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“Belonging to the Borders: uncertain identities in Northeast India”

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Ernest Gellner (1983) considered that, like nations, ethnic groups were ‘invented’. The analogy is all the more accurate in that the nation-state model, at least in the form it had in nineteenth-century European nationalisms, is the main model pursued by most ethnic politicians. They regard ethnic groups as true nations not only in their nature – homogeneous, specific, and immutable communities – but also in the rights they should be entitled to – an exclusive territory and political sovereignty over it. Nevertheless, the most recent history shows such fictions often becoming realities, in the form of identities that ordinary people sincerely assume for themselves. So, if ethnic groups are invented, or at least ‘re-invented’, two questions emerge: firstly, out of what original elements and by what processes are they shaped? And secondly: how did the social identities look before that, what type of communities did people feel that they then belonged to?

In an article written for the fiftieth anniversary of *Political Systems of Highland Burma*, I insisted on the diversity of identity models, taking the example of three cases from Northeast India.¹ I suggested that to understand anything about the mechanisms of identity in this particular area, one had to admit the dissociation between social structures, cultural patterns, and cultural practices, thus going beyond the confusion that contemporary identity discourses obviously entertained between these three levels. I will follow in this direction here, both in providing more examples illustrating the diversity of identities in the Northeast and also in testing the usefulness of the concept of ‘belonging’ in this respect.

I won’t abandon the notion of ‘identity’. Despite its obvious overuses it is absolutely needed to account for realities that cannot be easily looked upon as mere

¹ Ramirez 2007.

instrumental discourses. I feel all the more easy with the concept of identity, i.e. social identity, in that I reject all its essentialist assumptions. Identity is obviously a matter of perception, representation, and discourse, and it is by nature subjective: identity is not the 'true nature' of social groups, it is definitely the assertion by series of individuals that they form such or such a community. Now the representations shaping social identities rely on the perception of – true or seemingly – cultural similarities and the sharing of certain spaces, institutions, and practices. It is these perceived affinities that may be termed 'belongings'. Barth was absolutely right in asserting that identity is 'constructed'; but such a construction relies heavily on a pre-existing social – and natural – framework. Now if the identity processes are relatively flexible, this is not the case with the spaces, cultures, social structures, and institutions the concept refers to. One of our main objects here will be to illustrate several atypical local cases where dominant ethnicities stumble on inherited belongings.

Ethnicities versus Cultural Complexity: The Bhoi Region

To analyse the relationships between identity and belonging in the Northeast, I suggest, rather than starting from particular 'ethnic groups', considering a particular area. We will look at a belt of low hills (<700m) spanning the area between the Meghalaya plateau and the Brahmaputra plains and corresponding roughly to Ri-Bhoi District, State of Meghalaya. This area is close to both Guwahati and Shillong, two major administrative, economic, and university centres. However, it has the reputation of being 'interior' and 'remote', and its anthropology is very poorly known. As a rough introduction, we could tell how this part of Northeast India is very commonly depicted: Eastern Meghalaya would be the home of the Khasi Jaintia, speaking Mon-Khmer languages and following 'matrilineality'. Karbi-Anglong, more towards the east, would be the country of the Karbi, whose language is Tibeto-Burmese and who are patrilinear. This simple ethno-linguistic picture corresponds in fact to the dominant one, resulting from a kind of compromise between the views promoted by the ethnic elites of the most populous groups. The 'ethnic lands' picture suggests that clear-cut boundaries exist among those groups. We will see that this is true neither of cultural divisions, nor of social structures, nor of ethnic divisions. To say the least, this part of Northeast India is a complex one. To describe it as

'multiethnic' would not be wrong at a very broad level, but much more hazardous when trying to qualify the local situations: as we will see below, many villages cannot be accurately said to be either 'mono-ethnic' or 'multi-ethnic', because their inhabitants do not seem to perceive themselves in ethnic terms. In other villages, ethnic identities obviously exist; but they do not always match with specific cultures or social organizations. And finally, whether this is a cause or a consequence of ethnic complexity, the matrimonial, political, and ritual relationships among communities bearing different identities are multifarious.

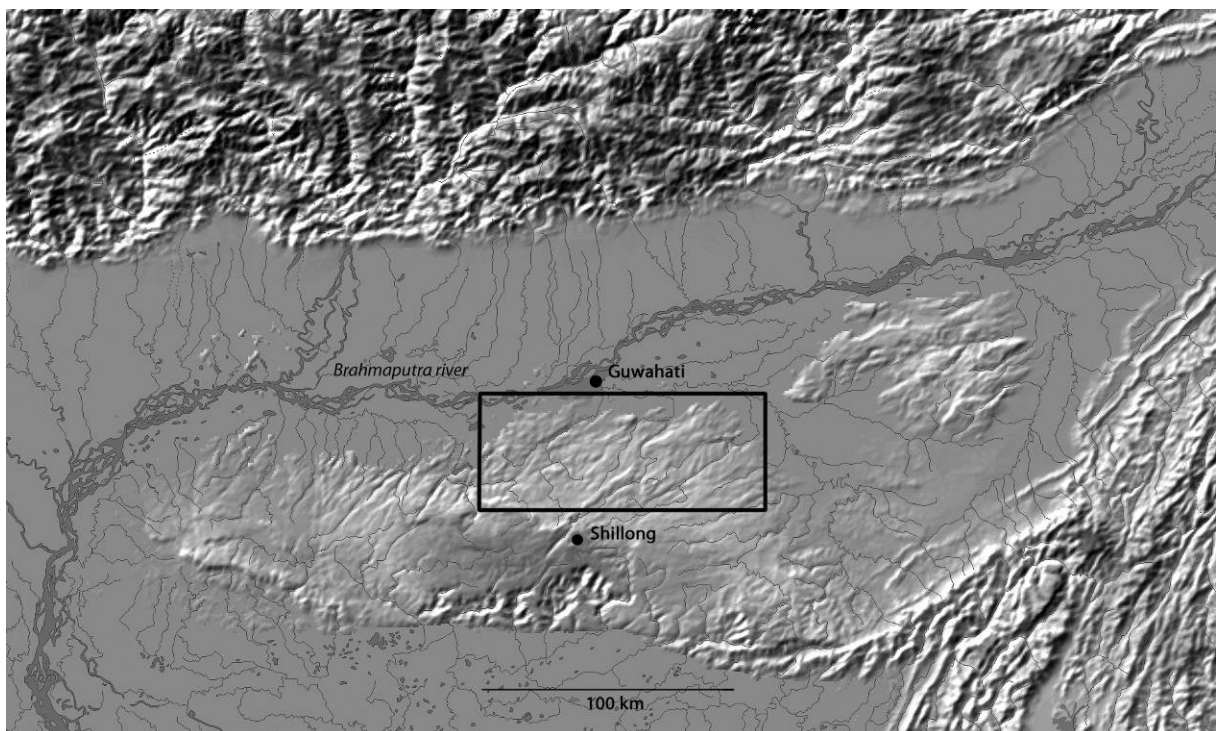


Fig. 4.1 Approximate location of the Bhoi area in Northeast India

In his classical monograph on the Khasi, P.R.T. Gurdon mentioned in several instances the 'Bhoi', on whom he gave indications that sounded contradictory.² Some of them were entirely wrong as we know today; however Gurdon's confusion gives a clue to the complexity of the overlappings between languages, cultures, and labels. Thus, he asserted in his very first pages that the term 'Bhoi' is 'a territorial name

² Gurdon 1990[1906].

rather than tribal'.³ Soon afterwards, describing the general setting, he mentioned the 'Bhoi-Khasi' as one of the 'five Khasi groups' (Khasi, Synteng or Pnar, Wàr, Bhoi, and Lynngam) and added that the 'Bhoi' of Jinthong, Mynri, and Rynghong subdivisions were not Khasi, but Mikir. In modern terms, Bhoi would thus designate a geographical area inhabited by a 'multiethnic' population, including Mikir and Bhoi-Khasi.

Nevertheless, in other instances, Gurdon describes Bhoi as corresponding to a specific culture: houses built on high posts, a taboo on the use of the sickle – they harvested by hand – and retention of the sleeveless coats that their neighbours had abandoned.⁴ Moreover, if Bhoi-Khasi were Khasi in one way or another, they were also discriminated against by other Khasi. According to Gurdon, the Khasi of the central plateau considered it disgraceful to marry Bhoi, as did the War, the people from the southern ridges.⁵ Last but not least, the Bhoi's inheritance law was paternal.⁶ We will see that on this last point, Gurdon was wrong. Nevertheless, his description may be taken as a kind of hypothesis on the situation of Bhoi at the beginning of twentieth century: Bhoi was an area inhabited by people who differed in their languages but shared similarities in other cultural aspects, and whose main ethnolinguistic designations were Khasi (or Bhoi-Khasi) and Mikir.

Very few consistent data are available prior to Gurdon. In the Assamese chronicles, the *buranji*, only two terms are found concerning the people of this particular area in the eighteenth century: *Dāmṅtialiyāḍ*,⁷ and, in several instances, *Gāro*.⁸ *Dāmṅtialiyāḍ* means literally 'people of the border/limits/margins'. As for the Garo, if they are found in significant numbers in the plains beneath Ri-Bhoi, they are absent today in Eastern Meghalaya, and are not mentioned in the colonial reports concerning

³ Ibid., p. 4.

⁴ Ibid., p. 40.

⁵ Ibid., p. 62.

⁶ Ibid., p. 85; "... thereby supplying another link in the chain of evidence in support of the conclusion that the Bhois, or, more correctly speaking, the Mikirs, are of Bodo origin, and not Khasi or Mon-Anam".

⁷ Bhuyan 1932: 221–56.

⁸ Bhuyan 1933: 194–5; *Jantiya buranji* quoted by Shadap Sen 1981: 136–9.

the end of the nineteenth century; the Garo hills (Western Meghalaya) are located far from there, at three days' walking distance.⁹ Garo do not call themselves 'Garo', but 'Achik'. It may well be that the Assamese indistinctly called all hill-dwellers from the south, 'Garo', a term that may have some link with the term 'Karew' used by Khasi-speaking Bhoi to designate themselves. Thus comparisons between eighteenth-century data and Gurdon's own data are uneasy. This is also true for other parts of the Northeast: *buranji* generally give very few clues on the human groups themselves; territories were not identified by their inhabitants but by their chiefs. Is this a sign of the absence of social identities in the past? Of the lack of collective consciousnesses that would have resulted in something alike 'ethnicities'? At least one has to underline the scarcity of collective terms in the pre-British documents.

What do we know about the present anthropology of the Bhoi region? Its administrative setting has to be introduced first, because, as we will see, it has now a very perceptible effect on the senses of belonging. The former Bhoi country more or less corresponds to Ri-Bhoi district, founded in 1992 within Meghalaya State. It falls under the Khasi Hills Autonomous District, assigned to the Khasi-Jaintia scheduled tribe according to the 6th schedule of the Indian Constitution (1951), which covers the central third of Meghalaya.¹⁰ In Meghalaya, the former political institutions, which already had relative autonomy in colonial times, are legally recognized and have a say in law-making and administration. Ri-Bhoi is thus dependent upon two major Khasi rulers, the *syiems* of Khyrim and Myllem, whose seats are outside Ri-Bhoi and who preside over local chiefs with various statuses (*syiem*, *sirdar*, *lyngdoh*). We will see below that the languages as well as many cultural patterns found in Ri-Bhoi are also found across its eastern border with the Jaintia Hills district (Meghalaya) and the Hamren subdivision of Karbi-Anglong (Assam). These cover the former Jaintia kingdom's possessions, 'fully' annexed by the British as early as 1836 (Fig. 4.2).

⁹ The 1931 Census showed a total of about 7,000 Garo in the "Khasi & Jaintia Hills", but the figures didn't distinguish between the hills themselves and the portions of plains included in the K&J Hills (*Census of India 1931*).

¹⁰ The original United Khasi–Jaintia Autonomous District (1952) was divided into two Autonomous Districts (Khasi and Jaintia) in 1963.

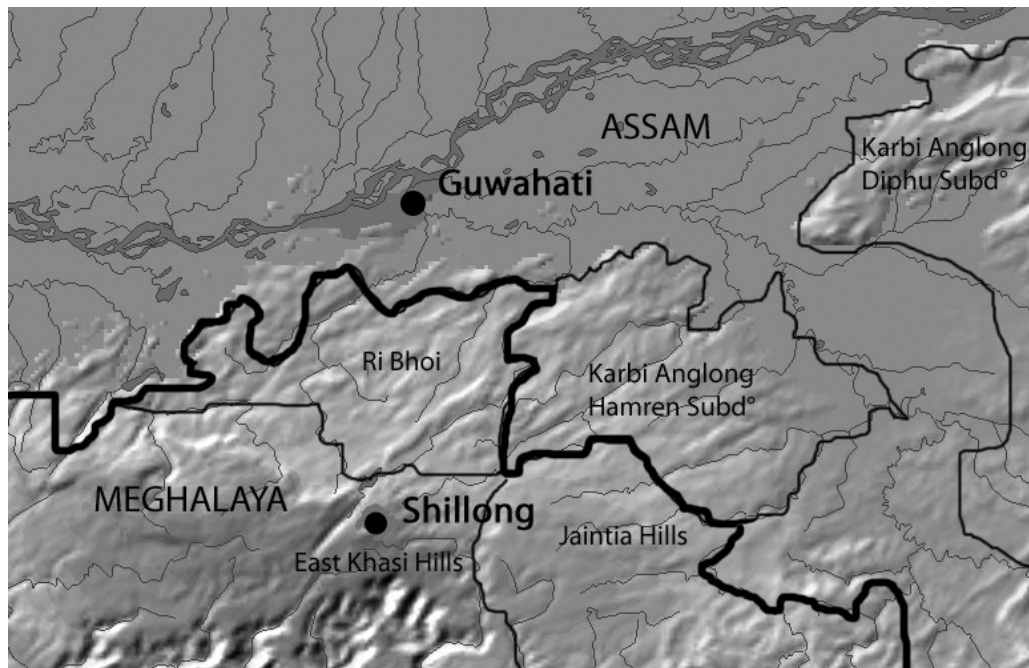


Fig. 4.2 Administrative divisions in the Ri-Bhoi/Karbi-Anglong area.

The official ethnic profiles only take into account the ‘scheduled tribes’ in the strict sense, i.e. only those who have this status in the state for which the data are given. For Ri-Bhoi District, 2001, the figures are: Khasi-Jaintia 139,071; Mikir 10,523; Garo 9,376.¹¹ I haven’t yet obtained the linguistic figures at the district level. However, out of the disparate pieces of information I possess, a very complex situation emerges, and one that diverges quite notably from the official figures.

The Khasi speakers of Bhoi generally call themselves ‘Karew’,¹² and use the term ‘Bhoi’ to designate the other dwellers of the area collectively: the Karbi speakers (whom they specifically call ‘Mikir’) and the Tiwa speakers (‘Lalung’).¹³ All three groups are called ‘Bhoi’ by the Khasi speakers from other areas. It seems, however, that the semantic field of ‘Bhoi’ is changing nowadays, maybe as an effect of the implementation of the new Ri-Bhoi district: the Confederation of Ri-Bhoi People now

¹¹ *Census of India* 2001.

¹² Karmawphlang (2001: 53): “Karew are the Khasis who live on the Northern slopes of the Khasi hills.”

¹³ ‘Mikir’ and ‘Lalung’ were extensively used in Assam till twenty years ago. Although they remain in the State’s official Scheduled Tribes’ list, they have now been replaced in common usage by the indigenous “Karbi” and “Tiwa” promoted by the tribal associations.

claims 'Bhoi' as their legitimate ethnic label, against the will of some all-Khasi organizations.¹⁴

Territorial Belonging and Identity: The Marnga Case

I propose to give a few cases that exemplify the various overlappings between culture, identity, and belonging in the Bhoi area. We will proceed from west to east. Less than three kilometres from the Guwahati–Shillong National Highway, the Marnga (or Marngar) have the reputation of forming an atypical tribe, at least in the eyes of those who know about their existence, i.e. their closest neighbours and a few knowledgeable persons in Shillong. Because for others, as it is for the Census, the area is 'fully Khasi', the Marnga describe themselves as the people of 'Nine Villages' that formed the core of an autonomous principality ruled by a *rājā* (or *syiem*, the two terms being used indistinctly). Looking at the electoral data, the population of the Nine Villages might be estimated at about 2,000 people, excluding four villages that the Marnga consider as 'Khasi'.¹⁵ Marnga assume themselves to be 'Bhoi', and more particularly one of the three Bhoi subgroups, which they list as: Bhoi Marnga, Bhoi Kāro and Bhoi Marvet, each corresponding to a particular area.¹⁶

Marnga express their specificity through a number of cultural features. The most striking would be their language. Yet the Marnga language proves to be very close to Assamese, the major Indo-Aryan language in neighbouring Assam. The difference is that Marnga use a few dozen Tibeto-Burman-looking words, which till

¹⁴ *Shillong Times* 19 October 2004: "The Confederation of Ri-Bhoi People (CORP) in a statement issued here has strongly defended the use of 'Ri-Bhoi' nomenclature for Ri-Bhoi district. Stating that the nomenclature was not only started since creation of Ri-Bhoi district, the organisation said that it was a name given to the people of the area since time immemorial. The organisation also said that the State Government should first change the name of Meghalaya 'which was not an indigenous name for our land'. It may be mentioned that the Ri-Bhoi Youth Federation (RBYF) was the first organisation to oppose the changing of Ri-Bhoi district into 'North Khasi Hills District'. Further, the KSU had issued statement stating that the use of 'Ri-Bhoi' nomenclature should be removed in order to preserve the unity of Khasi tribes. KSU and FKJGP were the only organisations to have used Ri-Bhoi district as 'North Khasi Hills District'." [FKJGP : Federation of Khasi, Jaintia, and Garo Peoples]

¹⁵ *Electoral Rolls 2006*, A100016-18.

¹⁶ Bhoi Marvet would be the hills immediately above Guwahati, Bhoi Kāro the remaining of the Bhoi area. 'Kāro' corresponds most probably to 'Karew'.

now could not be related to any neighbouring Tibeto-Burman languages.¹⁷ Beside, Khasi is spoken by every Marnga. If the Marnga language is peculiar it is indeed as an island of Indo-Aryan language at the core of a Khasi linguistic area. The Marnga say they belong to eleven clans. In fact, two clan names only can be said to be specific to the Nine Villages: Binong – the oldest clan in Marnga – and Barka. Three others are found mainly in the west of Ri-Bhoi district, among groups that we assume are Khasi-speaking. The remaining six are common in the whole Khasi linguistic area, among them the Syiem clan from which the Marnga chiefs are recruited.¹⁸ In terms of descent systems, the Marnga both resemble the neighbouring societies in their ‘traditional’ matrilineality¹⁹ and differ in its present development: matrilineality is highly prevalent among the older generations, but patrilineality is a clear tendency nowadays. Interestingly, one of our informants explained that this new trend was resisted by Marnga society on ‘moral grounds’, but that it was needed, owing to the prevalence of patrilineality in Assam. It has to be noted that the neighbouring Khasi-speaking communities are still largely matrilineal, that descent in the female line has legal status in Meghalaya, that it is an emblematic institution of the Khasi identity, and that it represents a common process for adopting outsiders. The prevalence of Christianity (79 per cent in Ri-Bhoi, 70 per cent in Meghalaya) does not seem to have significantly affected the descent system.²⁰

The Nine Villages and their *syiem* are placed under the *syiem* of Myllem. We may guess that this situation goes back to at least the nineteenth century, because there is no trace of other *syiems* or of any Assamese chief in this area during the colonial period. In Khasi language, the Marnga *rājā* is known as *Syiem Raid Marngar* (King of the Marnga district); his status is that of a *syiem raid*, a subordinate *syiem* –

¹⁷ According to François Jacquesson, CNRS LACITO, a specialist in Tibeto-Burman languages, who visited Marnga with me in March 2007.

¹⁸ Data on the clan distribution come from an analysis of Indian electoral lists undertaken under the ANR project “Languages, Cultures and Territories in Northeast India”; see <http://www.vjf.cnrs.fr/brahmaputra/uk/corpora/people.htm>.

¹⁹ Matrilineality is taken here in the wider sense: adoption of the mother’s clan, matrilocality, and inheritance in the female line.

²⁰ *Census of India 2001*.

raid being the lower administrative unit above the village. His authority is exerted more on a spatial area than on a particular community, because it concerns the four Khasi villages of Marnga as well. Under a contract with Myllem, he collects a tax on the Mawlong market.²¹

Finally, the scanty data that we have on Marnga religion indicate that, depending whether it is calendar, practices, charges or beliefs that are considered, its patterns may look more Assamese, Khasi, or specific.

In the Marnga case, the asserted identity ('We are Marnga') thus corresponds above all to a territorial and politico-historical belonging: 'Nine villages' under their own chief. Clan belonging does not seem to be a criterion of differentiation, as most Marnga clan names are found among the 'Khasi'. In the same way, Marnga do not describe themselves as being people of the 'Eleven clans'. This is a critical difference compared with other communities in the region, like the Karbi, who define themselves as being members of five particular clans. Similarly, cultural differences are hardly put forward by the Marnga in their identity statements: to take only two fundamental aspects, their language is noticeable only as an Assamese isolate within a Khasi-speaking area; and matrilineality is widespread all over the region. If Marnga cultural specificity is a reality it resides in a unique combination of discrete terms that also exist among their neighbours. It is nevertheless remarkable that Marnga identity survives when other more culturally specific groups are content with a 'Khasi only' identity. In other words, the cultural proximity of the Marnga with the Khasi, their sharing of similar clan names, their acceptance of a Khasi *syiem*, their situation at the core of the Khasi-speaking area, and finally their Khasi ST status does not seem to weigh much on their perception of their identity, or at least on its assertion. It is possible that the maintenance of a distinct chief, whatever the reality of his power, plays a crucial role in this regard. In the course of this chapter, we will find other illustrations of the importance of traditional political belongings in the shaping of identities.

²¹ In the absence of land taxes, market taxes constitute the main bulk of the revenue of Khasi chiefs.

Rising Ethnicities : Marmyeng

The second case pertains to Marmyeng, a group of villages about fifteen kilometres to the east of Marna. The data discussed here have been locally collected from members of the 'All Meghalaya Karbi Association'. I was accompanied by Karbi colleagues originating from Karbi Anglong District. To introduce briefly the relationships between culture and identity among the Karbi, we may say that half the communities claiming a Karbi identity live in the hills (Karbi-Anglong and Meghalaya) and the other half in the plains, where their villages are scattered over a vast area to the south of the Brahmaputra, from Guwahati to Upper Assam.²² Their speeches are mutually comprehensible, although relatively differentiated, especially between the plains and the hills, but also within the hills. Moreover, Karbi areas differ remarkably in their politico-ritual systems: either a regional and pyramidal apparatus, or village autonomies.²³ Nevertheless, the status of Karbi everywhere implies belonging to one of five clans: Teron, Terang, Ingthi, Inghi, or Timung.

Marmyeng is said to include eight villages in Meghalaya and two in Assam. Its Meghalaya population can be estimated at around 2,000 people. The Karbi speakers we met in Marmyeng asserted their Karbi identity by putting forward not only their dialect, which displays few differences from those of Karbi-Anglong, but first of all their patronyms. Half the Marmyeng Karbi have been converted to Christianity, which is relatively fewer than the Meghalaya average. The non-Christian ritual calendar comprises rites typical of Assamese Hinduism (Domahi/Bihu, Huriyā), together with rites more common in the hills and in Southeast Asia, such as 'closing the village' during the eviction of malevolent spirits, locally called Rong Ke Um.²⁴ There is no trace here of the major ritual events among the Karbi of the hills (Chojun, Chomangkhang, Rongkher) nor of the plains (Dehal, Jahang).

Marmyeng is administered by a hereditary *rongthe* assisted by officeholders, each from a particular lineage. Although the designations of positions are partly

²² For descriptions of the present Karbi, see Bhattacharjee (1986) and Phangcho *et al.* (2008).

²³ On the variation of political systems and rituals among the Karbi, see Ramirez (2007: 99–102).

²⁴ A.W. Macdonald, "Notes sur la claustration villageoise dans l'Asie du Sud-Est", *Journal Asiatique* Tome CCXLV, Année 1957, n° 2. In the Northeast, closing the village is especially common among the Dimasa (Danda 1978: 132–3).

Assamese, their functions bear several similarities to those of the political system of Western Karbi Anglong, which is reputed to represent the 'traditional' Karbi political apparatus. At a higher level, Marmyeng is presently subordinated to the Myllem *syiem*. This is a relatively new situation, as before 1830 it was dependent on Dimoria, in Assam, a principality whose present *rājās* consider themselves as Karbi and still acknowledge the Marmyeng *bangthe* as their feudatory. Incidentally the links with Myllem have faded. Myllem sovereignty over Marmyeng is still valid in the eyes of the Khasi Hills Autonomous District Council. A few years ago the Myllem *syiem* kept coming to levy taxes. Marmyeng people use to visit his residence, near Shillong, either to settle disputes or to bring a goat to the annual Ningkrem, the main Khasi collective rite. According to our informants, these relationships have come to an end.

Thus, in Marmyeng's current politico-ritual practices, the signs of an older authority are preserved at the expense of those of a newer one, providing an example of the weight of ethnicity on belongings. The fact that the Dimoria chiefs are considered by Marmyeng people as Karbi undoubtedly plays a role in such an apparent anachronism. Thus, in Marmyeng, Karbi speakers seem to be split between several territorial belongings. 'Attachment' would be more correct to qualify the feeling of Marmyeng Karbi towards Dimoria, and moreover towards Karbi-Anglong: they do not belong to that district, but feel a certain attraction towards a place that can be considered as 'Karbiland'. Marmyeng being a Karbi enclave within a Khasi-dominated territory, it is particularly responsive to the Karbi ethnic programme in its ambition of re-uniting all the scattered Karbi components. Dimoria kingdom exerts a kind of challenging seduction: despite its modest size and power, it possesses a higher historical relevance, and indeed represents a more local 'Karbi' dominion. Finally, the location of Marmyeng within Meghalaya territory implies a *de facto* political belonging. This is not radically rejected the way a pro-independence discourse would reject it; but it is clearly underplayed. Neglect for the Khasi *syiem* is one sign, another being claims to autochthony: 'We were the original inhabitants of Ri-Bhoi, before the Khasi themselves.' This attitude has to be contrasted with that of Marnga, where a specific identity and the acknowledgement of a local chief (*Syiem Marnga*) does not preclude the acceptance of an overarching Khasi sovereignty (*Syiem Myllem*). In

Meghalaya, Karbi is recognized as a Scheduled Tribe, under the label Mikir (11,399 in 2001),²⁵ and most Marmyeng inhabitants hold this status. This does not prevent them feeling that the Karbi of Meghalaya are discriminated against by the Khasi majority, a sentiment that we have not noticed in Marnga, and which points to a different kind of identity. Marnga people, who are still more of a minority and are not recognized as a separate entity, assume their Khasi ethnicity beyond their specific Marnga ethnicity. In other words, they accept the possibility of inserted ethnic belongings.

It is very uncertain how old the Marmyeng Karbi identity is in its present form. Interestingly, our informants themselves pointed out that there exist, in their immediate vicinity, some groups with a looser identity: this is the case with the small village of Markang, in the North of Marmyeng on the Assam–Meghalaya border, which consists of a dozen houses bearing Karbi clan names. We were told that Markang was founded some ten years ago by people who came from Marnga. At first, they did not consider themselves either as Karbi or as Khasi, but were more at ease with the Khasi language than with Karbi, which they still speak with difficulty. They were enticed by the Karbi speakers of Marmyeng to ‘convert’ into Karbi. This practice is quite common among the Karbi, where a newcomer is purified and adopted into a Karbi clan.²⁶ Markang people are still perceived as a marginal group, badly integrated, unsure about their belonging and whose practices would differ from those of the ‘typical’ Karbi culture.

Promotion of Karbi conversion would arise in reaction to an opposite movement of a greater dimension. According to our informants, among the 60,000 ‘real Karbi’ living in 51 villages of Meghalaya, 20,000 have ‘converted’ to Khasi and become matrilineal – which goes some way towards accounting for the fact that only 11,400 are listed in the Census. However, their Khasi-ization would not be complete: “They introduce themselves as Khasi in front of Khasi and Karbi when meeting

²⁵ www.censusindia.gov.in/Tables_Published/SCST/dh_st_meghalaya.pdf

²⁶ We have discovered a similar and very recent case in the vicinity of Guwahati, where a whole Garo village was converted into Karbi under the pretext that its inhabitants had some difficulties finding matrimonial matches.

Karbi.” And their clan names still prove they are Karbi. So here is the logic: a clan name with a Karbi consonance does attest a Karbi origin. As a matter of fact, similarity between patronyms is not always obvious – at least for an outsider – and may require some interpretation. One readily suspects that not all Khasi perceive these homonymies – paronymies, in fact – in the same way. They may have a different view altogether, stating that these names are “purely Khasi” and that those who bear them in Meghalaya are without doubt Khasi. Out of the state, ‘Khasi names’ among Karbi people would indicate a ‘conversion’ from Khasi to Karbi.

All these assertions do not tell how the maintenance of a patronym is actually possible, considering the difference of descent rules between Karbi and Khasi: when shifting from a patrilineal to a matrilineal society, or the opposite, the name of the convert/spouse should disappear at the next generation. But this may not be a crucial point here, because we are not primarily concerned with discourses: rather, such divergent interpretations should lead to an examination of the role that clanic belonging plays in the emergence of ascribed or self-ascribed ethnic categorizations. Firstly, because in the identity discourses heard in this region, clanic belonging seems to matter much more than language, descent, dress, or any other visible sign. Bearing a certain clan name means belonging to the corresponding clan and thus, systematically, to the ethnic group to which this clan is exclusive – in the eyes of the speaker. Then, if there is a disagreement on paronymous clan names, it is precisely because they are found among different areas and cultures. This is quite a widespread phenomenon, which in the context of rising ethnic claims becomes one of the leitmotifs of identity assertions.²⁷

Non-ethnic Communities at the Borders: The Mawker Case

The case of Markang, the ‘poorly converted’ village, is not exceptional in the region. Several villages are locally known for their uncertain identities. No fieldwork has yet been done on these communities, but it may be noticed that they are located at the margins of what could be called ‘ethnic cores’. By ethnic cores I mean spaces

²⁷ Trans-ethnic clans and clan names were documented as early as 1917 by Barbeau (1917: 393) in North America. For more recent examples in Africa see for instance Schlee 1985 or Lindgren 2004 (178, 182–7).

qualified by a homogeneity in terms of *both* culture *and* identity, which does not exclude the possibility that they contain several linguistic or ethnic components.²⁸ Marmyeng is a small-sized example. The territory of the Hill Tiwa, twenty kilometres to the east, is a more salient case.²⁹ Commonly referred to by the name of one of its larger villages, ‘Umswai’, this area comprises a concentration of villages speaking Tiwa, a Tibeto-Burmese language of the Bodo-Garo group, the largest group of whose inhabitants claim in their majority to be ‘Tiwa’. They, however, form only one-third of a total population of 30,000, which also includes Karbi, Khasi, and Nepali villages. Villages are almost always mono-ethnic, even in the common case where they are a few hundred metres apart from each other. In the Umswai area, the identity of each village is explicit. This does not mean that it is absolutely perennial. Within the last thirty years, abundant conversions to Christianity as well as the establishment of new villages by Christians seem to have been associated with shifts from the one identity to the other.³⁰

Nevertheless, almost everybody in the area explicitly asserts his belonging to an ethnic group – or ‘tribe’, to render the exact term used – whether Tiwa, Karbi, Khasi, or Nepali. And the first justification given to one’s own ethnic belonging as well as others’ is almost always the patronym, which points to a clan and thus to an assumed ethnicity.³¹

²⁸ The opposition between ethnic cores and margins that I draw here is mainly for qualifying different levels of convergence between culture and identity; I do not refer to any opposition – which may nevertheless exist – between a “centre” and a “periphery”, and more precisely not to the models imagined by Mus or Tambiah, which have recently been assessed by Toffin (2007: 14–18) in connection with the peripheral groups of the Kathmandu Valley.

²⁹ We will only speak here about the Hill Tiwa, who differ from the Plains Tiwa in their culture and language but not in their identity.

³⁰ Why many Christians have left their original villages is not yet very clear, although there are signs of reactions against conversions to Christianity, whether or not these are devised by Hindu radical movements. A proportion of non-Christian claim they are “Hindus”. If the tribal religions in the Northeast have been in varying degrees influenced by Hinduism, the religion of the Hills Tiwa is nevertheless clearly distinct from Assamese or Bengali Hinduism, even taking into account the variability of these.

At the periphery of Umswai area, identities are less clear-cut. Many villagers of the foothills annually attend Jonbil Mela, a fair held near Jagiroad in Assam. In February 2007, with a couple of Tiwa friends, I questioned visitors about their geographical origin, their mother tongue and – in a rather naive manner – about the ethnic group to which they belonged. A family who came from Mawker, one day's walk from there, in Meghalaya, responded very briefly by saying they spoke Karbi and Khasi. After my Tiwa friends summoned them to state whether they were Karbi, Khasi, or Tiwa, they just answered: "We are from *kur* Mukti." In Khasi language, *kur* means a clan. Mukti, generally spelled 'Muktieh' in Meghalaya, is quite a common title in Ri-Bhoi, perceived as being a 'Khasi surname'; some Tiwa interpret it instead as a distortion of the clan name 'Mithi'. The fact that some Khasi-speakers living in Meghalaya and bearing a patronym reputed in this state as Khasi, do not introduce themselves as Khasi, should attract our attention.³²

Mawker is situated in the northeastern corner of Ri-Bhoi, an area facing Umswai on the other side of the Umiat river, which forms the boundary with Assam. At the time when Meghalaya was created, these villages were included in the new state, as they used to pay allegiance to the Khasi *syiem* of Khyrim. The present *syiem* of Khyrim described this region to me as being inhabited by Karbi and Lalung (Tiwa) having their own traditions, benefiting from his protection, and acknowledging his own legitimacy, notably by bringing animals at the annual Ka Ponblang sacrifice held in his Smit *durbar* near Shillong.³³ Linguistically, Northeastern Ri-Bhoi displays the same features as Umswai: Khasi, Karbi, and Tiwa (most Nepali have fled on the

³¹ The case of Nepalis is slightly different, as their names do not always refer to clans. However, except in some instances (like "Sharma"), they are specific enough (Chettri, Gurung, Limbu ...) to mean "Nepali" in ethnic terms.

³² At least, this goes against a common assumption in the region according to which the benefits of the Khasi status in Meghalaya incite many outsiders to marry Khasi girls in order to 'become Khasi'.

³³ According to the Khasi Autonomous Council, non-Khasi may be considered as citizens of a Khasi State, under the status of *raiot*, if they belong to "Garo or Rabha or Mikir or Hajong or Lalungs or Lushai (Mizo) Community or any other plain Tribal or Tribal Community (except the Dkhars)" – 'Dkhar' meaning 'non-tribal', i.e. Assamese, Bengali, or Nepali. These communities are said to have been brought under the authority of the Khasi chiefs by virtue of defeat, migrations, or 'ethnic affinity'. Cf. the various statuses of citizenships at <http://khadc.nic.in/snippets/meanings.htm>

other side of the border after the 1987 anti-foreigners movements in Meghalaya), and many similar patronyms are found on both sides of the border. Thus, one would expect to find the same ethnic pattern as well. But this is far from being the case: linguistic and patronymic composition of villages is far more heterogeneous on the Ri-Bhoi side. The Karbi and Tiwa of Karbi-Anglong perceive many of those villages as either 'truly Karbi' or 'truly Tiwa', but as subjected to acculturation and not daring to assert their identity in a Khasi-dominated context. In certain cases, there are good clues enough to confirm this. For instance, in Magro and Lymphoid villages, people display patronyms that are widespread in Umswai Tiwa-speaking villages, but not in Khasi-speaking areas elsewhere in Meghalaya. Furthermore, Magro and Lymphoid still form two of the seven centres around which the major territorial ritual of the Tiwa-speaking area is organized (Yangli).³⁴

However, other villages are obviously in a different situation, of which Mawker precisely offers a good illustration. Mawker is inhabited by people who bear either Khasi-sounding or Karbi-sounding surnames; but these patronyms also coexist in many households. Actually, this is not only the result of a few occasional inter-ethnic marriages and of 'acculturation'. A look at the genealogical structure of Mawker's households gives the impression that all kinds of arrangements are possible.³⁵ Patrilineal and matrilineal forms coexist within the very same houses, and matrilineal descent is combined with either matrilocality, patrilocality, or neolocality. Neither the Khasiness nor the Karbiness of surnames seems to be in any correlation with the descent practices. Most of Mawker's 58 households throw into question the matrilineality of the Khasi, the patrilineality of the Karbi, and the structural coherence of descent systems. Of course, many good justifications (economy, pluri-ethnicity ...) could be found to explain the particular choices and arrangements made in each house. But the points to be stressed here are both the great flexibility in these choices and their association with a loose ethnic and even clanic identity. Mawker's people speak Khasi and Karbi, have Khasi or Karbi surnames, follow *both* matrilineal

³⁴ During Yangli, seven main villages sacrifice to the goddess Lukhmi in the name of their dependent hamlets (*pham*). The summation of the *phams* of a village does not form a continuous space, which suggests that ritual links are maintained subsequent to migrations.

³⁵ Data discussed here emanates from the electoral lists of Meghalaya.

and patrilineal descent, and have some difficulties in answering the question: “Which ethnic group do you belong to?”

Non-ethnic Polities, Trans-ethnic Clans and the Modern Ethnic States

We can presume that ‘loose’ or ‘undefined’ identities have something to do with cross belongings; but in which way? One possible conjecture would be that those cultural minorities are placed in an ambiguous situation owing to their insertion into a Khasi polity and a Khasi demographical majority. In the present ethnic context of Northeast India, identities tend to be exclusive. This may make certain minorities feel uneasy, as they are somehow compelled to choose only one among their several ethnic belongings. Thus, putting forward a clanic rather than an ethnic belonging, in the way our Mawker informants did, would be a way out of an alternative between, for example, Karbi and Khasi. Against this perfectly defensible interpretation, I would suggest another one that understands such identity statements in a literal manner, as expressing the possibility of non-ethnic identities. Pending more data on the history of these ‘marginal’ groups, I would put forward the following hypothesis: rather than a conflicting situation, the identity expressed by the marginal groups of Ri-Bhoi is a vestige of an ancient identity pattern in which clanic belonging did not determined ethnic or tribal belonging. This would account for the existence of similar clan names among the present distinct ethnic groups. An analogous phenomenon has been unearthed by Günther Schlee in East Africa.³⁶ Trans-ethnic descents, or at least homonymies, should make us constantly interrogate the perennial validity of ethnic belongings versus clanic belongings. The classical approach to tribal societies in anthropology starts from the ethnic group and then introduces the clans as sub-units. This correctly reflects the indigenous discourses, which – putting our atypical cases aside – describe the clans as having stemmed from the primordial ancestor of the tribe, and seldom evoke the existence of a parent tribe. But though this segmentary process is historically plausible, it does not rule out the possibility of another one, in which the clans would be relatively permanent entities, blending to form new ethnic

³⁶ Schlee (1985) elaborately described the segmentation of a proto-group into different ethnicities that retained the original descent units. Concerning Northeast India at least, I think that this is not incompatible with the possibility of an opposite movement, i.e. a process of aggregation where clans regularly combine to form new ethnic groups.

groups, moving individually from one group to another or simply surviving without any ethnic affiliation.

I do not mean that ascribed or self-ascribed ethnic identities did not exist in the past. We have seen above some occurrences of what looked like ethnic categories in Assamese historical documents. What might be challenged is the idea that ethnic identity necessarily relied on descent, as has become the dominant trend today. Neither is it obvious that culture, including language, formed prime belongings, i.e. those that were primarily asserted in identity. Some living clues are available today, for instance in the dual cultural morphology of the Tiwa, and more generally in the cultural heterogeneity of Northeastern groups.³⁷ Present-day Plains Tiwa and Hills Tiwa speak languages of distinct families (Indo-Aryan/Tibeto-Burmese), follow antithetic descent rules (patrilinear/matrilinear), and bear altogether different patronyms. They nevertheless constitute a single ethnic entity in the sense that most of them not only claim to be Tiwa but recognized the same quality in the members of the other cultural sub-group (Hills/Plains).

The Tiwa identity, as well as the atypical identities of the non-Khasi speakers living in Khasi polities, allow us to imagine what could have been the importance of political and territorial belongings in the genesis of present identities. Because what brings together Plains and Hills Tiwa, in the last instance, beyond their present ethnic identity, is their common recognition of the *Gobhā deorājā*, whose – now solely ritual – authority was and is exerted both on the hills- and plains-dwellers irrespective of their clans, descent rules, or languages.³⁸ The present Tiwa identity would be a projection of their former political belonging. The position of cultural continuities and discontinuities within this ancient identity set-up founded on clans and political entities remains to be understood. Did submission to a chief result in the adoption of politically dominant clans' culture? Or did the system allow for the co-existence of

³⁷ More than the Karbi, the Naga case is emblematic: Naga identity may be recent, the 'Naga' label may have been ascribed from outside; nevertheless, the extreme diversity of languages and social structures does not prevent a large number of individuals claiming this label. On the Naga's linguistic diversity, see van Driem 1997; on political systems, Bouchery 2007.

³⁸ For a brief introduction on the Tiwa king, see Ramirez 2007: 104–5.

several linguistic groups as well as various religious practices, provided, for instance, that certain rituals were attended and certain taxes were paid?

Among the elements involved in the formation of current identities in the region, political belonging, i.e. either belonging to a polity or acknowledgment of a ruler, remains crucial. Compared to the situation in the colonial period, the nature of political belonging has obviously evolved. The major innovation has been, it seems, the territory, or rather, the spatialization of authority. The present administrative arrangements, shaped according to the modern state model, rely on continuous spaces bounded by linear borders. This is the case of states and districts in the Northeast and has made conflicts between Northeastern states a regular occurrence. These concern both the delimitation of borders and the closely related issue of border populations' citizenship. Since the creation of Meghalaya, regular crises have opposed Meghalaya's and Assam's public opinions on the issue of the harassment of 'Block I & II Khasi' living on the Assamese side of the border in the Karbi-dominated district of Karbi-Anglong. As a result, Karbi living in Meghalaya have been regularly given a 'notice to leave' by certain Khasi organizations. Such reactions may be seen as the direct effect of the new dominant ethnic model, which 'ethnicized' spaces by assigning exclusive rights over a continuous space to a single ethnic group. Karbi-Anglong tends to be viewed, by both sides, as a 'Karbiland', and Eastern Meghalaya as a 'Khasiland'. Thus dominant ethnicized groups prove to have a dual attitude towards the marginal 'loosely ethnicized' groups like those of eastern Ri-Bhoi: either they underplay differences and specificities or these are acknowledged, and in the latter case this may lead them to the conclusion that these communities are not geographically in their correct place. This is far from being as yet a dominant paradigm in the hills, where, beyond the chattering classes, inter-community relationships are still largely regulated by what I've called the 'ancient identity model'.

We hope to have shown how the study of 'uncertain ethnic identities' helps greatly in understanding how ethnic identities themselves may have emerged, how they are not 'necessary', how they are evolving, and more simply what are their basic paradigms. To this end, the concept of belonging is quite useful in qualifying the individual bricks out of which collective identities are built. Ethnic identity appears to

have emerged as a crystallization of intersecting clanic, spatial, territorial, political, and religious belongings. In each case, a different set of belongings has come forward to sustain the materiality of the emergent ethnic group: descent groups, surnames communities, polities, and geographical areas seem definitely to have been crucial in the past; but belonging to linguistic, religious (especially Christian), or proto-ethnic communities ('Mongoloid', 'Tibeto-Burmese'...) assumes a growing role.³⁹ Ethnicities appear as layers of a new type that are superimposed above pre-existing belongings; not yet completely, however, and on the margins several pockets of – in ethnic terms – loose identities remain. Further research may reveal whether they are relics, having escaped the ethnicization processes, or in the contrary, paradoxical outcomes of conflicting ethnic forces. In the second case, it might not be entirely inaccurate to imagine that such marginal and atypical patterns may inspire new forms of identities in the future. Identity and belongings are clearly related in a dialectical way, mutually shaping each other. But the steadiness of the cultural and social frameworks that determine belongings definitely sets some limits to the imposition of invented ethnic communities. At the borders, uncertain identities always tend to appear.

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³⁹ I have not mentioned here the 'tribal' identity (sometimes pronounced /taybəl/), which is not common in Bhoi, but has become a common way of identifying oneself in other areas of Northeast India. 'Tribals' are hardly to be defined in descriptive terms, but rather in opposition to 'plains people', although ironically most 'tribals' live in the plains.

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