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Conversions, population movements and ethno-cultural landscape in the Assam-Meghalaya borderlands

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In North-East India, ethnic and religious conversions may be intimately associated. In the Assam-Meghalaya borderlands, conversions to Christianity throughout the twentieth century introduced a new factor in the interplay of spatial movements and cultural mutations, without fundamentally disrupting its basic principles. It is these complex dynamics that are described in this article through the history of three localities. Epidemics, religious conversions and cultural segmentation largely accounts for the present distribution of ethnicities.

KEYWORDS: ethnicity, missions, migrations, epidemics, Assam, Meghalaya, Karbi, Tiwa

The data and discussion presented here derive from long-term work on the anthropological complexity of North-East India, on the genesis of its main cultural, ethnic and spatial components, and on the identification of possible recurring processes which account for the current human landscape. In the following lines, I intend to present a few illustrations of a particular aspect of North-East India's complexity which has scarcely been documented, and that links the movements of populations to cultural, and ethnic mutations in dynamic relationships.

A better understanding of the causalities between spatial movements and cultural changes could seriously help us to forge credible scenarios about the present anthropological landscape of North-East India. More precisely, we would be able to have a clearer idea of how ethno-linguistic diversity could be maintained in a context of profuse and constant mobility. This could help to provide solid arguments against essentialist visions of North-East India's history. Certainly, in the wake of Dirks¹, most anthropologists and historians of North-East India implicitly reject the biological continuity of ethnic groups.² But they too rarely do so on the basis of empirical data.³

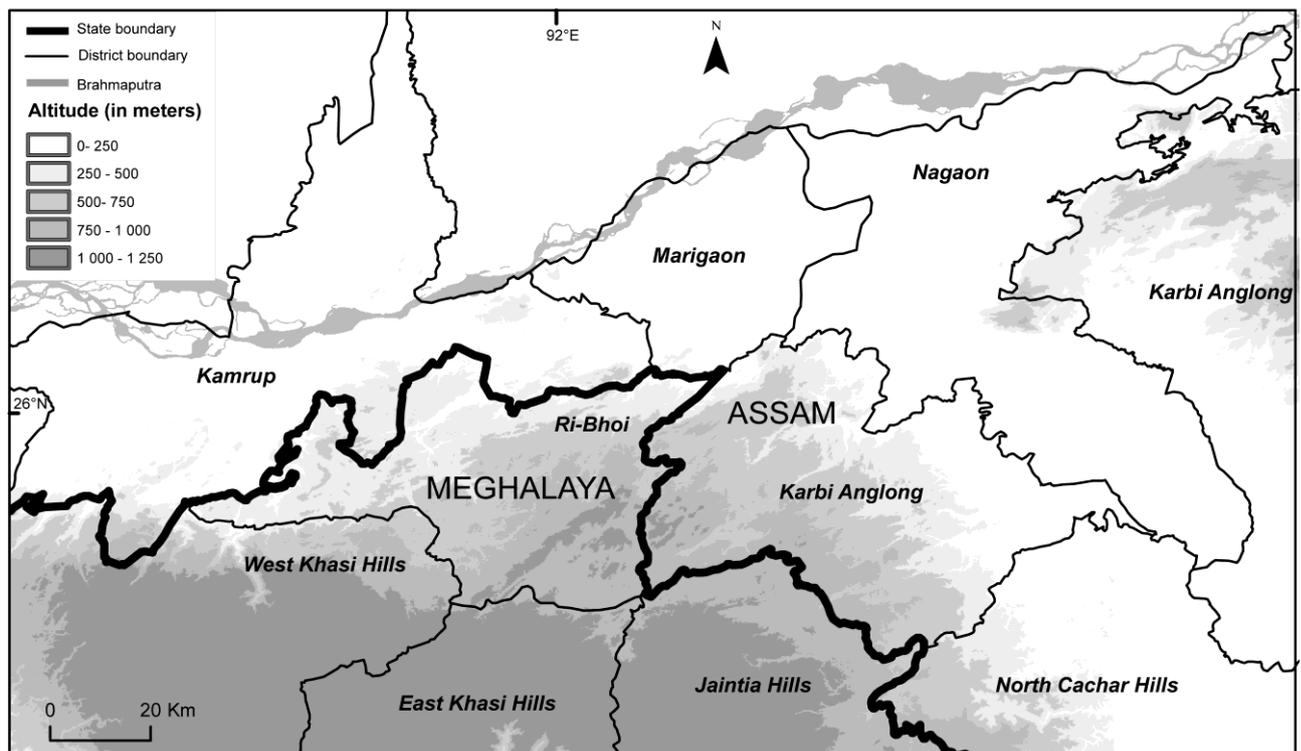


Figure 1 Area of Study. © [Ph. Ramirez, CNRS 2013]

Our focus area will be the hilly parts of the Assam-Meghalaya borderlands, which correspond to the east of Ri-Bhoi district in Meghalaya and the far western part of the Karbi Anglong district of Assam. The region hosts three main ethnicities: Khasi (or Khasi Bhoi), Karbi and Tiwa, which coincide with three very contrasted cultural entities, in terms of language and kinship, respectively Mon-Khmer and matrilineal, Tibeto-Burman and patrilineal, Tibeto-Burman and ambilineal –although many other features show close resemblances, particularly the ritual and political structures. Using the examples of a few localities, I will show how current maps of the various cultural, ethnic and religious affiliations, as well as the distribution of the settlements themselves result from close interplay between religious conversions, ethnic conversions and spatial movements.

In the Assam-Meghalaya borderlands, ethnic conversion, by which individuals or groups shift from one ethnicity to another may, in a number of instances, be related to conversion to Christianity. And whether related or not, both these types of conversions are almost always associated with movements in space and the creation of new settlements. How is it that very often in this area, Christianisation is often associated with a change of ethnic identity?⁴ Although ethnic conversion in North-East India has been studied very little, the number of cases reported among non-Christian groups leads us to assume that this is an ancient phenomenon or at least that it predates the spread of Christianity.⁵ On the contrary, conversion to Christianity has occurred only within the last one and half centuries, and only within the last century in the Assam-Meghalaya borderlands. Ethnic and Christian conversions are not mutually related by any inherent necessity. I hypothesize that the reason for their concomitance should be sought in the combination of three main factors. First, a general demographical feature: people have been readily and continuously moving over limited distances, forming new villages or settling in existing

villages. Then, two seemingly contradictory cultural characteristics, the origin of which we will not discuss here: 1. villages tend to be culturally and ethnically monolithic 2. individuals can easily move from one cultural environment to the other and in the same process from one ethnicity to the other. It should be underlined that such moves happen among rather distinct cultural and social worlds. They do not resume to the adoption of a few minor traits but appear rather as a metamorphosis. No magical transformation is involved though: people generally already possessed some familiarity with the culture they adopted ; however, everything looks as if, within the locality they moved into, their conformity to the local culture and ethnicity became total.

The area was one of the last uplands of North-East India to be affected by Christianisation.⁶ To the south and west, in Pnar and Khasi-dominated zones of Meghalaya, conversions occurred as earlier as the mid-nineteenth century under the Presbyterian Church of India.⁷ To the east, in Karbi-dominated zones, American Baptist missionaries made some attempts from 1859 onwards, though with poor results up until the 1920s.⁸ For a long period of time, "Bhoi country", i.e. the lower hills north of the Khasi & Jaintia hills, was less of a priority for missionaries: this area was far from Shillong, with a reputation of being inaccessible, its population was looked down upon by uplanders and it had hardly been identified by foreigners.⁹ German Salvatorians made a brief attempt at penetrating this area in the very first years of the twentieth century. With the outbreak of the First World War, any Germans had to leave; so, the Salvatorians left, having converted only a few villagers. It was only in the 1930s that the Salesians and the Presbyterians took a serious interest in the region. In the 1950s this interest turned into a fierce competition between them, as this area was one of the last to contain a number of "virgin" villages to be converted.¹⁰ Nowadays, the Meghalaya side of the boundary is all Christian except for five Tiwa-speaking villages in the far Northern corner. On the Assam side, the proportion of Christians within the population amounts to almost a half.

Before the advent of Christianity in the area, short-distance migrations were indeed commonplace.

As the Meekirs take up fresh land every two or three years, and remove their dwellings to different parts of the hills, it is necessary to make a new settlement every year with their chiefs.¹¹

The two main motives for shifting from one locality to the other were related to agriculture and health. Up until the last decades of the twentieth century, shifting cultivation was by far the main farming method and implied that settlements were displaced whenever fresh land became rare in their proximity.¹²

The second factor mentioned in witness accounts concerns epidemics. Hills were less affected by the plague or malaria than the plains but smallpox and cholera were still rife in the 1950s. The problem of epidemics, as well as unidentified serial deaths, and deaths provoked by uncontrolled deities, was very often addressed by merely shifting settlements. In 1845, Major Butler noted the following about a nearby area, the Mikir hills:

On the appearance of any epidemical disease amongst them, they have recourse to sacrifices; and if the wrath of the deities cannot be appeased – that is, should the sickness not abate – they leave their houses and property, and retire to the densest forests, closing all communication with their former habitations. In the year 1834-35, the cholera raged throughout the Hills, and so alarmed were the inhabitants that there was scarcely a single village that did not remove to a new site.¹³

This account from the mid-nineteenth century finds echo in one account we recorded in west Karbi-Anglong:

We left the old village thirty years ago [c. 1980] after three boys died the same day. God Thanasar was angry with us because we hadn't offered a sacrifice to him in the right manner. Maybe there was also an epidemic going on. Nevertheless, ten houses moved about one kilometre away and settled here, just outside Thanasar's territory. Anyhow, till now, we preferred to carry on the worship.

Another, less common, reason for moving out was the deportation of couples convicted of incest, i.e. of sexual intercourse within the same clan, or of other irregular sexual relationships. Two village polities (Khasi: *raid*) in Meghalaya, Raid Maiong and Raid Nukhap, just above the Assam plains, illustrate the multiplicity of factors behind the foundation and cultural genesis of settlements, as well as the typical aggregation of local and long-distance immigrants in new settlements. Umlaper village of Raid Nukhap, was founded in the very first years of the twentieth century by an illegitimate Tiwa-speaking couple made up of a man and his wife's elder sister. Both were expelled from the “Old Village” (Kh.: *nongbah*) of the polity and settled only about three kilometres away. Another “new village”, Mawker, was established in the same period by settlers fleeing a smallpox epidemic that had struck the Old Village, also a couple of kilometers away. Ronald¹⁴ recounts the arrival of his family in Raid Maiong:

My maternal grandparents were pagans (*gyntir*). In our native village 6 km away, now in Assam, we used to offer human sacrifices to a local powerful deity (U Blei Wai). After Indian Independence, Assam police undertook to suppress this practice throughout the State. So the sacrificial sword hid by itself deep in the forest. Sacrifices continued for a while in the new place, but people became reluctant to perform them. As a consequence, strange deaths began to occur. My grandparents decided to leave and came here. Before we arrived, Maiong was inhabited mostly by Pnars who were involved in the production of lac.¹⁵ When the demand dropped in the forties, most of the Pnars left.

From 1955 onwards, a Presbyterian missionary, Miss Thomas, regularly visited Raid Nukhap and Raid Maiong. She first met with some hostility. Some claim that she cursed villagers for their less than friendly welcome. So when the 1958 smallpox epidemic struck, it was regarded as a sign and therefore massive conversions ensued.

In Raid Maiong and Raid Nukhap, the cultural and ethnic effects of conversion to Christianity have proved rather gradual and, compared to what we will see below, undifferentiated. Obviously, the original differences between Khasi, Pnar, Tiwa and Karbi settlers have seriously faded in favor of a culture that does not apparently differ much from that of other parts of Bhoi country, and which falls within the large Khasi ensemble. Among Presbyterians, non-Khasi languages have died out. As for identity, the Khasi, or more recently the Khasi Bhoi ethnicity has been widely adopted. Surnames are, at first sight, the sole elements which still point to villagers' multiple origins. And even then, surnames have been "translated" into their Khasi equivalents.¹⁶ It may be suggested that, generally speaking, Christianisation has acted as a catalyst for a process that we may call Khasi-isation and which consists in adopting the Khasi language and ethnic identity. The acculturation of Nukhap would be an acculturation to the dominant cultural model in eastern Meghalaya. This is indeed confirmed by the situation of non-Christian Tiwa-speaking communities just a few kilometers away, who seem to have remained totally unaffected by Khasi-isation. Acculturation to the dominant model is, however, significantly reduced among communities living close to the Assam plains and among Catholics: Catholics of Tiwa origin still speak the Tiwa language, assert their Tiwa-ness and are much less prone to refer to themselves as Bhoi. Although some plurality may be found in the origin of dwellers in several villages in the area, there is only one realm in which these villages lack plurality, i.e. their Christian denomination: Catholics and Presbyterian never cohabit, thus all villages host a single denomination. One explanation which immediately springs to mind is obviously the fierce competition between Presbyterian and Catholic missionaries. Yet segregation between Christian denominations is one effect of a more general dynamic which also concerns the separation between Christians and non-Christians.

With the rise in Christian conversions and the establishment of the first Christian villages, deportation became a major cause of spatial displacement. There is a bi-directional causal relationship between Christian conversions and spatial movements: when new converts were -and still are- banished from villages, and they either founded a new settlement or went to live in already established Christian villages, it may be said that conversion prompted spatial shifts. Predominantly Christian villages from where individuals refusing to convert were driven away fall in the same category, as well as cases of Christians who were thrown out of a Christian village because they did not adhere to the dominant denomination. The causal relationship is somehow the reverse when non-Christians immigrated, whatever the reason, to a Christian village or a mixed village, and as a consequence converted. In this second series of cases, shifts can be said to have provoked conversion. It is this symmetrical causal relationship that we will now demonstrate.

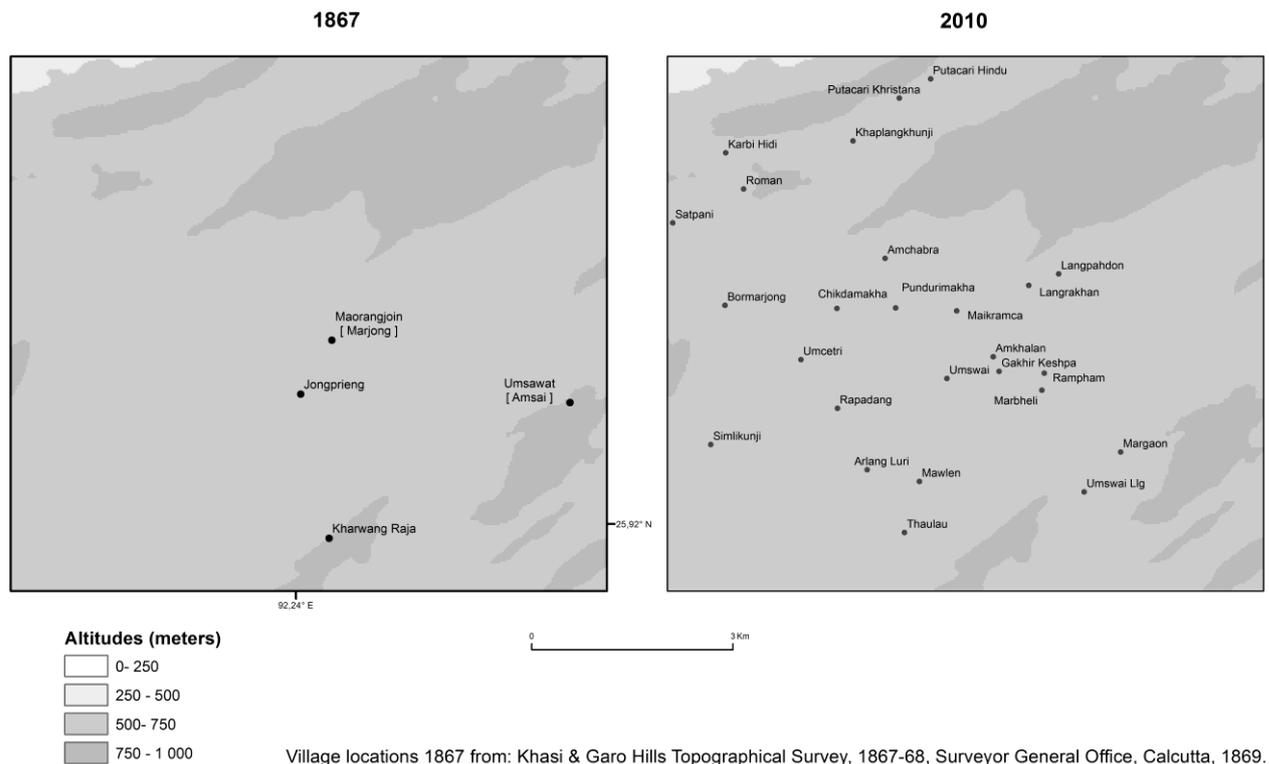


Figure 2 Umswai valley villages ,1867-2010. © [Ph. Ramirez, CNRS 2014]

On the Assam side of the border, segregation is even more visible than on the Meghalaya side. Villages are, with a few exceptions, mono-ethnic, mono-cultural and mono-religious; either all Tiwa, all Karbi or all Khasi, and either Catholic, Presbyterian or “Hindu” – as non-Christian are commonly termed. On both sides of the border, the twentieth century saw a dramatic fragmentation of the human geography. The number of villages increased at least three-fold. Part of this process may be ascribed to the drop in mortality, although the disappearance of epidemics and the availability of medical facilities dates back only to the 1980s in this area.¹⁷ Yet this does not suffice to account for the highly segregated distribution of settlements that we observe today. The example of Umswai valley gives us clues to the process through which the interplay of epidemics and conversions produced this particular pattern. In the mid-nineteenth century, Umswai valley's population was concentrated into two large villages: Bormarjong and Amsai. It now hosts 15 distinct settlements. As shown on Table 1, nine of the 13 new settlements are of different Christian denominations, among which seven are Tiwa-speaking and two Karbi. With the exception of the Catholic mission neighbourhood, Tiwas never cohabit with Karbis in the same village. There are very few Khasi-Bhois and Nepalis in the Valley itself but their settlements in neighbouring areas follow the same organizing principles.

Table 1 Languages and religious denomination in Umswai valley villages

VILLAGE	LANGUAGE	RELIGION
Amchabra	Tiwa	Catholic
Arlang Luri	Tiwa	Catholic
Chikda Makha	Tiwa	Catholic
Punduri Makha	Tiwa	Catholic
Thaulau	Tiwa	Catholic
Amkhalam	Tiwa	Hindu
Bormarjong	Tiwa	Hindu
Satpani	Tiwa	Hindu
Umswai Lalung	Tiwa	Hindu
Mawlen	Tiwa	Presbyterian
Umcetri	Tiwa	Presbyterian
Karbi Hidi	Karbi	Hindu
Rapadang	Karbi	Hindu
Maikramca	Karbi	Presbyterian
Umswai School	Karbi	Presbyterian

Pundurimakha village now has a population of about 350, all Tiwa-speaking, Roman Catholic, and they all assert a Tiwa ethnicity. It was set up in the early 1950s as families started to leave the large old Amsai village (present population around 500) to settle a few hundred meters across a rivulet, still within the traditional Amsai territory. Most witness accounts collected today among Pundurimakha's inhabitants involve a series of health-related events which affected the families:

Sanjib came with two other related families from Amsai in the early 1960s after several of their children died: "We became ruined. The *ojha* (Tiwa, Assamese:healer) asked for more and more sacrifices, we could not pay anymore. We thought: 'let's become Christian so we won't have to pay for more.' After a year in Punduri, we were baptised".

Thomas's father was one of Amsai's traditional dignitaries and a firm believer in local deities. In the spring of 1979, the drought caused many cases of dysentery in Amsai which killed his son and daughter. He therefore decided to join his brother who had already settled in Punduri. Thomas describes an atmosphere of panic, *phana-phani* (Tw.: "everyone dispersed"). And the flights from a disease-stricken village sometimes provoked even more calamities: As it happens, Thomas's father, as the eldest male in the matrilineage (Tw.: *jela*), was in charge of the lineage god's rituals. After he and his family had left, the lineage god was no longer propitiated and the family relatives who stayed in Amsai experienced even more deaths.

Maladies are not the only physical plight that induced people to move to Pundurimakha. The "fear of *mantras*", i.e. the fear of spells cast by an opponent in a conflict situation, is also mentioned. Push and pull factors emerged after the Catholic mission was set up in the valley in 1975 and

started to offer free schooling and health care. These services were not reserved for Christian villages but convinced many non-Christians that converting and living in Christian villages brought many benefits.

Pundurimakha became a natural refuge for all Amsai inhabitants fleeing calamities, and for wandering groups coming from more distant localities who could not find a proper place to settle for good. Shortly after they arrived, they became Catholics, whether or not they had any previous intention of doing so.¹⁸ And, as in every migratory movement, networks of acquaintance and kin played a central role.

Mathew's young brother was only five when he started to suffer badly from fever (Tw.: *Lungjawa*, later diagnosed as malaria). Traditional remedies had no effect. After it was discovered that birds had eaten away a piece of the child's ear, the family became seriously alarmed. A distant relative from Punduri, where their maternal uncle used to live, persuaded them to come and settle there. He promised that the child would recover and that they would not have to spend any more money on sacrifices.

As mentioned earlier, flight before epidemics and similar calamities was nothing new. The new factor in the Assam-Meghalaya foothills from the 1920s onwards was the intermingling of "health refugees" with "religious refugees" – to use modern terms. Those who fled epidemics and took refuge in makeshift settlements increasingly met those who had been expelled after converting.

"Religious refugees" cover a variety of cases. As on the Meghalaya side, during an initial period, the greatest number was made up of new converts to Christianity who had been expelled from non-Christian villages. After Christian villages had been set up, those who refused to convert were in turn expelled. In essence, all these situations stem from a principle of total separation, where only one religious affiliation is tolerated in a locality.

Thus, converting meant – and still means – moving in the short term, and in return moving into a village where the community follows a different creed meant converting in the short term.

We came to save ourselves from fever. But one could not just come here and stay without converting.

And this could lead to situations where, over their lifetime, people would change places and denominations several times over.

That family came with us here and converted. After a while they changed their mind, went back to our original village and re-became pagans.

Comparatively speaking, Pundurimakha represents a "simple" situation because the integration of newcomers involved a change of religion but not of ethnicity. Our third example illustrates how even more erratic the paths of individuals caught in the dynamics of separation could/can be and, in a sense, how unproblematical repeated shifts in religion and ethnicity might be.

Roman Marjong village (pop. 300), in Umswai valley, is a remarkable example of the multifarious connections between Christian conversion, ethnic shifts and spatial mobility. Like many villages in the surrounding area (e.g. Pucari Hindu/Pucari Kristian), Roman Marjong is named after the religious affiliation of its inhabitants, i.e. Roman Catholic, therefore meaning “the Catholic part of Marjong”, in contrast to Bormarjong, “Big Marjong”. While Bormarjong is only Tiwa speaking and a “Hindu” village (pop. 700), Roman Marjong is not only Catholic but Karbi speaking and most of its inhabitants have Karbi surnames. Roman Marjong's existence goes back to the very first Christian incursions in Umswai valley. According to our informants, it was founded by Catholics in 1914. Missionary sources confirm that the first converts were six “Karbis from Marjong” who came to be baptized by the Salvatorians in 1914.¹⁹ However the very first inhabitants of Roman Marjong might not all have been Christians; they might have come for some other reason, and perhaps before 1914. B.K. Gohain reports that the village was founded by incestuous couples expelled from Bormarjong, the largest Tiwa-speaking village.²⁰

Villagers today attribute the foundation of Roman Marjong to five or six Christian families who had been expelled from Bormarjong. They settled for a while very close to the original village, in a place called Sakrapera (Figure 3). Shortly afterwards, some individuals preferred to abandon Christianity, they re-converted to “Hindu” and went back to live in Bormarjong. Others were converted by Presbyterians from Pucari Kristian and went to settle in that locality, an hour’s walk away towards the north-east.

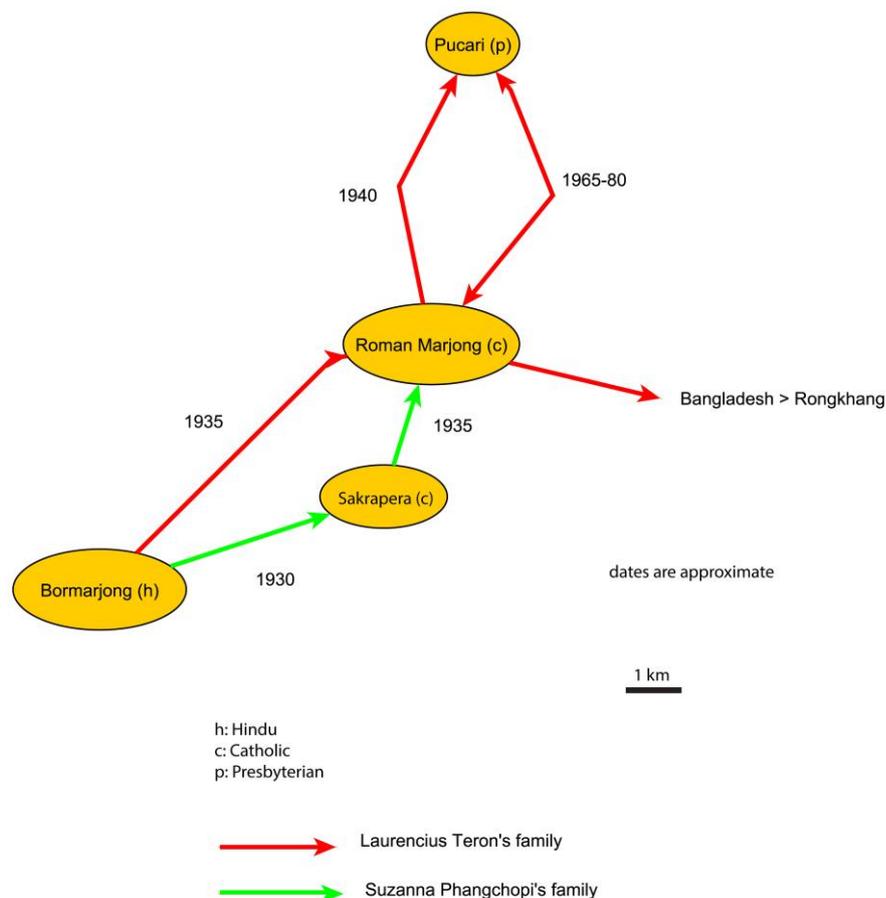


Figure 3 Origins of a Roman Marjong's couple. © [Ph. Ramirez, CNRS 2014]

Among the handful of Bormarjong converts who remained Catholic was Lili Amsong and her brother, Lang. Lili's husband, Sondar Madar – who married her matrilocally – refused to convert. Their story was told to me by their grandson Robert Teron, now in his early forties. Around 1935, his grandparents and great-uncle left Bormarjong and settled in Roman Marjong. The small village must have already been Karbi dominated because shortly after their arrival, they were adopted into Karbi clans: the sister and brother became Teron, the husband became Be. These clans were neither chosen randomly, nor on the basis of their friends' nor according to their personal preferences. They corresponded to the Karbi clans that were equivalent to their original Tiwa clans. Thus Teron is said to be “similar” to Amsong, and Be to Madar. These equivalences between surnames, which amount to equivalences between descent groups, are commonly found in the Assam-Meghalaya borderlands and imply relations of exogamy among equivalent descent groups across three different ethnicities: Karbi, Tiwa and Khasi. People who have equivalent surnames are said to be “the same” and therefore cannot marry.²¹

Going back to the story, while Lili and her husband became Karbi but remained Catholic, Lang, Lili's brother, soon went to live in Pucari Kristian, where he had a Karbi ceremonial friend (As.: *sugi*) and became a Presbyterian Karbi. After Lili died, her husband lost his mind and left for Bangladesh before returning to another area of Karbi-Anglong. Their son Cornelius Teron married a Roman Marjong girl, Martha Phangchopi, who was originally a Tiwa from Bormarjong. Martha's mother, Elizabeth, had converted to “Catholic” but her first husband refused to do so and all her kin were opposed to the idea. She therefore left home with her daughter and went to Roman Marjong. There she married Laisingh Phangcho, who my informant confessed not remembering whether he was an original Karbi or a Tiwa converted to Karbi– a very revealing irresolution indeed. As is common among Karbis in cases of remarriages, Martha's daughter took her step-father's clan. Soon after the birth of my informant, Robert, i.e. in the early 1970s, his parents died. Robert went to live with Grand-Uncle Lang in Pucari and, although a Catholic “by birth”, he was educated as a Presbyterian. Robert told me that up until a very late age he had not at all suspected that his grandparents on both sides had been Tiwa. Everybody around him only spoke Karbi and it was later in life that he learned Tiwa from his maternal grandmother. On becoming an adult, Robert came down to Roman Marjong to take care of his parents' house and land. He thus “re-converted” to “Catholic”. He then married a “Hindu-born” Tiwa girl from Bormarjong, Jonaki Malang. Jonaki became Catholic but refused to take a Karbi surname, a choice now more and more common.

All Roman Marjong villagers except two bear Karbi surnames. Some are recognized as “original Karbis”. Others, it is recalled, descended from Tiwa parents or grandparents. They are generally referred to by their Karbi surname but it may happen that their former Tiwa title is used, especially in Tiwa speaking situations. In Roman Marjong, adoption into a Karbi clan is relatively simple. People are adopted by a lineage belonging to a clan that is equivalent to their Tiwa clan. The convert goes to meet an elderly male member of the lineage who “ties a cotton thread” (Karbi: *hongjenkekok*)

around their right wrist and offers them some food. The wife of the elder offers the adoptee some milk. In Karbi-dominated areas further east, conversion procedures are generally more elaborate, particularly when an alien is concerned.²² Converting a non-Karbi does not, however, differ in principle from bringing a Karbi into a new lineage or clan, or even making a newborn baby a member of the lineage. All these procedures fundamentally amount to adoption into the descent group through “purification” (Kb.: *kapangthir*). The difference is that in the case of a non-Karbi, purification and *rites de passage* are more elaborate, as higher risks are involved.

The case of Roman Marjong provides valuable insight into the complexity of the interactions between population movements and the ethno-cultural genesis of present settlements. Roman Marjong’s current cultural and ethnic features did not result from a linear, insulated process by which a core group of founders grew locally to become the Karbi Catholic village we know today. These features resulted from continuous geographical, ethnic and confessional mixing in the area. The history of Roman Marjong cannot be understood without taking into account the multiple movements of individuals throughout the twentieth century, their shifts back and forth, their religious and cultural mutations. Hesitancies and oscillations are key aspects for understanding how the village has evolved. These hesitancies pertained to various tensions at family level, e.g. about matrimonial choices, or at village level, e.g. between religious affiliations (Catholic / Presbyterian / Hindu). In all these cases, individuals showed an amazing propensity to move. And, as in the Amsai-Pundurimakha scenarios, this was facilitated by and achieved through networks of acquaintances in neighboring settlements.

The cases of village genesis described here are representative of pervasive general processes, but are far from summing up the particular features of all localities. This is a key aspect of the anthropological complexity of regions like the Assam-Meghalaya borderlands. Relatively similar initial conditions result in very different social formations. The most common scenario is the one we described for Roman Marjong and Pundurimakha, where a series of individual events finally led to a strong linguistic, ethnic and religious coherence. These can be firstly contrasted with villages which have not crystallized into mono-ethnic entities. One example is Umkashi where a Salesian mission was setup in 1945 and which hosts 34 Karbi households, 20 Tiwa, 11 Pnar and 15 Khasi Bhoi. Most are Catholic but two pagan households (Kh. *jyntir*) are still to be found there. And different again are communities who converted collectively and suddenly. All the inhabitants of Trairit “Model Village”, which was formerly Tiwa and surrounded by large Tiwa villages, joined the Presbyterian Church collectively on the initiative of Karbi catechists and shortly after that, they all adopted Karbi names.²³

The scant ethnographic data presented here lead to several immediate observations. First, the cultural landscapes of North-East India cannot be analyzed properly without taking into account the importance of mobility, and more especially of short-distance local mobility, the “micro-migrations” described by Toni Huber for Northern Arunachal.²⁴ Ancient and long-distance migrations may be of some interest but – even when related

to real events – do not teach us much about the actual processes of cultural and ethnic genesis and changes. In contrast to the canonical image of tribes travelling as one man and bringing their culture from far away to shape their new homeland – an image common in modern folk histories, we have seen individuals and small groups moving to the next locality and adopting the local dominant culture.

Second, the range of ethnic shifts I have presented obviously partly owes to the advent of missionary Christianity in the region. However, changes of ethnicity were made possible by institutions or at least social features which predated Christian conversions. Among these is the mere possibility of ethnic change and the patronymic equivalence system which enabled the pursuance of clanic relationships despite reinforcement of ethnic boundaries.

Another important point is that conformity to the dominant cultural and ethnic patterns of the village seems to prevail over the perpetuation of those inherited from the lineage. This does not put into question the primacy of descent over ethnicity in terms of long-term membership, quite the opposite indeed: people move from one ethnicity to the other while remaining attached to the same descent groups. Nevertheless, whether conformity is voluntary or imposed, most newcomers to a village will soon adopt the village's language at home and readily convert to the village ethnicity. And in the same manner they will, if it has not already been done, adopt the religious denomination prevalent there. This does not preclude the possibility that after a few years the same persons or their descendants will suddenly move to another settlement and easily adapt to its particular setup. Plurilingualism, i.e. competence in several languages, is definitely an asset in this context. While villages show a strong linguistic distinctiveness, their inhabitants are often fluent in the languages spoken in the surrounding area. I think that in the same manner we might suggest that their pluriculturalism helps them to evolve across a multicultural landscape.

This might help to understand how despite continuous spatial movements, North-East India did not turn out into an evenly mixed melting-pot, but into a relatively compartmentalised one, ethnically and culturally. We saw how new inputs are either incorporated into existing compartments or contribute to the creation of new compartments according to the same logic of exclusivity. It is this latter process which happened after Christianity was introduced in the Assam-Meghalaya foothills.

The processes put into light here obviously open up to crucial questions about the cultural history of North-East India as well as of areas where similar phenomena have been documented.²⁵ Ethnic shifts may at first glance sustain the idea that present ethnicities had been invented. Obviously, all the ethnic groups we know today might not have resulted from a very long biological continuity.²⁶ But even if we assume that present ethnicisation resulted from identity polarisations congealed during and after the colonial period, it does not imply that, prior to that, the region was culturally undifferentiated. People probably did not identify to categories hierarchically superior to clans, like present-day tribes, but conformed to local cultures that differentiated at the village level.

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1. Dirks, *Castes of Mind*.
 2. See for instance Bordoloi, "Impact of Colonial Anthropology".
 3. On the dissociation between biological and linguistic descent, see Van Driem, "The Diversity of the Tibeto-Burman Language Family" 232-237. For a critical introduction to the ethnography of North-East India, see Subba and Wouters, "North-East India: Ethnography and Politics of Identity."
 4. On similar phenomena in Nigeria see Harnischfeger, "Islamisation and Ethnic Conversion in Nigeria."
 5. A few mentions of ethnic shifts and conversions may, however, be found about the colonial period: Stack, *The Mikirs*, 23; Hutton, *The Sema Nagas*, 161-162; Hutton, *The Angami Nagas*, 117-120; Mills, *The Rengma Nagas*, 12-16. Similar processes happen in the context of Assamisation/Hinduization: e.g. Barua, "Ethnicity and Inter-Ethnic Relations," 40. For a general presentation, see Ramirez, "Ethnic Conversions and Transethnic Descent Groups"; Ramirez, *People of the Margins*, 61-86.
 6. Becker, Stadler, and Karotemprel, *History of the Catholic Missions*; Karotemprel, *The Catholic Church in Northeast India*; Joshi, *A Matter of Belief*.
 7. Rees, *Vehicles of Grace and Hope*.
 8. Sangma, *A History of American Baptist Mission*, 71, 92, 96.
 9. Gurdon was clearly puzzled about who the Bhoi really were, *The Khasis*, 2,62.
 10. On a similar competition in nineteenth-century British Columbia, see Manly, "Boundaries Rejected".
 11. Butler, *Travels and Adventures*, 130.
 12. In the nineteenth century, slash and burn was the sole method of farming in northern Meghalaya. Gurdon, *The Khasis*, 40; Chattopadhyay, *The Jaintias*, 59.
 13. Butler, *Travels and Adventures*, 137.
 14. Although I do not generally favour the use of fictional names, the sensitive topics addressed in this article (health, conversions...) force me to do so.
 15. Lac, produced by a tiny insect, *Laccifer lacca*, has been a prosperous activity in the hills of eastern India. On North-East India, see e.g. Gurdon, *The Khasis*, 47-48. or Allen, *The Khasi and Jaintia Hills*, 86.
 16. Ramirez, *People of the Margins*, 34-35, 64.
 17. Pre-1960 population data for the hills is subject to caution, and local situations varied greatly, but one may assume a doubling of global human density for Khasi & Jaintia hills between 1891 and 1931. *Census of India 1891 Assam Report.*; *Census of India, Report on the Census of Assam for 1881*; *Census of India 1901-2*; *Census of India, Census of India 1941*.
 18. As remarked by Vibha Joshi *A Matter of Belief*, 8., "while it is sometimes possible for a convert or outside analyst to identify the interpersonal, aesthetic-emotional, relational and material factor in individual decisions...it may in practice be difficult to distinguish them as separable motives".
 19. Karotemprel, *The Catholic Church in Northeast India*; "Umswai Parish".
 20. Gohain, *Continuity & Change*, 91.
 21. See Ramirez, *People of the Margins*; Ramirez, "Ethnic Conversions and Transethnic Descent Groups". On similar phenomena in Nagaland, see Hutton, *The Sema Nagas*, 134-135; Mills, *The Lhota Nagas*, 92-93.; on Upper Myanmar, cf. Robinne, "Transethnic Social Space," 291-296.
 22. For details see Ramirez, *People of the Margins*, 67-71.
 23. Collective conversions are not exclusive to religious conversions. The most striking example I have recorded is that of a hamlet very close to Guwahati, where a few years ago a dozen families formerly assuming a Bodo ethnicity converted as one man to Karbi ethnicity in order to find matrimonial matches. Ramirez, *Ibid.*, 62.
 24. Huber, "Micro-Migrations of Hill Peoples."
 25. For instance on Northern Myanmar, Robinne, "Transethnic Social Space." See also Scott, *The Art of Not Being Governed*, 241-242.

- 26 The study undertaken by Langstieh et al., "Genetic Diversity and Relationships." has shown that people who presently identify themselves as Khasi and Garo are genetically hardly distinct.

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