thus, in contrast to other *raids* with a Karbi component – Nukhap for example – which have adopted a Bhoi identity, Marme still perceives itself as a subset of a vanished polity. The creation of the Assam-Meghalaya border, far from severing the link with Dimoria, would have generated a nostalgic sense of belonging.

Culturally, Marme comes across as a transition between the Khasi-speaking hills and the Kamrupi Karbi-speaking parts of the Assam plains.³⁹ The transition, however, can be said to consist of one other component at least, if not more. Less than an hour's walk north of Marme, the Assam border runs through a village, Markhang, made up of 45 houses. The inhabitants bear Karbi titles of the kind found in Marme, but do not spontaneously assert a Karbi identity. They speak a Kamrupi Karbi with a heavily Assamized lexicon. Their main collective ritual has a rather Hindu feel about it: it is a sacrifice to "Mahadev, Kamika and Rongsundi".⁴⁰ Interestingly, Marme people, although all Christian, believe that those of Markhang have lost their Karbi identity.

The history of Markhang is narrated as a double migration: firstly "following a Gobha prince" down from modern Karbi-Anglong to the plains and then up to Marngar in the Khasi hills; secondly from Marngar back to the present location in the plains. This route

³⁵ See Ramirez 2009.

³⁶ KHADC, op.cit.

³⁷ Cf. Syiemlieh, 1989: 67. In 1830 the "Rajah of Khyrim" relinquished "his former claims on the boundary of Desh Doomoroah", but was assigned some land near Sonapur market for trading: Aitchinson, 1931: 131.

³⁸ See Ramirez, 2009.

³⁹ Kamrupi Karbi refers to the Karbi dialects spoken in the plains.

⁴⁰ Mahadev is a name for Siva, Kamika might well be Kāmākhyā, the most famous Goddess in Assam, and Rongsundi literally means "healing" in Assamese.

involved settling in rather different natural environments, which is not at all exceptional in the stories of origins we have collected. There are many reasons for these comings and goings. We will evoke some of them below. In a regional context of high mobility, the plain villages bordering the hills, such as Markhang, have been particularly exposed to countless ebbs and flows, whether in terms of population, political sovereignty or ethnic identity.

Lokkikok is a Tiwa-speaking village in Assam situated only 10 km from Markhang, in a similar geographic setup. This is how villagers narrate their arrival:

"We came down from Murji Kunji, near Marjong in the hills, to search for land. We settled first in Jagiroad Deosal, then in Lokkikok in 1942. The place had been inhabited by Karbis. They had stolen and shared among themselves the buffaloes belonging to the Dimoria King. A woman, angry about not getting a share, went to the king, who cursed and expelled them. They left after cursing the place and settled in Belkhuri, 2 km downstream. When we arrived in the area looking for a possible site, one of the Karbis showed us Lokkikok. At first we suffered from numerous diseases. We finally found out that a local spirit was responsible, the Tortoise Eater Lord (Kaso Khua Gohain). A cult was established and the troubles stopped".

These few words sum up the common historical aspects of the peopling of this region: shifting cultivation, political conflicts, morbidity, setting up of new cults and moves from the hills to the plains. Only banishment for incest is missing here. The route taken starts from Marjong, in the Tiwa hills, then makes a first stop at the most important Tiwa shrine in the plains, Deosal, near Gobha, and next, in a very typical move, runs along the foothills for 20 km to Lokkikok. This narrative somehow completes the route of the Gobha outbound migrations depicted by the Markhang and Marngar people. It illustrates the plains-to-hills migrations, which are seldom evoked in literature. We have come across several such moves, which took place at the turn of the twentieth century. Though this might be an ancient and regular phenomenon, let us try to determine what might have been its context in the late nineteenth century.

Northern Bhoi Migrations, examples

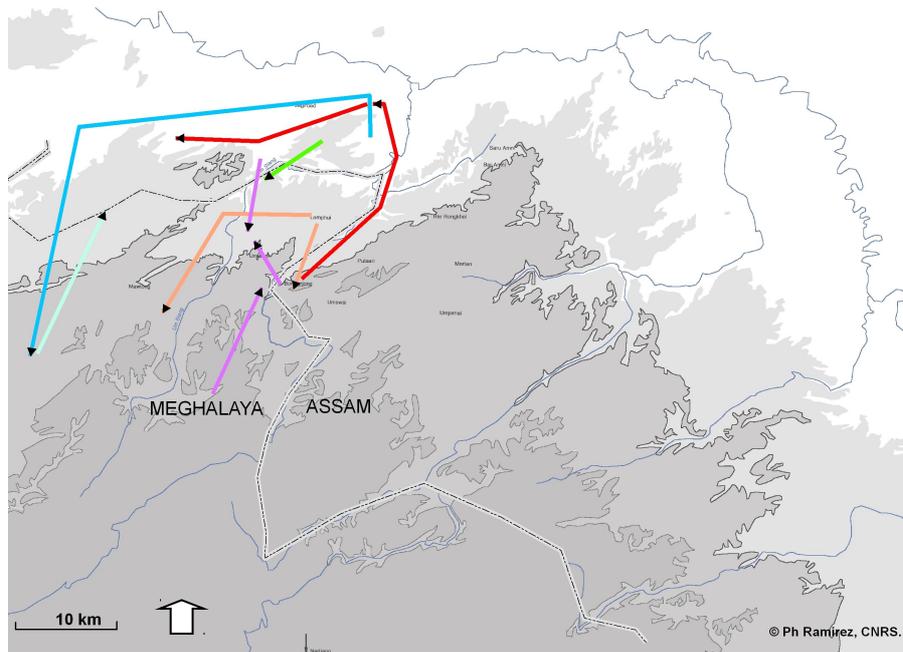


Illustration 6: examples of migrations to northern Bhoi in the nineteenth century (the colours of arrows refer to different narratives). (© Ph. Ramirez, CNRS)

In the nineteenth century, slash and burn was the sole method of farming in northern Meghalaya.⁴¹ Yet amazingly, the need for land is rarely mentioned as a factor of migration in local histories. Either land was plentiful enough to avoid moving villages, or the practice was regular enough not to be specially noticed. Another factor which immediately comes to mind because regularly mentioned in the Assamese chronicles is epidemics. The scale of some pandemics was such that it certainly had a decisive impact on the demographic map of Middle Assam and Khasi-Jantia hills. However, given the present state of knowledge, the effects are still difficult to assess, at least in the case of plains-to-hills migrations. Assam was hit for several consecutive years between 1890 and 1903 by an outbreak of *kala azar* (leishmaniasis), which is endemic in North-East India.⁴² Documented in the Garo hills since 1869, it broke out in Kamrup and Nowgong



Illustration 7: a sandfly of the phlebotomus genus, the vector of leishmania (Wikimedia Commons)

districts in 1888 and 1897. At the same period, the area was hit by a smallpox (1898) and cholera (1900) epidemic.⁴³ Finally, the earthquake of 12th June 1897 further weakened the public health situation and resulted, moreover, in vast areas of arable land being covered by sand.⁴⁴

Between 1891 and 1901, the total population of the Assam plains grew from 2.6 to 2.7 million (+6%). Yet the population declined sharply in the districts of central Assam: Kamrup lost 45,000 inhabitants (-7%), and Nowgong 86,000 (-25%) which, for these two districts, meant a total deficit of over 250,000 lives. The plains localities next to Ri-Bhoi (Nij Teteliya, Gobha, Mayong, Raha) lost around 40% of their population.⁴⁵ The lower hills were also affected: Duar Amla (-14%), Rangrang-Nomati (-33%). Thus, at least a third of Nowgong district's population either died or fled.⁴⁶ No district in India had ever experienced such losses in the great epidemics of the late nineteenth century, not even during the plague of 1896-97. Where did the survivors flee to? Large displacements occurred towards Upper Assam and the North Bank (Sibsagar,

⁴¹ Chattopadhyay 1988: 59; Gurdon 1914: 40.

⁴² Until the invention of treatment in 1922, *kala azar* mortality stood at 95%. (Sanyal 1982).

⁴³ Allen 1905: 214-215; Allen 1902a: 23-24.

⁴⁴ The 1897 earthquake provoked internal migration within the hills. Nakane (1967: 112) gives some examples for southern Meghalaya.

⁴⁵ Census of India (Allen 1902b).

⁴⁶ It is not easy to determine whether certain groups were more affected than others. The Tiwas (Lalungs), who live mainly in the area hit by *kala azar*, definitely show a noticeable decline (52,000 to 32,000) but according to Allen (1902a: 82), part of them might have converted to Koch.

Lakhimpur, Darrang). The Khasi hills seem to have been relatively less affected, since their population was still on the rise during that period (6-7%). However, the Census does not reveal any significant move between the plains and the hills. If migrations did take place, either they were not on a massive scale or they were only temporary. Moreover, the great pandemics of the late nineteenth century did not entirely spare the hills.⁴⁷ Thus, while this particular outbreak of *kala azar* emptied the foothills of their population, it does not seem to have generated significant waves of migration towards present-day Ri-Bhoi. At least this is not obvious in the statistical data available. Yet, what can be assessed is the size of such phenomena, and we can imagine that at other periods of time they were more marked, as in 1834-35, when most villages in the Karbi hills had to move.⁴⁸

The relationship between ritual practices and migrations is rather unexpected. According to certain indigenous accounts, the abolishment of certain ritual practices has made survival impossible in some localities. Soon after Independence, the Assamese police were ordered to do away with human sacrifices in the former "excluded" zones in which the British did not apply the general law. This was the case of Sonaikuchi. Some villagers offered goats instead, others ceased to worship. Mysterious deaths started to occur and were attributed to the wrath of the local gods. Some families, terrified, fled to the Bhoi hills.

Finally, one of the major causes of migrations has obviously been the development and decline of economic opportunities. Two particular cases may be mentioned: in the early twentieth century, hundreds of families came down from the Jaintia hills, attracted by recent developments involving lac cultivation and trade. Most of them left when the prices collapsed after the Second World War. Similarly, in the early twentieth century, thousands of Nepali settled in Meghalaya, including Ri-Bhoi, where they specialised in milk production. They have almost disappeared from the Khasi hills since the xenophobic riots of 1987.⁴⁹

The spatial mobility of Bhoi groups must be put into some perspective along with some features of their social structures. The potential of these local polities (villages or *raids*) to integrate newcomers, whatever their culture, resides in their structure. The Ri-Bhoi *raids* are governed by rules common to all Khasi hills, though we will not go into detail here.⁵⁰ Many parallels with other political systems in Assam may also be drawn. The *raid* is first of all an association of local lineages, *kpoh*, which reside in a number of villages that have broken away from a "great village", *nongbah*. Each village has a chief (*rongbah shnong*), elected by the village assembly (*darbar shnong*). But at the *raid* level, authority is vested in the *basans*, who are the representatives of the lineages, mostly the founding lineages. Yet the system is flexible enough to accommodate late settlers as well. In Ri-Bhoi, there is no formal distinction between first and new settlers, as in some

⁴⁷ In 1898-99, the hills particularly suffered from a high mortality rate attributed to the great 1897 earthquake. (Allen 1902a: 24; 1906: 56-57).

⁴⁸ Hunter 1879 II: 189.

⁴⁹ The Census of India 1931 (Mullan 1932: 265) counts 6,932 Nepalese in the Khasi States with an increase of 2,939 since the 1921 Census.

⁵⁰ See Gurdon 1907: 68-75, Bareh 1967: 39ff.; Nongkynrih (2002: 66-88) gives a detailed description of the local political setup. For the Jaintia political apparatus, see Gassah 1998.

other areas of Meghalaya.⁵¹ The *basan* assembly is based on an organic structure where each lineage is hereditarily assigned an administrative position. In some *raids*, the *basans* delegate government tasks to a territorial priest, the *lyngdoh*, or to a lower level *syiem*, the *syiem raid*.

Now, in Ri-Bhoi the rules for admission into the *raid* and its assembly do not take into account ethnic affiliation. Rights are defined by belonging to lineages, on the basis of patronymics. Thus, the assembly of Nukhap *raid* consists of twelve *basans* from nine lineages, out of which seven bear names commonly considered to be Karbi (e.g. Phanchu/Phangcho) or Tiwa (e.g. Umbah/Puma). In any case, whatever the ethnic group villagers associate with these names, this will not challenge the legitimacy of the bearers to reside in the *raid*.

Similarly, ethnic or cultural differences do not preclude matrimonial relationships. Interethnic marriages are almost totally absent from anthropological literature on the region. This might not be a very ancient practice but it is now widespread, at least in Ri-Bhoi, Morigaon and West Karbi-Anglong. It seems that interethnic alliances are quite common in North-East India and are associated with a widening of local matrimonial networks. In Northern Ri-Bhoi, village endogamy and *raid* endogamy still prevail, as is the case throughout the Khasi hills.⁵² This is, not however, incompatible with interethnic unions. In strictly matrilineal and matrilocal communities, as among Upland Khasis, any "trace" of external husbands disappears, since their titles are not passed down to the next generation, and the situation is similar with wives' titles among patrilineal and patrilocal groups. In Ri-Bhoi however, where both descent and residence systems coexist – we shall come back to this later – village endogamy may perpetuate among lineages of different ethnic affiliations. In certain areas, such as Raid Nukhap, there have been so many mixed unions, that it is difficult to decide what should be retained as an "interethnic marriage". This, incidentally, is of no relevance in this society, since the limits of permitted unions are mostly those of the "tribal" category: any "tribal" may be a possible match. This rule seems to be increasingly common in North-East India and might be the sign of the genesis of a "meta-tribe".

How are descent systems compatible with these interethnic marriages, when they bring together patrilineal and matrilineal families? As a matter of fact, this opposition seems to be largely inaccurate in Ri-Bhoi and the Tiwa hills. In 1905's Nowgong Gazetteer, B.C. Allen commented a Lalung (Tiwa) narrative, found in the Ahom chronicles⁵³ and still common today, depicting the Lalungs "as moving back from the hills into the plains, as they disliked the ruling of the Khasi chiefs that inheritance should go to through the female line."⁵⁴ Allen was obviously amazed on hearing the story and pointed out that "their own rules of inheritance are, however, strange. A woman may either enter her husband's clan or the husband may enter that of the wife, but all property and children of the marriage belong to the clan which was adopted at the time of the wedding". This could apply today not only to the Hill Tiwas but also to all the

⁵¹ Nongkynrih (2002: 69-71) points out that in several villages of the Sohra region, access to village positions was restricted to the "founders" (*nongseng shnong*), as opposed to the newcomers (*shongthap*: lit. temporary settlers).

⁵² Nakane, 1967: 113-114.

⁵³ Bhuyan 1932: 228.

⁵⁴ Allen, 1905: 83.

Bhois. It is rather surprising that we still retain matrilineality as the main feature of both Khasi and Hill Tiwa societies without introducing regional nuances. If it is true that most Khasi speakers in the Khasi hills and most Tiwa speakers are matrilineal, it is not the case among the Bhois, who explain that "one inherits one's mother's name when born in her house and one's father's name when born in his house". In other words, descent does not come first and, moreover, does not depend on ethnicity. It is the choice of residence which determines the transfer of a title, positions and properties. Moreover, the choice of residence is not imposed by a fixed social rule, but depends on the will of the families concerned, according to their obligations and preferences. It is obvious that such a principle does not prevent the coexistence of two descent modes in the same house, a case for which we have plenty of illustrations.

Chie Nakane's work on Khasi and Garo matrilineality⁵⁵ does not mention the possibility of patrilocality or the possibility that residence determines descent. Current Khasi customary law places matrilineality at the heart of Khasi identity and this has had very practical consequences: in 2008, Waibha Kyndiah, a politician and ironically the son of the Minister of Tribal Affairs, had to withdraw from the local elections after his Khasi status was withdrawn by the Khasi Hills Autonomous District Council. The reason was that he did not use his mother's name.⁵⁶ However, the same KHADC law does, "under certain conditions", allow for the quality of Khasi to be passed down from father to son, either keeping the father's name or adopting a new clan name; these conditions specify, among others, that father and son "observe and are governed by Khasi matrilineal system of lineage...".⁵⁷ If we consider the effective practices, regional distinctions need to be made. In the Khyntiam and War zones, matrilineality is obviously of structural importance, reflected in the fundamental figure of the grandmother as well as in the roles of elder sisters and maternal uncles. In the Jaintia hills, matrilineality is not associated with matrilocality but with natalocality instead, since after marriage husband and wife remain in their respective mother's home.⁵⁸ Nevertheless, these differences do not prevent immigrants from the Khyntiam zone or Jaintia hills from easily adapting to Bhoi's descent system. This may be facilitated by two social constants in the Khasi hills: a strong fissionary tendency and a short genealogical memory.⁵⁹

Although Ri-Bhoi falls under KHADC authority, and although the Tiwa hills had been under Jaintia's authority before British rule, in both these areas matrilineality is a tendency, not an absolute principle. If we postulate that in Ri-Bhoi and the Tiwa hills, descent is determined neither by culture nor by ethnicity, but by residence, then it is much easier to understand how patrilineality and matrilineality may be combined. We suggest considering that these societies follow ambilineal descent. Ambilineality may have emerged following contact between patrilineal and matrilineal groups, although there are no clues to assert it. Nevertheless, the absence of a strict unilinear descent enables matrimonial relationships to be established and maintained among groups whose

⁵⁵ Nakane, 1967.

⁵⁶ The Shillong Times, 6 feb 2008.

⁵⁷ KHADC 1997: 3(c).

⁵⁸ Gurdon 1907: 76; Lamare 2005: 19.

⁵⁹ Cf. Nakane 1967: 131 and Nongkynrih 2002: 51.

ethnicity is – really or ideally – associated with distinct modes of descent.

One of the most striking manifestations of the weakness of ethnic compartmentalization in Ri-Bhoi is the trans-ethnic phratries. Exogamic phratries exist in the Khasi social system, where they result either from the association of two clans (*teb kur*) or from the adoption of a child (*ting kur*).⁶⁰ In Ri-Bhoi, phratries comprise clans that are perceived to belong to different ethnicities. It is not always clear whether the entities involved are descent groups or patronymic groups. Some claim to be of the same clan (kh. *shi kur*), stemming from the same apical Grandmother, (*Iawbei-tyrrai*), others claim they belong to distinct clans which "amalgamated" (*teb kur*) and thus became exogamous. The social implications are the same however: that some individuals simultaneously claim a different ethnicity and a kinship relation of a kind that will forbid them to marry. This involves much more than the bearers of homophonic titles. While it is not surprising that Muktieh (Khasi)⁶¹ and Mithi (Tiwa) are exogamous, what about the other components in the same phratry: Lumphuid (Tiwa/Bhoi), Ingti (Karbi), Syngkli (Bhoi), Kurbah (Khasi), Majaw (Khasi) and Basaiawmoit (Khasi)? Some informants describe the relationship between these names as a relation of "equality", for example: Khwait (Bhoi)=Khymdeit (Bhoi)=Malang (Tiwa)=Mayong=Markhap (Bhoi/Khasi)=Muksher=Solen. There are thought to be a dozen phratries in Ri-Bhoi, which would include most region-specific patronymics.

As in the case of ambilineal descent, it is difficult to assert that there exists a determinist link between migrations and trans-ethnic phratries. These could be seen as mutations of Khasi and Tiwa phratries, which would have lost their ethnic belonging as a consequence of "local globalization". However, I think it reasonable to allege that they are rather the remnants of an old social system dissociating ethnicity and descent.

The multi-ethnicity of phratries and matrimonial networks might have extended well beyond the actual areas where it has survived. It might have been associated with a human geography characterized by high mobility and the interlacing of village networks. The village network is a general feature of settlement organisation in this region, whether in a multi-ethnic or mono-ethnic environment. The *raid* is a true network, since, as we have seen, its inhabitants claim they all come from the same "great village". Similarly, certain particular *raids* are considered as "elders", as original sites from where other *raids* emerged, such as Iapngar for the *raids* of north-east Ri-Bhoi. The situation is similar in the Jaintia hills, where villages fall into two different categories: *shnong barim*, ancient villages, and *shnongbri*, farm-villages which stemmed from the former. How is an ancient village in fact different? It has a *lyngdoh* priest and it houses the matrilineage deities, which means that people from farm-villages have to go to their native village to worship them.⁶² A very similar arrangement is found in the Tiwa hills. Each Tiwa perceives himself and is perceived by others as belonging to one of the seven major villages, *krain baro*. These are the only "true" villages, those that have a *loro* priest. They are supposed to be the oldest settlements, although this is not always the case due to various

⁶⁰ Gurdon, 1907: 78. Cf. Nongkynrih 2002: 41 on these associations. Phratries also exist among the Tiwas, where their composition is institutionalized.

⁶¹ When available, we indicate in brackets the ethnic identity commonly asserted by these title bearers.

⁶² Chattopadhyay 1988: 69.

divisions and mergers. Villages without *loro* are called *kunji phara* or *pham*, "extensions", and each of them is linked to a founding village.⁶³ The largest network centred around Bormarjong village links sixteen settlements straddling Meghalaya and Assam.

Finally, the traditional Karbi political system relies on a sophisticated fabric of village networks. Ronghang, Chingthong and Amri, which are considered to be the three original geographical cradles of the Karbis, each come under the jurisdiction of four, three and two councils of dignitaries respectively, who act as judges and supervise rituals for a set of villages.⁶⁴ These functionaries reside in a sacred village, which definitely evokes the Khasi *nongbah* although it is not considered to be a founding village. At the lower levels, villages are organized into complex clusters (*longri*) governed by a hierarchy of local chiefs (*babe*) emanating from specific clans. The spatial distribution of village clusters does not follow a simple juxtaposition, but often a series of interweavings.⁶⁵ Since the eighteenth century at least, the Jaintia political domination has certainly contributed to the modelling of Karbi as well as Tiwa supra-village structures. A sign of this influence may be found in similarities between the titles of functionaries in the Jaintia, Tiwa, Karbi and Bhoi areas.⁶⁶ Whether they have been imposed by the Jaintia State or inspired by a common model, these institutions are obviously related to each other by a common "politico-ritual culture"—Leach would have spoken of a "ritual language".⁶⁷ Ethnic revivalism has not uprooted them and, on the contrary, they have found a new legitimacy in Karbi-Anglong Autonomous District. As a matter of fact, these ancient political structures are not based on "Karbi", "Tiwa" or "Khasi" principles, but on the tribal principle of local power-sharing by descent groups.

Conclusion

The new territories of North-East India are being created on an ethnic basis. The ideal model pursued is clearly an ethnically and culturally homogenous Nation-State. Ethnic polities which have been established, or are sought after, are supposed to stem from timeless spatial sovereignties. Without judging the legitimacy of these claims, it is worthwhile noting that many local data point to models which are the opposite of such representations. In several areas of the North-East, local communities are not the subset of a particular ethnicity, but association of lineages asserting various ethnicities or none at all. As a matter of fact, these local communities look upon themselves as small multi-ethnic nations. If such societies represent relics, this would mean that in part of North-East India at least, the States had no strict ethnic basis, that a change of ethnicity was common and that ethnicity itself was not compulsory. If, on the contrary, we are dealing with the product of a recent intermingling of populations, then it must at least be admitted that the boundaries between ethnic groups are far less firmly rooted than we

⁶³ The term *pham* certainly has a link with the Assamese *pam*: "land newly occupied at a distance from home" (Hemkos 2006: 676).

⁶⁴ Interestingly enough, the head of each council is called *lindok* and has many functions in common with the "Khasi" *lingdob*.

⁶⁵ For a short discussion on the Karbi political system, see Ramirez 2007: 99-101.

⁶⁶ Beyond *lingdob/lindok*: *doloi*, *pator*, *basan*, *sangot*. Some of these terms look Indo-Aryan, but are not easily traceable in Assam or Bengal.

⁶⁷ Leach, 1954: 101-102.

generally suspect.

The perception of ethnicity depends both on the spatial point of view and on the spatial focus. Seen from the centre, like Shillong for the Khasi hills, one may feel that people sharing the same ethnic identities correspond to obvious cultural entities, with geographical cohesion and a historical depth. Yet as one gets closer to the margins, heterogeneity grows in linguistic as well as cultural and identity fields, though in various forms and on different scales. This does not mean that the anthropological landscape is amorphous. Distinctions emerge among different configurations of multi-ethnicity, for example in the contrast between mixed villages and mosaics of mono-ethnic villages. Nonetheless, anthropological territories, whatever their definition, rarely coincide with current political territories. As ethnic groups, the Karbis, Khasis and Tiwas are present in significant numbers on both sides of the border between an "officially Khasi territory" and an "officially Karbi territory".

Can the idiosyncrasies of these areas be explained by their location on the margins of major and clearly identifiable political and cultural poles? In this case, they would be mere transitional areas, zones of compromise, of mingling, where specificities become blurred. This would in itself be a finding that would run counter to the very common image of a compartmentalized cultural landscape. However, it would be necessary to explain why this transition zone does not take the shape of a regular continuum and how the discontinuities appeared: migrations, ethnic and religious conversions, political conquest, economic change... The local representations of history lead us on to another track, that of a true "marginal" space, where cultures, identities and State authority constantly undergo a redefinition, a space which the "Three Kings" or "Three Borders" metaphor does indeed effectively illustrate. Much more than a space of contested ethnicities or of deculturation, the Three Borders would be one of the last portions of a multi-ethnic and multicultural space caught nowadays between the conquering territories of States and ethnicities.⁶⁸

The anthropological situation prevailing at the Three Borders almost represents a counter-model opposed to the ethnic exclusivism which has affected North-East India over the last four decades. This movement has materialized in the form of new political territories, the States and Autonomous Districts. Yet if my presumptions are right, ethnicization has also transformed the perception of the territories inherited from the past. Ancient polities are increasingly represented as historical manifestations of the spatial rights of such or such an ethnicity. As formulated by Hobsbawm, Gellner or Smith,⁶⁹ the ruling elite imposes or inspires a cultural model among the dwellers of a territory so that finally they perceive themselves as part of a single body.

If we take the Three Borders as a testimony of the past, the recent spatial compartmentalization has brought about another rupture: the territories that are being imposed consist of continuous spaces. Here also, social representations have been largely conditioned by the Nation-State model. According to this model, polity might be

⁶⁸ This model would be the multi-ethnic version of the "bridge & buffer" model by which Roy Burman (1994 : 81-91) explains the formation of tribal groups.

⁶⁹ Hobsbawm 1983: 1-14, Gellner 1986, Smith 1986: 77.

conceptualized only as a space, not as a network. And it would only be a continuous space, i.e. not intersecting with other spaces on the same scale. We have seen that several present-day societies in the area are still organized – or were organized not so long ago – on the basis of interwoven village networks. This form of organisation is incompatible with the administrative grid of modern States, which require linear and tight limits. When such grids are imposed, networks are being severed by new boundaries – as happened on the Meghalaya-Assam border – creating enclaves which the States are striving to reduce.⁷⁰ Paradoxically, if Ri-Bhoi margins carry the remains of vanished multi-ethnic societies, they also inspire a vast meta-tribal process which may be detected nowadays in matrimonial networks. Inter-ethnic marriages illustrate developments which go counter to ethnicization and which may provoke its complete redefinition. In the near future, they may design new social entities, both egalitarian and endogamous, transcending the ethnic and territorial compartmentalisation imposed by ethno-nationalisms. Finally, the discovery of these political forms, both archaic and modern, prompt us to reconsider the way North-East Indian societies have been approached so far, starting with the ethnic group.⁷¹

⁷⁰ The nationalities policy in the USSR provides an interesting point of comparison. With the aim of taking into account the spatial imbrications of ethnicities in the Caucasus, territorial enclaves were multiplied. Cf. Hirsch, 2005: 145; Martin 2001.

⁷¹ Striking parallels may be drawn with the tribal zones of Pakistan and Myanmar: "Using self-identification as the critical criterion of ethnic identity, it should thus be perfectly possible for a small group of Pathans to assume the political obligations of membership in a Baluch tribe, or the agricultural and husbandry practices of Kohistanis, and yet continue to call themselves Pathans." (Barth 1970: 24); "Generally speaking, the perennial nature of the clans and lineages from the colonial period up to now contrasts with the reification of ethnicity involved both in the process of Christianisation and in the contemporary pan-kachin movement..." (Robinne, 2007: 284).

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