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Philippe Ramirez

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Across Ethnic Boundaries  
in North-East India



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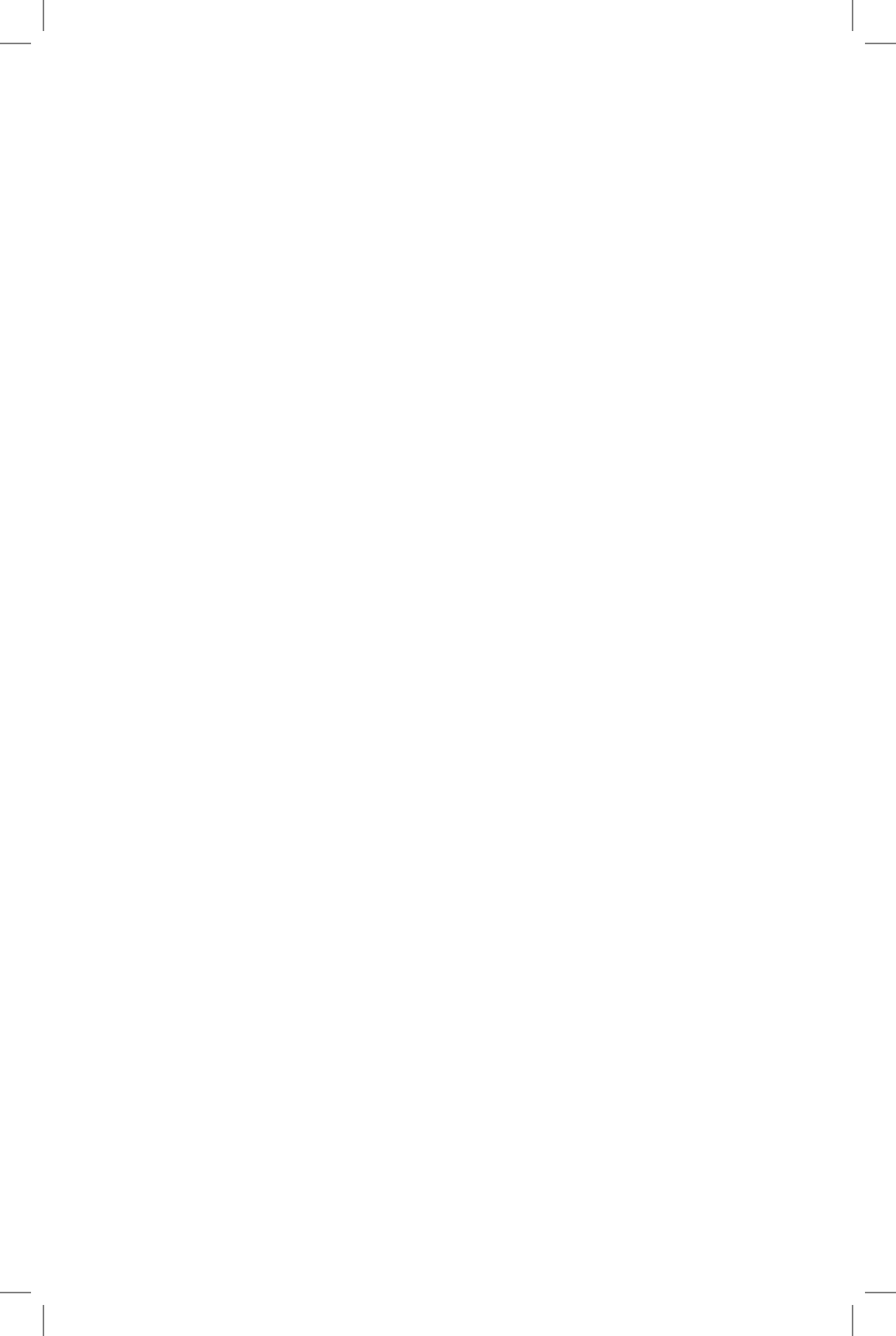
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This book sets out to throw light on the many complexities of North-East India; how any assertion about its people is always prone to uncertainty and exceptions. There is one truth, however, to which through the years I have not found an exception: the selfless hospitality and help I encountered everywhere I happened to go. And what I might have initially feared as a lengthy, thankless investigation soon turned into the discovery of more and more friendships.

I don't believe I will ever be able to give back everything I have been given there. I'm also aware that many of my local friends will be disappointed by this book, that they won't recognise the image they have of their country, that they will feel I have devoted too many pages to details which they deem futile, and not enough to what seems most important to them. To me, however, the best way of giving back a bit of what I have received is to offer something useful, and that is the point of view of a foreigner and my passion for the hidden mazes of human societies. I will be quite happy if this book contributes, even through contradictions, to the debates on history and culture of which my friends are so fond.

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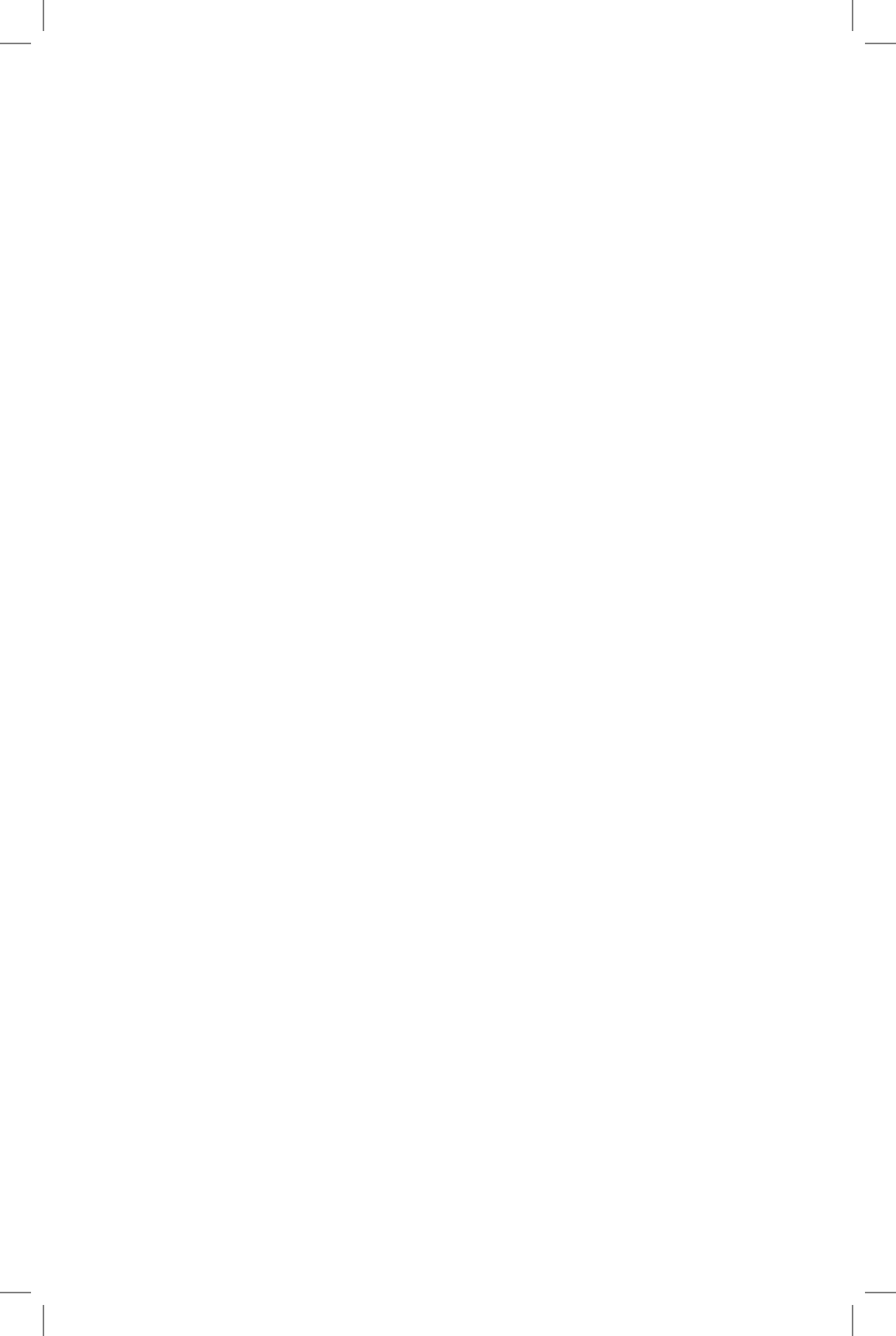


### *Transliterations and orthography*

For Assamese words, my main reference has been H. Baruva's Hemkosh (Baruwa 2007). I have adopted the International Alphabet of Sanskrit Transliteration, which enables easy comparisons with other Indo-Aryan languages. For terms with several occurrences I have used diacritical marks only on the first occurrence.

For languages with a Roman script I have followed the spelling given to me by literate informants or found in dictionaries.

The language from which a word was collected is indicated by the following abbreviations: As. Assamese, Dm. Dimasa, Kb. Karbi, Kh. Khasi, Pn. Pnar, Th. Tai-Ahom, Tw. Tiwa.



## Introduction

This book is the first of two volumes in which I aim to describe a set of social forms I have come across on the borders of the Indian states of Assam and Meghalaya. North-East India and more generally Upland South-East Asia have a reputation of being complex regions characterised by a great diversity of languages, cultures and identities. As I endeavoured to identify regularities with a view to describing the region in a comprehensive manner, I was indeed overcome by a feeling of complexity.

“Complexity” is commonly used to mean intricacy, a difficulty in describing something, and can be equated with “complicatedness”: you qualify something as complex because you are not able to grasp it fully. This has been a critical problem for computer scientists trying to quantify the amount of information needed to describe an object, what they refer to as descriptive, computational or algorithmic complexity.<sup>1</sup> The measure of descriptive complexity is not so much concerned with the problem of the underlying order and causes. By contrast, this is what the concepts of “self-organisation” or “emergence” strive to grasp, positing, as Aristotle formulated it, that “the whole is greater than the sum of its parts”. It is not enough to identify the parts to understand the whole, as some specific properties of the whole “emerge” out of the interaction of the parts. In this perspective, describing complexity will consist in identifying the processes connecting lower-scale phenomena to higher-scale ones. Taking into account complexity in this sense has become indispensable in major scientific realms, from cybernetics and systems theory to biology, earth sciences, network science and economics.<sup>2</sup> For anthropologists, however, complexity has remained a metaphorical and very vague if not repellent concept, the dominant feeling being that the humanities should have nothing to do with anything

---

1 (Goldreich 2008; Kauffman 1996:83–85; Bar-Yam 1997:253–258).

2 On the theories of complexity, see for instance (Capra 2002; Kauffman 1996; Krugman 1996; Luhmann 1995; Manson 2001; Prigogine and Stengers 1984; Urry 2004).

that looks too mechanical or mathematical.<sup>3</sup> As for the issues that concern us here, cultural diversity may be addressed as a series of dynamical systems, according to the view that observed forms or patterns are stationary states of underlying dynamics.<sup>4</sup> Yet the delimitation and comparison of the patterns observed are indeed a major issue. Accounting for the organisation, or arrangement, of continuity versus discontinuity is a serious methodological problem in anthropological descriptions beyond very local scales.

North-East India is emblematic of the regions where it is not only the extent of diversity that seems immeasurable, but also its irregularity. That is why the “mosaic” metaphor often used to represent such regions no longer seems satisfactory. First of all, fragmentation cannot easily be reduced to a combination of a limited number of identifiable and recurrent patterns. Moreover, fragmentation does not actually pertain to a single level but to a multiplicity of levels, each possibly hosting different modes of fragmentation.<sup>5</sup> Finally, unlike fragments of a mosaic, human and social forms as well as ecological forms do interact.<sup>6</sup>

At a relatively early stage in my investigations, after having toured a relatively limited area of central Assam, I had the feeling that “anything” might be found, i.e. whatever regularity I was able to identify was very soon to be refuted by the many exceptions. Thereupon three methodological options had to be considered: to decide that complexity will always be inaccessible; to consider that complexity is only a sign of the confusion of the observer and that it would still be possible in a reductionist mode to break it down into a few simple components; or, in the words of Denise Pumain, to seek a theory that will help to understand

---

3 See, however, the substantial works undertaken by (Archer 1995; Fischer et al. 2012; Lansing 1991, 2006; White and Johansen 2005).

4 On pattern formations, see (Ball 2009; Meinhardt and Prusinkiewicz 2009).

5 For this reason, Appadurai’s type of “fractal metaphor” (Appadurai 1990:20) which suggests that similar patterns are found at various levels, does not prove to be suitable.

6 The identification of empirical forms is an ancient problem, going back at least to Goethe’s reflections on colours, and still a major methodological concern for geographers and ecologists (Goethe 1840; Di Castri et al. 1988; Klippel 2011; Sadahiro 1997).

“ecological and spatial processes which lead to the organisation and differentiation of localisable entities and of the representations that human societies make of them”.<sup>7</sup>

I will deliberately not address North-East India as a set of “tribes”, be they understood as labelled cultures or as ethnic groups. Firstly, labelled cultures are arbitrary entities, useful at certain stages of the description, but ontologically subjective.<sup>8</sup> Secondly, one can hardly decipher the mechanisms operating at a level above the ethnic group, including relations among ethnic groups, from a viewpoint situated at the centre of one of them. On the field, the objects of my observations have been all sorts of limits and anomalies, especially those pertaining to the assumed correspondence between societies, cultures and ethnicities. This involved, for instance, people claiming to belong to group A but speaking a language commonly associated with group B, or following social rules assumed to be typical of group C. I did not hunt down anomalies and limits with the moral or political view of merely “decentering”<sup>9</sup> but with the hope of empirically uncovering specific social phenomena not perceptible in the cultural cores of labelled populations.

This book mainly addresses the subject of boundaries and margins. The notion of “frontier” may capture some of the phenomena we will come across, but due to the history of it in the humanities it is not suitable for what I want to describe. Following on from Frederick Turner, the notion has given rise to inspiring studies about mutual perceptions along dividing lines.<sup>10</sup> In this

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7 “les processus (écologiques et spatiaux) qui conduisent à l’organisation et à la différenciation des entités localisables et des représentations que s’en font les sociétés” (Pumain 2003:25).

8 On this point, I largely agree with the view of Sperber and Hirschfeld (1999:CXXVII): “the notion of a culture should not have more of a theoretical status than that of a region in geography. Culture is best seen not as a thing, but as a property that representations, practices, and artefacts possess to the extent that they are caused by population-wide distribution processes.”

9 See for instance (Narayanan and Sandra 2000).

10 (Giersch 2006; Turner 1920; White 2011). The internal micro-frontiers described by Kopytoff (1987) for Africa are more similar to the multi-levelled differentiations that will be described here.

field of research, “frontier” refers mostly to the pioneering front, or tidal frontier, which is only one among the many kinds of limits I wish to throw light on. Furthermore, as British North-East India was truly a “frontier” in the latter sense, using the same term for other kinds of limits might be misleading. The “frontiers” in globalisation studies might also be inspiring but remain too metaphorical and fuzzy for practical purposes.<sup>11</sup> Similarly, the border of “border scholars” appears all too often to be an excuse for fuelling the favourite postmodern topics with an additional “trope”. The social and cultural dynamics specific to borderlands have barely been analysed.<sup>12</sup>

The boundaries and margins that I will consider are of several types (ecological, cultural, or ethnic), and they can assume a variety of forms, discrete or continuous, among others. The observation of boundaries can obviously contribute to general theories about social processes. However, this assumes that, as a prerequisite, one does not stop at dealing with boundaries in a literary sense but instead attempts to describe the social forms that are associated with them in realistic terms.<sup>13</sup>

The value of margins as a privileged object of study is that they enable a partial escape from an ethnic-centred vision on societies. North-East India is not the only place where externally perceived or internally perceived (i.e. ethnic) groups seldom coincide with those defined by language or other cultural features and where every collective entity is characterised by unexpected and often rapid mutations. A large amount of recent anthropological litera-

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11 For a concise review of the contemporary approaches of frontiers, see (Hannerz 2002).

12 Alvarez, one of the major contributors to border studies recently confessed that “In retrospect, I see how my own research revolves around processes in which the border becomes meaningful, but realise that the order itself was not a central focus”. (Alvarez 2012:550) For example, in one of his earlier works, he argued that “the conceptual parameters of borderlands, borders, and their crossings... illustrate the contradiction, paradox, difference, and conflict of power and domination in contemporary global capitalism”. (Alvarez 1995:447).

13 By “realist terms” I mean terms which take into account both the informants’ discourses and consciousness independent facts or structures. (Bhaskar 1998:38–39; Bourdieu 1989:14; Lévi-Strauss 1963:121)

ture is replete with the obligatory passages about “flexibility”, “permeability”, “fluidity”, “impermanence”, or “hybridity”. Indeed, the original impetus behind these truisms helped to remind the flexibility of anthropological objects.<sup>14</sup> And one of the central critiques actually pertained to delimitation. As Ferguson and Gupta rightly remarked, “Representations of space in the social sciences are remarkably dependent on images of break, rupture, and disjunction”.<sup>15</sup> While such observations were legitimate they were not that inventive. Bashkow has recently shown in a very convincing manner that contrary to what many postmodern caricatures have suggested, the issue of the delimitation of cultures had long been a central issue in anthropology.<sup>16</sup> As early as 1916, Sapir insisted that cultural classifications were valid only at the time of observation,<sup>17</sup> and soon after, Lowie asserted that “culture is invariably an artificial unit segregated for purposes of expediency”.<sup>18</sup> The fuzziness of boundaries and the artificiality of cultural areas do not mean, however, that cultural features are never organised into remarkable aggregates. As Bashkow argues, while commenting on Eric Wolf’s views on connected cultures, “The classic argument that cultures cannot be thought of as bounded because they are connected to one another through relations of politics, trade, migration, and influence presupposes that we can think of the cultures as distinct from one another and, thus, connectable”.<sup>19</sup>

Once it has been agreed that cultures are not discrete and immutable entities, what are the implications for data collection and classification? Should one abandon any project of identifying

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14 (Appadurai 1996; Bhabha 1994; Marcus and Fischer 1986; Wolf 2010).

For a concise summary of debates on culture in the 1980-1990’s, see (Brightman 1995).

15 (Gupta and Ferguson 1992:6).

16 (Bashkow 2004).

17 “The culture area is primarily a descriptive, not an historical, concept. The various culture elements that serve to define it are of very different ages and their grouping into a set of cultural differentia is applicable only to a particular, in our case generally a very recent, cross-section of history.” (Sapir 1916:28–29, 44).

18 (Lowie 1937:235).

19 (Bashkow 2004:453).

remarkable cultural aggregates? Should one adopt a radical relativist posture, sticking to native speeches only and supporting the image of an amorphous cultural universe made up of fortuitous encounters of individual representations? Primary ethnographic material should obviously remain the informants' points of view. However, these often provide highly essentialist and split ethnocentric visions of their human environment, characteristic of folk sociologies.<sup>20</sup> Taken collectively, they naturally contradict each other. As long as one of the main aims of anthropology is to faithfully render native representations, how does one rationally link up several ethnocentric contradictory discourses and furthermore how does one account for their divergence with observed cultural realities?

To many relativists, this is not an issue: what matters are native representations alone, and if several of them conflict, it is a sign of different positions of power.<sup>21</sup> In my opinion, the description of culturally complex regions is pointless without our acknowledging the existence of social realities beyond discourses and individual consciousness. Ethnocentric representations are observer-relative features, epistemically objective yet ontologically subjective.<sup>22</sup> This implies that beyond ethnocentric representations, three other domains have to be explored: the common, possibly universal processes producing them, the ontologically objective facts they apply to, and the dynamic interactions among them; what Fredrik Barth named "ethnic boundaries".<sup>23</sup>

While the correspondence between collective (ethnic) identities, human aggregates, cultures, and social organisations, which are taken for granted in folk sociologies, is rarely asserted by scholars today, the issue is rarely addressed by contemporary anthropology, as if it would be upsetting either to admit that

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20 (Brubaker, Loveman, and Stamatov 2004; Hirschfeld 1998:60).

21 (Fairclough 2001:47ff.).

22 (Searle 1995:10); Hannertz takes the same stance: "It could hardly be that if people do not think of culture as "flowing", or if for that matter they prefer to think of their ways of life and thought as pure, stable, and timeless, they should be allowed to veto those of our analytical, or at least protoanalytical, notions which suggest otherwise." (Hannertz 2002:15).

23 (Barth 1969).



there is sometimes a match or to explain why it is generally not so. Practically speaking, anthropologists still develop their arguments “as if” the match was real, depicting cultures as entities which they name by applying ethnic or national labels (“Yoruba culture”, “French culture”...), and attributing agency to ethnic groups. Can we actually escape the ethnic qualification of cultural phenomena?<sup>24</sup> This book strives to show that descriptions which avoid the ethnic group, the tribe or even “the” (particular) culture as starting points considerably reduce any risk of ambiguity.

To sum up, I propose three simple methodological principles to describe the anthropological complexity at a regional level: 1. to make a distinction between, on the one hand, native discourses about the human environment and, on the other hand, the social and cultural forms actually observed. 2. to investigate a-ethnic and transethnic social forms. 3. to investigate on and from geographical, cultural and ethnic borderlands, or “margins”.

While a second volume will deal more with modelling and possibly explanations, this volume presents mostly explorations. The different chapters were shaped to reflect several meaningful aspects of my exploratory journey through the complexity of North-East India. Suggesting new anthropological approaches to culturally complex regions first of all requires a summary of classical descriptions and the reasons why they have not proven satisfactory. Moreover, to grasp the core developments of the book, a reader unfamiliar with North-East India will need a minimum number of reference marks, which will possibly be deconstructed in the subsequent chapters. In Chapter I, as an introduction, I will start from a scale that roughly corresponds to North-East India. Much of colonial and post-Independence literature was—and is still often—set within an ethnic paradigm reflecting the essentialism of colonial and local elites, and which it helped to reinforce and propagate. Together with several post-Independence socio-economic and political developments, this was one of the contributing factors to an enduring process of “ethnicisation”. Only a few clues suffice to seriously challenge the image of a region consisting of a patchwork of discrete cultures and languages, each

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24 This issue largely exceeds the domain of anthropology, as it pertains to the qualification of human aggregates and to individualisation in general; see for instance (Descombes 2001) and (Wiggins 2001).

corresponding to the contours of a particular “tribe”. A change of scale is enough to discover a high diversity within each of these entities. On the other hand, overlaps and continuities from one entity to another arise on inter-cultural and inter-ethnic margins, which host considerable dynamics of exchanges and mutations. However, it would not be satisfactory to merely replace a model of a homogeneously partitioned society with one of a heterogeneously blended society—this would only shift the problem. In actual fact, available data show that cultural heterogeneity of North-East India is itself—if I may say so—not regular. First of all, cultural differences are not distributed according to recurring patterns. Secondly, entities do indeed exist which should not be taken for “cultures” in the usual sense, but which obviously form “cores”, where a typical sequence of features is concentrated. When taken one by one, the features encountered in the cores are seldom typical, but their conjunction obviously is.

Besides the image of the tribal mosaic, two classical oppositions should be reconsidered: the one that distinguishes the plains from the hills and the one that distinguishes castes from tribes. On these particular points, as on many others, I will not deliberately seek a critical “stance” by claiming that the schemes proposed so far are totally unfounded, but will instead explore the multiple levels that organise human realities in this region.

Ethnicity is only one of the dimensions of North-East India’s complexity. Nevertheless, for anyone wishing to describe such a region in the most realistic manner, the pervasiveness of ethnified world views poses serious methodological problems.

The main spatial framework of my field investigations is a 1,600 km<sup>2</sup> area of foothills and plains straddling the Assam-Meghalaya border. It does not match any administrative unit or cultural homogeneous zone, but on the contrary was deliberately and arbitrarily chosen to overlap such manifest spatial entities. In this area, like elsewhere in North-East India, people generally perceive their human environment through ethnic categories, either the “tribes”—for this particular area the Tiwas, the Khasis and the Karbis—or the “Assamese”. The ultimate criterion for an assigned identification is the recognition of surnames, each of which associated with a particular ethnicity. As shown in Chapter 2, a study of the perception of surnames, together with the mapping of their

objective spatial distribution allows us to sketch a “landscape of names” underlying the ethnic landscape and consisting in the interactions between the entire set of subjective perceptions. As might be expected, subjective ethnic ascriptions prove to be contradictory in many cases. And this often gives way to a “battle for surnames”, typical of ethnic politics in North-East India, each section claiming the highest possible number of surnames, hence the highest number of members and associated territories. From the superimposition of clear-cut subjective ethnic ascriptions emerge the contours of an ethnic landscape made up of margins where assumed identities are not so clear-cut, with people assuming several ethnicities, uncertain ethnicities or no ethnicity at all. Margins are more than mere spaces of transition, uncertainty or miscegenation;<sup>25</sup> they are spaces where ethnicities are built and where they are reproduced, not unlike Barth’s “ethnic boundaries”, though in a much complex manner. And it is no coincidence that ethno-nationalist claims and conflicts, of which I will give some examples, relate primarily to the margins. Since the multiplication of tribal territories and claims before and after Indian Independence, the representations of the human landscape on the one hand and the political arena and institutions on the other have kept structuring each other via very systematic processes.

An exploration of the margins helps uncover atypical and transethnic social phenomena that discourses produced in ethnic cores tend to conceal. One of the most remarkable of these phenomena is ethnic shifts, which will be addressed in Chapter 3. These consist in truly institutional processes in which individuals or entire groups are “converted” from one ethnicity to another. Conversion rituals include “purification” and the adoption into a new kin. They pertain either to individuals of the same ethnicity shifting from one descent group to another, or aliens, and in this case they amount to ethnic conversions. This in itself violates the foundations of the dominant ethnic essentialism, which conceives ethnicity as biologically acquired property and ethnic groups as historically immutable bodies. Yet the paradox goes deeper still, as another phenomenon closely associated with ethnic conver-

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25 “Borderlands should be regarded not as analytically empty transitional zones but as sites of creative cultural production that require investigation.” (Rosaldo 1989:208).

sions is the existence of transethnic descent groups: individuals claiming and being recognized as members of different ethnic groups nevertheless acknowledge the same descent affiliation. Their surnames are considered to be “equivalent” to each other, which prohibits mutual sexual and marital relationships. The sum of equivalence relations draws exogamic entities across ethnic boundaries. I was able to show that this phenomenon is not restricted to mere marginal idiosyncrasies: intra-ethnic and inter-ethnic exogamies fit into a very consistent arrangement.

Patronymic equivalences and conversion rituals allow a smooth flow of spouses between groups of different language and ethnic identity. These observations strongly support the hypothesis that there exists an extended social system beneath or across ethnic divisions and cultural differences. Transethnic phenomena lead to a new interpretation of local social structures, which does not restrict itself to the internal logic of each particular “culture”. In addition to uncovering transethnic institutions, an ethnography of the margins allows us to radically reconsider some of the most consensual knowledge. This is what I demonstrate about the classical opposition between matrilineality and patrilineality, commonly considered as one of the most stable organising principles of North-East Indian societies. According to this view each tribe would be, almost in essence, patrilineal or matrilineal, this property even determining, in the latter case—that of Khasis and Garos—much of the other cultural features of the group. The flexibility of descent rules found in the Assam-Meghalaya borderlands seriously questions this paradigmatic gap between patrilineality and matrilineality. I go even further to show, based on very tangible facts, that descent is often second to residence and that the identity acquired by an individual at birth is not dependent on his/her parents’, but on his house’s. Thus, besides a better understanding of North-East Indian cultural assemblage, investigations on the margins and a transethnic approach to social structures also provide valuable contributions to the general theory of relations between descent and residence.

Chapters 4 and 5 set out to test a different approach to complexity, more intuitive than the relatively formal methods employed in the previous chapters. Before trying his hand at constructing a model, the observer often goes through a phase of free and “naive”

combinations of his field materials.<sup>26</sup> Published writings rarely push open the door to this workroom. The guiding principle here will not be the rigorous validation of a hypothesis, but the search for enduring a-ethnic patterns and connections, pre-dating the colonial period and which would now be largely hidden by the ethnicising filter. I assume that these patterns emanate from a basic level of the social and cultural fabric, that of social cognition, which builds a socialised landscape out of material patterns by meaning attribution: the human mind establishes associations or connections between social functions and some remarkable natural elements or artefacts found in its environment, which we may call “places”.<sup>27</sup> A set of several such connections forms an “assemblage”, and when shared among several individuals over time, it leaves material and ideal clues that make it perceptible to an outside observer. We will follow one recurring assemblage in particular, which recurrently connects markets, megaliths, original villages, elders’ councils and politico-ritual centres. It takes very similar forms in different cultural and ethnic backgrounds. Artefacts especially seem to move from one time period to another, from one society to another and to be subjected to different semantic attributions yet still included in the same basic assemblage: for instance, the same monolith, perceived at a time as the abode of the market god, will be re-interpreted by new settlers as the seat of a leader presiding over a market.

The market place seems to have played a role in inter-ethnic relations that exceeds the role of a mere place of exchange between communities. It appears to have been the centre of symbolic connections across cultural and ethnic boundaries. By following symbolic connections pertaining to markets and trade, in the mythological narratives, we’ll meet another recurrent pattern, also independent of ethnic affiliations and labelled cultures: the hill-plain exchanges as a source of prosperity. Hill mythologies portray the prosperity of the Uplands as being dependent on maintaining relations with the Lowlands. In this scheme, the geographical and social spaces of the “margins” assume considerable importance.

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26 Max Gluckman (1964:163) called “incorporation” the procedure by which “certain events are taken for granted, as given basic facts”. On relations and connections in anthropology, cf. (Strathern 1995, 2004).

27 (Hirsch 1995; Lynch 1960; Tilley 1994).

Therefore, in the final chapters I'll go back to the margins, and investigate in particular the figure of the foothill *rajas*.

Hill-plain relations in the North-East are often depicted by historians in terms of a relationship between communities, or between a State and the surrounding communities. This is an anachronistic projection into the past of the current ethnicised society. A new reading of the oldest Assamese chronicles shows that, at least during these periods (prior to the seventeenth century), ethnic identification of the peripheral populations by the plains-dominating Ahom (Assamese) State was not so much based on cultural as geographical or political categories. A first distinction distinguished hill people from plains people and a second one, independent populations from subordinate and dutiable populations. The State was not described as interacting, when in a war situation, during negotiations, for trade or administrative purposes, with "tribes" as wholes but with specific villages. It is only in post-seventeenth century chronicles that discrete ethnic categories can be seen to emerge, and most come under the labels we know for the colonial period (Naga, Mikir, Kachari...).

Before the arrival of the British in the early nineteenth century, the Ahom state, which was confined to the plains, dealt directly with uplanders only in exceptional instances. It generally had recourse to leaders who had settled in the borderlands, for whom it recognized the status of *raja* and to whom it entrusted the protection of markets and trade routes. The last chapter will be specially dedicated to one of these *rajas*, Gobha raja. The fascinating aspects of this character provide a lot of insight into the process of social and cultural structuration in the plain-hill interfaces. The study of mythology associated with Gobha raja, of the distribution of ritual functions in his lineage, and of the purifying power he holds, does indeed challenge historical and anthropological accounts of uplanders as either submissive or resistant to the domination and acculturation exerted by lowlands' States and societies.<sup>28</sup> The comparison of native stories in particular does not confirm such a strict dichotomy, but instead reveals *rajas* travelling between the plains and hills, incorporated into both worlds, and ruling over culturally plural spaces. Beside the *raja*, some populations held the same capacity of shifting

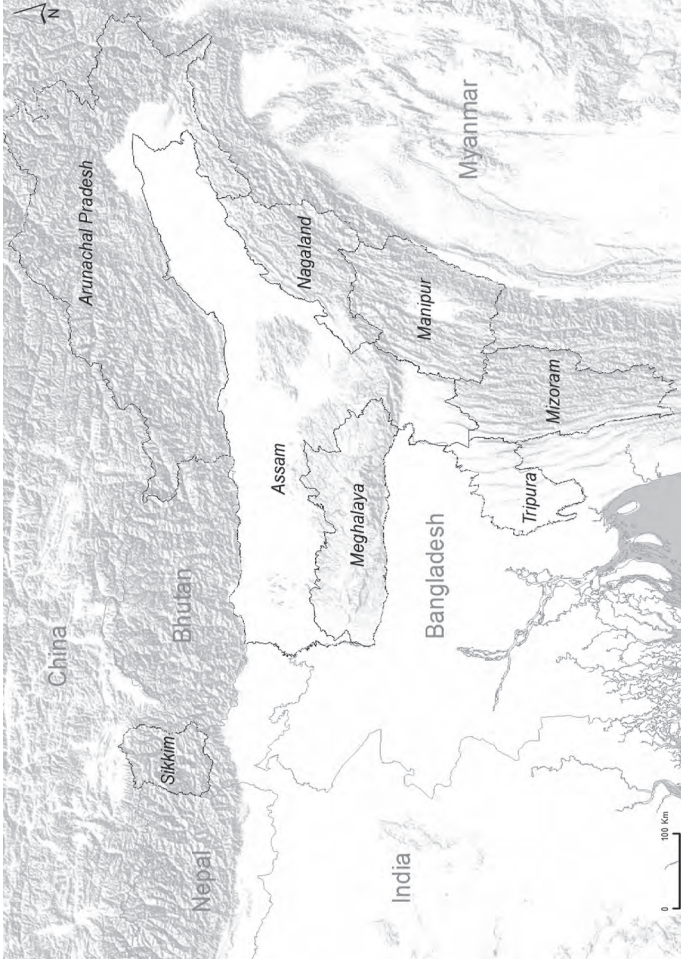
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28 For a recent well-known thesis on these lines, see Scott (2009).

naturally between several ecological and cultural milieux, like most of the people who today call themselves Tiwa. The Tiwa are a single ethnicity, but are distributed and circulate between two widely dissimilar cultural and social entities, one concentrated in the hills, the other in the plains.

The current ethnic clustering has not invalidated Gobha raja's position as a link between the hills and plains, and between communities asserting different ethnicities. He is thus, for example, still able to legitimise very sensitive cases of conversion, such as the conversion of a Muslim girl to Hinduism.

Gobha raja and the communities of the margins, of which the Tiwas represent an ethnicised form, would have emerged from long-term interactions between people originating from different cultural cores. These interactions, which come in the context of numerous local migrations, addressed concerns as concrete as obtaining matrimonial partners, finding business and political brokers, or struggling against calamities. The inter-ethnic phenomena observable today in the margins thus help to start deciphering the mechanisms of cultural complexity which have produced both continuities and discontinuities at different yet interconnected levels through conjoint processes.



**Figure 1-1:** *The eight states of North-East India*  
(in italics) base map: ESRI, USGS, NOAA



## Chapter 1: The Anthropological Landscape of North-East India

This study covers a geographical region which is conventionally referred to as North-East India. Such a notion does indeed correspond to an administrative and historical reality. From an anthropological point of view though, referring to North-East India involves the risk of making interpretations in relation to a “centre”, either Indo-Gangetic civilisation or contemporary political India, and furthermore narrowing one’s perspectives to present-day national borders while neglecting the multiple similarities and shared histories with the spaces lying beyond these borders. Thus in the following chapters the term “North-East India” will primarily allude to a convenient space of reference and should not be taken in the very literal sense of “the north-eastern corner of Indian territory and civilisation”.

In official terms, North-East India forms an administrative entity which comprises eight States: Assam, Meghalaya, Tripura, Mizoram, Manipur, Nagaland, Arunachal Pradesh, and Sikkim (Figure 1-1). Since 1971 (2002 for Sikkim), these States have been associated within a “North Eastern Council” whose aim is to coordinate and promote development policies. Having forged few historical links with the rest of North-East India, Sikkim stands apart of the intimate connections maintained among the seven other States. North-East India acquired its present form two years after 1947’s Independence, when Assam province, together with all its “excluded zones” along the Chinese, Bhutanese, Burmese and East Pakistani borders, were amalgamated with the Princely States of Manipur and Tripura. Assam, the largest and most populated component, had recently been acquired by the British Empire, following the Anglo-Burma war in 1826. Its designation, commonly used as synonymous of North-East India as a whole, originates from the name of the Ahom sovereigns (Assam is pronounced /əxəm/ in Assamese) who ruled over the Brahmaputra valley before the British period. Tripura had been annexed prior to that (1765) and Manipur afterwards (1891). Contrary to the rest of pre-colonial Northern India, most parts of the North-East did not fall under Mughal dominions. It was integrated into independent

India mainly due to it being part of the British Raj at the time of Indian Independence.

Other from an administrative perspective, North-East India is nevertheless also perceived as a tangible entity both by its inhabitants and by those of other Indian regions. Strangely, the specificity of the North-East is generally formulated in cultural terms, which would make it different from other parts of India. Likewise, this applies to many other States, from Kashmir to Andaman and the Nicobar Islands. While many cultural features differentiate North-East India from the Indo-Gangetic civilisation, just as many others associate it with this. Indigenous and exogenous feelings of a specificity are actually due to several factors. Firstly, the late integration into British India. Secondly, the very geographical shape of the North-East, which following the 1947 partition of India and Pakistan, became landlocked within 4,500 km of international borders, remaining attached to the rest of the country by a narrow, 22-kilometre corridor, the Chicken's neck, or Siliguri Corridor, as it is known. Indeed, this configuration fosters a feeling of remoteness and vulnerability.<sup>1</sup> People from the North-East commonly call the rest of India "Mainland India". They complain about being perceived as foreigners by other Indians. This particularly concerns those whose physical features lead them to being called "Chinkies" on the streets of Delhi. The multiplication and durability of separatist movements, noticeably armed movements starting with the Naga insurgency in 1952, have inculcated mutual perceptions of remoteness and foreignness. When, in 1962, Chinese troops penetrated deep into present Arunachal Pradesh, the strategic vulnerability of North-East India was highlighted. And the extent of the agitation during the Assam Movement (1979-85), with demands for more economic aid and autonomy, fuelled the existing sentiment of perplexity in the rest of India towards this region: "what do these guys really want?". Finally, the picture of "the Frontier" is particularly telling. The British regarded the region as a wild border, peopled by savages, separating their own empire from that of the Chinese. Significantly, the Himalayan part of the North-East, today Arunachal Pradesh, at the time came under the name North East Frontier Agency (NEFA). Nowadays, emerging "adventure tour-

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1 On these aspects, see e.g. (Baruah 1999).

ism” cherished by the Indian middle class, against a backdrop of wild spaces, natural parks and “colourful tribes” has revived the representation of a remote, exotic and uncivilised frontier.

### *Historical States*

Before the colonial period, the present territory of North-East India covered a number of States as well as areas beyond any State authority (Figure 1-2). According to the documents available, the Brahmaputra valley has successively seen the emergence of two States which only controlled the whole of it for short periods of time. First of all there was Kamarupa, as mentioned by the Gup-tas in the fourth century, which was ruled by several dynasties that had settled in Pragiyotishpur (present-day Guwahati) and Haruppushvara (Tezpur), among others.<sup>2</sup> Inscriptions attributed to Kamarupa sovereigns range from the fifth to thirteenth centuries.<sup>3</sup> Kamarupa artefacts show obvious Indo-Gangetic influences, but the cultural make-up of its population remains unknown.

Kamarupa gradually gave way to the Ahom state, founded in the thirteenth century at the eastern end of the Brahmaputra valley by chiefs speaking a Tai language. They gradually extended their authority over existing States in the plains (Kachari, Chutiya, Koch), forming a major power in the period spanning the seventeen and eighteenth centuries.<sup>4</sup> The Ahom elite went through a process of Sanskritisation, patronising shaiva cults and finally abandoning their original language in favour of Assamese, the dominant Indo-Aryan language of the Valley. Following the Moamoria rebellion (1769-1806), internal conflicts within the aristocracy, and finally the 1824 Burmese invasion, the Ahoms were compelled to submit to British rule (1826).

The Ahoms handed down the *burañji chronicles* (As. *burañji*: “history”), the factualness of which has hardly any equivalent in South Asia with the exception of the Kashmiri chronicles.<sup>5</sup> These are essential documents for a study of pre-colonial North-East India, and which inform us notably about the other States in the

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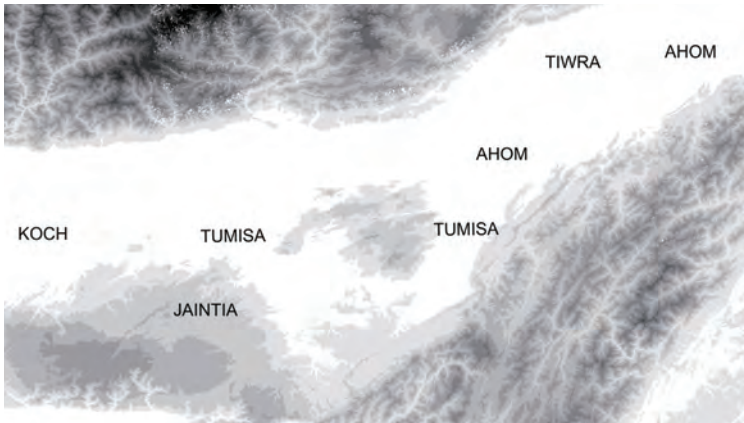
2 (Bhandarkar et al. 1981:215–220; Bhuyan 1987).

3 (Lahiri 1991; Sharma 1978).

4 (Guha 1983).

5 For a comprehensive presentation of the *buranjis*, cf. (Gogoi 1986).

area: in Upper Assam, the Tiwra (Chutiya), annexed by the Ahoms in 1522, and the Tumisa (Kachari), driven towards the south at the same period.<sup>6</sup> Tiwra and Tumisa chiefs, controlling the north and south of the Lohit river respectively, are thought to have been linguistically Tibeto-Burmans.<sup>7</sup> Following the decline of Kamarupa in the twelfth century, Lower Assam fell under the Kamata Kingdom, and then, following Mughal attacks, to the Koches established in North Bengal. Finally, the eastern part of



**Figure 1-2:** Major political influences in Assam in early sixteenth century (Barua 1930, Bhuyan 1990)

the Meghalaya plateau was under multiple polities which on the eve of the arrival of the British were linguistically Khasi. These might well have been ancient polities but, as in the case of Tiwra and Tumisa, their ancient history cannot be ascertained beyond

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6 (Baruah 1985:37–47, 187–191, 231; Devi 1968).

7 Given our limited knowledge, great care should be taken when conjecturing about cultural affinities of former rulers and populations, all the more so because the issue has become the focus of various ethnic claims. Nevertheless, Tumisa (As. Kachari) may be associated with the present-day Dimasa language and identity. Tiwra would have been their counterparts north of Lohit River. *Ti-* or *di-* (“water”) is a common affix used by Tibeto-Burman languages to designate rivers.

the Ahom and Koch chronicles.<sup>8</sup> The most powerful of them, Jaintia, resisted the Ahoms and Tumisa throughout the seventeenth century. It wielded authority both on the plateau and on its southern fringes, and obviously underwent an enduring influence from Brahmanical culture, particularly in the realm of administrative and religious matters.<sup>9</sup>

### *Early anthropological descriptions*

The classic representation of North-East Indian populations is marked by three main biases: classifications in ethnic terms, confusion between linguistic and other cultural affinities, and the absence of any doubt about the historical continuity of groups. As for the last aspect, despite the value of the Ahom chronicles, we have little information about north-eastern cultures before British rule; contemporary anthropology relies strongly on the categories provided by colonial depictions.

Thus attempting to portray pre-colonial anthropological landscape is an arduous task. Ahom, Koch and Mughal chronicles, as well as pre-colonial travellers' accounts, provide us with dated information about polities, localities, and a few ethnonyms, but very few data on the common people.<sup>10</sup> The first extensive description of the North-East, written by Francis Hamilton in the early nineteenth century relies on second-hand information, collected on the Bengal-Assam border.<sup>11</sup> With the arrival of the British in Assam in 1826, the number of documents grew significantly and they became more accurate: explorers' reports, gazetteers, military and civil correspondence...<sup>12</sup> However, the bulk of cul-

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8 Only Khyrim and Jaintia are mentioned by the Koch chronicles for the late sixteenth century. (Ghoshal 1942:141–142) The only written chronicle is an Assamese transcription the date and origin of which are barely known. (Bhuyan 1964) On the history of Khasi polities, cf. (Bareh 1997).

9 (Pakem 1987).

10 (Barua 1985; Bhuyan 1933, 1990; Chevalier 2008; Ghoshal 1942; Minhaju-s Siraj. 1970; Mīrzā Nathan 1936).

11 (Hamilton 1940).

12 (Allen 1905; Butler 1855; Griffith 1847; Hamilton 1912; Hooker 1905; Hunter 1998; M'Cosh 1837; Mackenzie 1884; Moffatt-Mills 1984; Wilcox 1832).

tural and social data of any use to anthropological studies comes from a dozen monographs each pertaining to a specific “tribe”: Playfair on the Garos, Endle on the Kacharis, Stack on the Mikirs, Gurdon on the Khasis, Shakespear on the Lushei, and Hutton and Mills on the Naga groups.<sup>13</sup> After Indian Independence, the same principle prevailed. Except for a study by Fürer-Haimendorf on the Konyaks (1969), all monographs dating from the 1960-70s’ are by researchers who trained at the Research Dept., Shillong, under the supervision of Verrier Elwin, responsible for the tribal policy in the North East Frontier Agency (NEFA).<sup>14</sup> The last two decades have seen the publication of more sophisticated studies but which rarely go beyond a strictly ethnic or local perspective.<sup>15</sup>

Tribe-by-tribe depictions of the North-East undoubtedly stem from a nineteenth century European vision of human diversity which in many aspects converged with local representations. In this respect, colonial censuses have greatly contributed to the freezing of categories although its precise role in ethnogenesis has recently come under debate.<sup>16</sup>

### *Linguistic entanglement*

Like the Census of India, the monumental Linguistic Survey of India in fact reflects a compartmentalised vision of North-East India.<sup>17</sup> Thanks to sophisticated comparative and taxonomic tools, recent works in linguistics provide a solid basis for a fresh vision

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13 (Endle 1911; Gurdon 1914; Hutton 1921, 1921; Mills 1922, 1926, 1937; Playfair 1909; Shakespear 1912; Stack 1908).

14 (Fürer-Haimendorf 1969) (Baruah 1960; Roy 1960; Sharma 1961; Shukla 1959; Sinha 1962; Srivastava 1962, 1973). Elwin himself provided a few cross-sectional views on the NEFA and Nagaland.(Elwin 1959, 1964, 1965, 1968, 1969).

15 (Bhandari 1996a, 1996b; Bhattacharjee 1986; Blackburn 2008, 2010; Burling 1963; Cantlie 1984; Chutia 2003; Danda 1978; Dutta 1990; Gogoi 2006; Gohain 1984, 1993; Kuli 1998; Pegu 1981, 1981; Saikia 2004; Sarkar 1987). (Barua 2002)and (Huber and Blackburn 2012) are some of the only works that adopt an inter-ethnic or transcultural perspective.

16 (Bhagat 2006; Cohn 1984; Guha 1999, 2003; Jones 1981).

17 (Grierson 1928).

of the cultural history of the region.<sup>18</sup> New historical-linguistic perspectives help us to move beyond ethnic and national borders to which anthropological studies are still all too often confined. Phylogenetic models, possibly informed by genetics and paleobotany, may lead to a more rigorous debate on the tricky issue concerning the genesis of north-eastern populations.<sup>19</sup> However, this is an ongoing debate. Burling, for instance, recently drew attention to the importance of the *lingua franca* which, as a local unification process, questions “tree models, i.e. phylogenetic reconstructions based solely on branching principles.”<sup>20</sup> In many ways, the old paradigm of discrete ethno-linguistic groups traveling unaffected by time and space is now beginning to crumble.

Precise historical sequencing is still a delicate task but it is possible to sketch the main components of today’s linguistic scenery. We will throw more light on the languages spoken in the areas dealt with in the following chapters, i.e. central Assam and eastern Meghalaya.

North-eastern languages are conventionally split into four groups on the basis of structural and lexical similarities, which does not imply any phylogenetic continuity, i.e. languages of the same group do not necessarily stem from a same root language: Austro-Asiatic, Indo-Aryan, Tai and Tibeto-Burman. The Austro-Asiatic group is thought to represent the oldest stock in eastern India and continental South-east Asia. It comprises in the eastern part of Meghalaya (1.1 M speakers in all) Lyngngam, Khasi and its cognate languages.<sup>21</sup> While these languages may not be strictly autochthonous, their distance to other members of the group suggests that they were separated a long time ago, around 2000 BC according to Diffloth.<sup>22</sup> They are thought to be closer to Khmu and Palaung spoken in Laos and Myanmar than to Munda languages of eastern India. Munda languages have also been in

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18 For example (Diffloth 2005; van Driem 2012; Jacquesson 2008a, 2008b).

See also the proceedings of the North-East Indian Linguistics Society: (Hyslop, Morey, and Post 2010).

19 (van Driem 2012).

20 (Burling 2007b).

21 This figure and those that follow are taken from the (Census of India 2001a).

22 (Diffloth 2005).

existence in Assam (Santali, 252000, Mundari, 104000...) among tea gardens' workers since the nineteenth century.<sup>23</sup>

Five Indo-Aryan languages are spoken here: firstly Assamese (13 M as their mother tongue) in the Brahmaputra Valley. It is the *lingua franca* in Assam as well as in Nagaland in a local form called Nagamese. Bengali (8.9 M) predominates in Tripura (67%) and is widely represented in Assam (25%). Its importance has considerably grown since the colonial period and with the recent wave of immigration from Bangladesh. Hindi (1.8 M) is the mother tongue of Bihari migrants, and the official language of Arunachal Pradesh. Sadri is used as the *lingua franca* in tea gardens, and this concerns a population estimated at around 7 M. Finally Nepali (0.8 M), has been introduced in the region both by Gurkha soldiers and cow breeders who migrated from Nepal over the last two hundred years.

Speakers of Tai languages (c. 12000) are concentrated in Upper Assam: Khamti, Khamyang, Aiton and Phake. Ahom, the former language of the political elite, died out in the nineteenth century. As a whole, Tai languages were introduced in Assam rather late. While Ahom arrived in the thirteenth century, some other languages were introduced as late as the nineteenth century.<sup>24</sup>

Tibeto-Burman is the most complex linguistic group in the North-East. It includes a great number of languages that are spoken not only in all the north-eastern States but also in all the ecological milieux. According to recent classifications one may distinguish three subgroups (Bodo-Garo-Konyak, Kuki-Chin and Tani-Mishmi).<sup>25</sup> The fact that their distribution may form discrete

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23 (Census of India 2001a, 2001b).

24 (Morey 2008:208).

25 (Matisoff 1986b) The classification of Tibeto-Burman languages is widely debated. I have chosen to draw on the work of Benedict (1972). For a comparison cf. (Matisoff 1986a) while bearing in mind the criticisms formulated by Burling (2003) on the consistency of the Kuki-Chin subgroups. I think it wise to consider that these different subgroups do not originate from simple genetic branchings. Van Driem denies the relevance of tree-shaped phylogenies to describe Tibeto-Burman languages, and has suggested a representation in the form of "fallen leaves" (van Driem 2012).



areas in some places may give rise to two somewhat opposite interpretations: this might result either from discrete migratory processes or from local contacts, with inputs from various geographical origins. To judge from its geographical range, from south-eastern Nepal (Mech, Koch) to Tripura (Kokborok), Bodo-Garo would correspond to the oldest stock of TB languages in the region:<sup>26</sup> Bodo (1.3 M) is spoken in most parts of the Brahmaputra plains, Rabha (1.5M) and Koch (290,000) in Lower Assam, Deori (28,000) in Upper Assam on the northern bank, Garo (0.9 M) and Tiwa (27,000) on the Meghalaya plateau, Dimasa (110,000) and Tripuri (Kokborok, 0.9 M) respectively in South Assam and Tripura. Recent taxonomies<sup>27</sup> also include in the Bodo-Garo group the northern Naga languages on the Nagaland-Arunachal border: Konyak (248,000), Nocte (33,000), Phom (122,000), Tangsa (37,000), and Wancho (49,000). In Assamese chronicles and colonial documents, plain dwellers who today speak Bodo-Garo languages were indistinctly referred to as “Kachari”.<sup>28</sup>

The languages of the eastern hills (South Nagaland, Manipur and Mizoram) are all classed in the Kuki-Chin subgroup and are very closely related to those across the Myanmar border. This subgroup is remarkable for its internal differentiation, first of all in Nagaland although the censuses biased by ethnic categories, often differentiate between languages that are in reality very similar. Only the eight most spoken among the thirty-three listed in the Census of India (2001) will be mentioned: Meitei (Manipuri, 1,4 M), Lushei (671,000), Lotha (170,000), Ao (259,000), Thado (189,000), Tangkhul (141,000), Angami (131,000) and Sema (103,000).

Karbi (Mikir, 419,000) is to be found both in the Karbi hills and in the central Assam plains. Previously considered a Kuki-Chin language, it is now recognized as forming a specific entity.<sup>29</sup>

In comparison, the situation in the Himalayan areas of the North-East has long been regarded as relatively simple, in that it is composed of two well defined entities. In the central region of

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26 See the well-informed article by Jacquesson about the “discovery” of Boro-Garo (Jacquesson 2008a).

27 (Burling 2003).

28 (Bhuyan et al. 1936).

29 (Grüssner 1978; Matisoff 1986a).

Arunachal Pradesh, Tani languages cover a very large area: Adi (196,000), Apa Tani (22,000), Mishmi (34,000), Nyshi (208,000), which was associated with the large Mishing-speaking population (0.5 M) in the plains. On the northern fringe and in western Arunachal are the Bodish languages: Aka, Sherdukpen, Bugun, and Monpa. Except for Monpa (55000), which is closely related to Tibetan, they all concern only a few hundred speakers. However, recent findings have seriously questioned whether Arunachal languages originated from two distinct stocks and even whether they were strictly Tibeto-Burman.<sup>30</sup>

The complicated aspect of North-East India's linguistic map is an indication of the task involved in giving an anthropological description of this region on a large scale. If the distribution of languages displays such heterogeneity, what might we expect with other less stable cultural features? As a matter of fact, the multiplicity of linguistic categories should be qualified. It stems from real discontinuities in linguistic attributes but also from partitionings inherited from previous censuses as well as those emerging from identity processes. For instance, the distinctions that official documents list among the dozen Mizo-Kuki-Chin languages reflect purely linguistic differences to a lesser extent than ethnic and clanic processes characterised by an acute segmentation which, only among the Kuki, has led to the recognition of 36 Scheduled Tribes. Thus, discontinuities in the data available may sometimes mask continuities; hence the region may not always be as "complicated" as it sometimes appears.

### *Racial depictions and socio-cultural continua*

The difficulties encountered by linguists in proposing some coherent order in North-East Indian languages suggest not only that the region cannot be summed up by a few simple continua, but that these vary according to the features studied and that they intimately overlap each other. Anthropological description is hampered by very similar problems. Literature from the colonial period portrayed north-eastern cultures according to a dichotomy opposing "Aryan" castes in the plains to "Indo-

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30 (Post and Blench 2011).

Chinese” or “Mongoloid” tribes in the hills.<sup>31</sup> This concurs with the traditional Indian opposition between civilisation and forest (village/jungle), and therefore these terms still provide the implicit background to many discourses among local elites and in local academic literature. Migrations, physical features, linguistic families and ways of life are conceived as being inseparable. On the one side are “Caucasoids” speaking Indo-Aryan languages, associated with the Indo-Gangetic civilisation, and with castes and Hinduism in particular, and on the other side “Mongoloids” from Tibet who are organised into tribes. The Aryan/Mongoloid opposition forms the framework of a number of debates among intellectual and political elites. Debates pertain less to the terms of the opposition, which is left relatively undisputed, than to the historical primacy of each of the two components. One of the camps holds that Aryans have been present in the North-East since antiquity, as proved by archaeological remains. For others, Mongoloids represent the ancient stock of the region. Ancient kings are thought to have been Mongoloid. Aryans would have arrived later on and appropriated their artefacts, depicting them as Hindu. Antiquity not autochthony is the issue here and, to be even more precise, the contribution of each group to the north-eastern culture.<sup>32</sup> Both sides produce multiple etymologies which would attest to their anteriority. Such a debate obviously echoes dichotomies under debate in other parts of India, notably the Aryan/Dravidian dichotomy, and is related to very tangible political claims.<sup>33</sup>

Common racial discourses certainly rely on manifest aspects of the anthropological landscape, particularly the concentration in the hills of “tribes” with “Mongoloid” physical features and non-Indo-Aryan languages, in contrast to the concentration of Indo-Aryan speaking “Caucasoids” in the plains. However, to some extent they ignore many phenomena that are just as apparent: the presence of (what are perceived as) Mongoloid features

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31 (Dalton 1872:1–3)(Gait 1906:1).

32 On ethno-nationalism in North-East India, cf. contributions by Agrawal (1996).

33 On the history of the Aryan/Dravidian opposition in orientalism, as well as related debates in contemporary India, see for example (Bryant 2001).

among Assamese castes; the fact that tribes are more numerous in the plains than in the hills; the historical association of Tibeto-Burman or Mon-Khmer speaking elites with Hindu political and religious forms in States such as Manipur, Jaintia or the Kachari-Tumisa kingdoms.

As such, the ethno-nationalist phenomenon in North-East India fully corresponds to ethno-nationalism in general as defined by Gellner, Hobsbawm, Anderson or Eriksen.<sup>34</sup> We shall come back on several occasions to its manifestations and to how they inform us about the mechanisms of ethnicity. What I would simply like to underline here is the influence that ethno-nationalism exerts on any anthropological approach to the North-East, including my own. The Aryan/Mongoloid paradigm is mostly reproduced by educated elites, other social categories especially in rural areas being much less concerned by it. Consequently, the Aryan/Mongoloid dichotomy heavily affects local academic productions and thus the comparative data available. Three essential facts often remain hidden. First, the permanent displacement of groups and individuals. Secondly, the composite character of local populations, with areas and often single villages housing several cultures and/or several ethnic identities. This proves to be true not only in the plains, with its patchy cultural map, but also in the hills, where Naga villages for instance may be divided into sections speaking different languages. Multi-cultural and multi-ethnic configurations may furthermore take widely dissimilar forms. And finally, ethnic labels apply to populations displaying wide dissimilarities in their linguistic, cultural and social features.

The concept of “Assamese” is pivotal in the understanding both of indigenous discourses and of the cultural processes at play in the region. “Assamese” as a geographical identity, i.e. native of Assam, does not prove problematic, and most of the people concerned willingly assume this designation, whatever the historical and political outcomes it might imply. The problem lies more in acknowledging the links between this overarching identity and what is called “Assamese” in a more restricted sense of the particular social and cultural set-up associated with na-

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34 (Anderson 1991; Eriksen 1993; Gellner 1983; Hobsbawm 1990). On the political aspects of ethno-nationalism in India, cf. (Baruah 2010).

tive Assamese speakers.<sup>35</sup> Some understand it as the ancient core of regional civilisation, while some as an excessively dominant component imposed by aliens.

### *The Assamese society*

“Assamese” in the restricted sense can be said to designate that socio-cultural complex shaped by the combination of caste principles and Ekasarana vaishnavism. Assamese society is associated with the typical agrarian economy of the Brahmaputra valley based on fishing and wet rice cultivation under three forms, *ahu* (non-transplanted spring rice), *sali* (monsoon transplanted rice), and *baou* (non-transplanted floating rice). Assamese-speaking castes have acquired very few cultural elements from the Ahom elite to which they were subjected for about two centuries. On the contrary, it was the Ahom elites who were sanskritised and adopted the Assamese language, eventually becoming somewhat zealous defenders of the Brahmanical order.<sup>36</sup> However, the geographical and social position of Assamese castes in the present regional society owes much to the history of the Ahom state. Assamese upper castes provided the bulk of local middle-ranking officers in the Ahom administrative apparatus. Most of their patronyms (Hazarika, Barua, Saikia, Phukan...) still refer today to positions in the former administration. The organisation of the Ahom State pertained more to the exploitation of the workforce—in a context of a very low human density—than of land per se. Prior to the eighteenth century, land was not subjected to taxation and permanent private rights were limited to homesteads. Subjects (*paik*) were divided into leagues (*khel*) comprising 1,000 to 6,000 adult males who were appointed in turn as soldiers, labourers or craftsmen to the service of different sections of the State.<sup>37</sup> A quota of cultivable land was allocated to each *khel* which had joint ownership of it, with each *paik* receiving a fixed surface of

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35 See e.g. (Baruah 1999:173–188), on the contested meanings of “Assam” and “Assamese” among the Bodo elites.

36 (Saikia 1997:222–224).

37 (Gait 1906:236–237) On the social outcomes of the Ahom administrative order, cf. (Guha 1991:44–52). A *khel* could also be formed under contract with the State to reclaim new land or farm a fishery, e.g. (Butler 1855:128).

about three acres. This did not prevent economic and social differentiation, at least after Ahom sovereigns started to resort to granting entire *khels* to Brahmin priests, and at a later period to Vaishnavite abbots (*mahanta*). In fact, *khels* were hierarchically organised, with *paiks* grouped under officers on several levels (Bora, Saikia, Hazarika, Rajkhowa). While upper castes are found to have held these offices, one should not be too hasty in jumping to the conclusion that access to these offices was reserved for upper-caste Hindus. For it might be reasonable to argue that the mere fact that incumbents from other cultural backgrounds held offices contributed to their Hinduisation.

Assamese caste society differs in its composition and principles from most caste societies in India, and not only because commensality and other forms of physical discrimination are reputed to be less strict than elsewhere.<sup>38</sup> First of all, its originality pertains to the classical division of Hindu society into *varṇa*. Assamese castes are organised in a bipolar order: at one end the *brāhmaṇ* and at the other the *śūdra*, the latter forming the vast majority (84%, 1901 Census). Secondly, *jajmānī*, the exchange system among specialised castes which is found in many parts of India, has never existed here.<sup>39</sup> Finally, the bipolar character of Assamese caste society provides it with a propensity to integrate tribals in its middle ranks. This particularity, which is also found in Nepalese hill caste society,<sup>40</sup> is all the more remarkable in that “converted” tribals form a specific status category, the Koch.<sup>41</sup>

The originality of Assamese caste society stems largely from the role played by the Vaishnavite reform over the last four centuries. Assamese Vaishnavism (Ekasarana, or Mahāpuruṣīyā) has evolved since the sixteenth century around principles developed by Sankaradeva, including the grouping of devotees into communities, the rejection of Brahmanical ritual exclusivism, and the prohibition of the cult of idols (*murti*)—the latter having proved only relatively successful in practical terms. Soon after Sankardeva’s death, the movement split into different sects

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38 The only in-depth study of Assamese caste society published in a European language is by Audrey Cantlie (1984).

39 (Wiser 1936).

40 (Höfer 1979).

41 (Barua 2002; Sharma 1995).

(*samhati*) associated with different monasteries (*satra*) and whose prescriptions differed (idol cult, participation in non-Vaishnava rituals, purity rules...). The sacred and secular centre for the local community is the praying hall, *nām ghar*, although *pūjās* to idols take place in spatially and conceptually separate shrines, *thān ghar*. *Nām ghar* is a place for daily chantings (*kirtan*) and for worshipping sacred texts (Bhagavan, Kirtan ghosa), for certain life-cycle rites, and for annual festivals. It is also here that meetings are convened to decide about common affairs and to settle disputes. Every lineage is affiliated to the *nām ghar* or to one of the *nām ghars* in the village. The *nām ghar* itself is affiliated to one specific *satra* monastery, where male devotees are initiated and which is maintained thanks to regular financial contributions by devotees. Affiliations to *nām ghars* and various degrees of initiation combine with caste affiliations to define a complex range of individual statuses and commensality relationships. The more initiated a person, the less he will accept cooked rice from a caste lower than his own. And depending on the *nām ghar*, the rules differ, both with regard to the relationships within the same community and to the relationships with other communities.<sup>42</sup>

#### *Cultural continua and conversions: Koches*

Defining purity both by birth status, i.e. caste, and by initiation status opens the Assamese system, on the one hand, to inter-caste mobility and, on the other hand, to the relatively easy integration of external elements. Indeed it is a question of integration, not of “assimilation”. This is important with regard to the usual distinction between castes and tribes as well as to the distinction between Hindus and non-Hindus. Edward Stack, author of a chapter on “Castes and Tribes” in the 1881 Assam Census, admitted that “In the Brahmaputra Valley it is hard to say when the new converts definitely became Hindus, especially as many of them cling to their old habits of eating and drinking”. He noted that among the Miris (today’s Mishings), the Assamese used to differentiate between the *bhakatia*, devotees of a master (*gosvāmi*), and the *abhakatia* (“undevoled”).<sup>43</sup>

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42 (Cantlie 1984:205ff).

43 (Census of India 1883:41, 87).

In fact, there is not just one degree of integration of tribals, but at least two, which are landmarks among the many degrees of “acculturation”. In Central and Upper Assam, after the first initiation (*śaraṇ*), the tribal convert is called *Śaraṇiya Koch*. At this stage, he does not have to undergo any food restrictions. If he however abstains from alcohol, beef and pork he will be allowed to undertake a second initiation, (*prāyaścitta*), where he will be taught a devotional song (*śaraṇ bhajan*). These second-grade converts are called *Saru Koch* (“little Koches”). After three generations, they become *Bar Koch* (“great Koches”).<sup>44</sup> Some Bar Koches undertake *upanayana*, receiving the sacred thread and acquiring Kshatriya status.<sup>45</sup> In Lower Assam, the same model is somewhat simplified, with no *prāyaścitta*: first-grade converts are indiscriminately called *Śaraṇiya Koch* or *Saru Koch*, and become *Bar Koch* after they have undergone food restrictions. Yet throughout Assam, many first-grade converts do not proceed to a higher stage and their offspring end up forming a distinct local community. The situation of these “intermediate” populations gives a lot of insight into the processes behind the genesis of regional society in North-East India. It forms a framework for a number of often contradictory, asserted and ascribed identifications that are related to several dimensions of cultural changes.

The multiple meanings of the term “Koch” illustrate rather well the complex interplay between conversion, identification and cultural differentiation. Today rapid semantic changes take place in the ethnic sphere and any description is soon outdated. Even so, it is possible to sum up the late colonial situation. In Lower Assam, “Koch” only referred to converts when associated with a qualifier (*Saru*, *Bar*). Used in a generic manner, Koch meant, to the Assamese, neighbouring groups not integrated in their village society, who led a different way of life and spoke languages other than Assamese or Bengali. The more “remote” of them were described as *Pani Koch*, “Koch of the forest”. Some of the groups referred to as Koch by the Assamese attributed the term to themselves. Others preferred to be called *Rabha*, or *Koch*

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44 (Census of India 1891 I 1892:225).

45 (Barua 2002:40).



Rabha.<sup>46</sup> All spoke Tibeto-Burman languages of the Bodo-Garo group. Interestingly, while the asserted identity of the Koch/Rabha complex seemingly shifted a great deal during the colonial period—which is therefore very confusing for observers—<sup>47</sup> some converts formed an assertive ethnic group, the Koch Rajbongshi (“of royal lineage”), that claimed to be linked to the Koch dynasty. They spoke and still speak today an Indo-Aryan language close to both Assamese and Bengali.<sup>48</sup> Koch Rajbongshi organisations are vehemently campaigning for the obtention of the Scheduled Tribe status. In this case, the adoption of religious features regarded as Hindu clearly did not result in their assimilation or dilution into caste society, but on the contrary, in forming an autonomous social group, paradoxically more akin to a tribe than to a caste.

In Upper Assam, “Koch” only applies to groups reputed to have converted to Assamese Hinduism and which no longer recognize themselves as Tiwa, Karbi or Bodo. The Koch category does not, however, encompass all the intermediary statuses between caste and tribe. For instance, in the same region of Upper Assam, the Koch category conceptually overlaps the Kachari, the second term being more common on the northern bank and the far east (Lakhimpur, Sibsagar, Dibrugarh, Dhemaji, and Tinsukia districts). While “Kachari” did formerly apply to a large part of plain tribes, and is still commonly used in this sense by outsiders, it is now assumed only by sections that, like the Sonowal Kacharis or Saraniya Kacharis, speak only Assamese and are fully integrated into Assamese caste society. Other “former” Kacharis now assume distinct ethnonyms such as Bodo or Dimasa. From a symmetrical point of view, some ethnonyms give no indication to the level of Assamisation or Hinduisation. Rabhas for instance are acknowledged and recognize themselves as such no matter whether their way of life and religion are similar to those of local Assamese villages, the only decisive feature being linguistic.

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46 (Basumatāri 2010:2–3) On the current Koch/Rabha identity situation and politics, see Karlsson (2001:26ff).

47 Cf. for example (Dalton 1872:89–91).

48 The languages of the Rajbangsi group, found from far eastern Nepal to Lower Assam, do however take many forms, some closer to Assamese, some closer to Bengali.(Wilde 2008:1–6).

How can a global, coherent vision of the situations described above be put forward without projecting the present caste/tribe dichotomy onto the past? Nowadays in the North-East, “tribe” and “caste” are very commonly used as such, i.e. in English. It is worthwhile, however, underlining that this dichotomy does not exist in the Assamese language itself nor in other Indo-Aryan languages in India, which do not differentiate between different sorts of human “kinds” or “species”, *jāti*. What is perceived today as tribals converting to Hinduism does not seem to have been perceived as such till very recently. On the other hand, it would be misleading to consider initiations as only the mere acknowledgement of adhering to Sankardeva’s religion. Initiations did indeed imply giving up, or vowing to give up certain food practices which did indeed distinguish societies organised into hierarchised status groups from those that were not. A cultural limit was crossed, all the more so when one considers that, despite the original rejection of Brahmanism, the importance of food codes remained essential in Assamese Vaishnavism.<sup>49</sup> The outcome of initiation in terms of hierarchy naturally depended on the social environment the convert came from, whether from an already converted community or not, an exclusively Rabha, Karbi or Mishing locality, or on the contrary, from a village or locality made up of a majority of Brahmins, Kalitas or Kaivartas.<sup>50</sup> In modern terms, as far as the first case is concerned, the convert might be culturally Hinduised but socially tribal according to the given criterion, while in the second case they become socially Hindu as their social interactions henceforth depended on their particular status in the local hierarchy.

Instead of a mosaic made up of sealed off, non-hierarchised societies abutting hierarchised societies, the Assam plains might be better portrayed as constituted by surmountable cultural and

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49 See the chapter on the social symbolism of food in Assam in (Cantlie 1984).

50 As Xaxa has pointed out, Hinduisation “is not enough to make a caste out of a tribe. The empirical reality of a village in which tribes form a minority and are absorbed into the Hindu fold is inappropriately extended to villages and regions where they may not be in a minority and where even if Hinduisation operates it may not lead to abandonment of tribal identity.”(Xaxa 1999:1522).

social limits, similar to what Surajit Sinha described in central India.<sup>51</sup> The problem consists in explaining how passing from one to the other, and the intermediary statuses, were conceptualised or perceived from both sides. From the Assamese Hindu point of view, individuals and communities were ranked according to their status with regard to initiation and its cultural implications: non-initiation and initiations to varying degrees meant different degrees of acceptance and integration into the ideal society. What the alternative points of view consisted of is less clear. Would it be possible to describe societies neighbouring Assamese Hindu society any other way than by locating them at its “periphery”, since this not only defines a single centre but also lumps together a wide range of cultural situations. Different social modes were not distributed on either side of a major line (Castes/Tribes) but instead along several chains of intermediate configurations linking one society to the other. The tribal pole did not obviously form the symmetrical mirror of the Hindu pole. This is even less true nowadays after conversion to Christianity has led many non-Christian to assert themselves both as “tribal” and “Hindu”. As illustrated by the Koch or Rabha cases, asserted or “emic” categories do not provide a proper basis to escape a Hindu-centric description of cultural continua. While proceeding with our introduction to the anthropological landscape of North-East India we will stress this point through a series of asserted ethnic categories.

*Cultural differentiations and scales: Tiwas and Karbis in the plains*

In the following chapters, we shall come back in detail to the Tiwas, called Lalungs by their neighbours, and whose single ethnicity covers two culturally distinct groups: The 11,000 hill Tiwas<sup>52</sup>, concentrated in the central Assam hills, all speak a Bodo-Garo language (Tiwa); their villages are centred around youth dormitories (*samadhi*); their descent mode is ambilineal (see chapter 3) with a high incidence of matrilineality; approximately half of the hill Tiwas have become Christian, while the

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51 (Sinha 1965).

52 When applied to Tiwas, I will not capitalise “hill” or “plain”, in order to reflect the fact that the same ethnicity is assumed by both subgroups.

rest follow the indigenous religion.<sup>53</sup> Generally speaking, the much more numerous plains Tiwas (171,000) do not speak Tiwa; they follow a patrilineal descent pattern and widely adhere to Assamese Hinduism. All plains Tiwas claim to have come from the hills, although only a few know exactly where from. Despite the possibility of merging with plain groups, the importance of downward movements can be documented for the recent past; for more distant times we find at least the explicit mention in a seventeenth century chronicle of the “descent” of twelve Lalung families (see page 128).<sup>54</sup>

Many Tiwas account for the cultural dichotomy between hill Tiwas and plains Tiwas in terms of an acculturation to the Assamese dominated plain culture. While most Tiwa communities in the plains do actually seem to confirm this at first sight, several others display typical features of hill Tiwas: they speak Tiwa, run a youth dormitory next to the *nam ghar* and perform *Sakra puja*, when a dance troupe visits each of the lineages’ root houses in turn, thus “re-assembling” the village’ lineages. Some of these villages are obviously situated at the foot of the hills, they are made up of recent immigrants who often marry hill dwellers—which would confirm the Assamisation thesis. Other such communities, however, live deep in the plains, have kept no memory of their arrival and have very little contact with the hills. Should we consider that a dozen such cases versus hundreds of “Assamised” villages represent borderline cases, vestiges doomed to vanish, exceptions which only confirm the general trend? Or

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53 By “indigenous religion” I do not mean that the practices concerned are specific to a particular group or that it has remained unchanged over time but only that it has a local specificity and that it differs from Christianity, Islam or dominant forms of Hinduism. Although some non-Christians recognize themselves nowadays as “Hindus”, this category is more misleading than “indigenous” or “traditional”. Here indigenous practices do not correspond to the “little tradition” as defined by Marriott (1955). The term “tribal religion”, or for instance “Tiwa religion”, has the disadvantage of associating a set of beliefs and practices too closely with a particular “tribe”, many of these being shared by other “tribes”. The main distinctive feature of indigenous religions in this region is the absence of texts and permanent altars.

54 (Bhuyan 1990:228).

should we take them into account as fully fledged components of the regional complexity? This is part of one of the main problems of describing North-East India which, as we shall understand through specific examples, indeed includes rather a lot of such atypical or exceptional cases.

Like Tiwas, Karbis display a cultural dichotomy, yet of a fairly different nature. Karbis, called Mikirs by their neighbours, are found in greater numbers and are distributed more evenly between the hills and plains: 364,000 in total, about half in the hills of Karbi Anglong district (Assam) and Meghalaya, and the other half in the plains, mostly on the southern bank of the Brahmaputra (Golaghat, Nagaon, Morigaon and Kamrup districts).<sup>55</sup> Compared to Tiwas, a higher proportion of plain Karbis—around a quarter—have “kept” their language, which is even more remarkable considering their wide spatial distribution and the intertwining of their village with Assamese-speaking villages. Nevertheless, in the plains, the majority of those who assume a Karbi identity do not speak Karbi. As in the Tiwa case, a simple definition of Karbis could hardly be proposed in cultural terms, even by focusing on only one of their two geographical components. When examined on a large scale, hill Karbis do indeed exhibit greater cultural and social homogeneity, well beyond their linguistic homogeneity, and they can be regarded as globally distinct from other hill groups. However, when comparing local situations, significant variations emerge as well as a large number of similarities with neighbouring hill Tiwa, Khasi and Pnar communities. For instance, Karbis depict their “traditional”, i.e. hill society, as divided into five major patrilineal (*kur*) which fall into three centralised politico-ritual territories (*longri*). In fact, while each lineage is attached to one of the five

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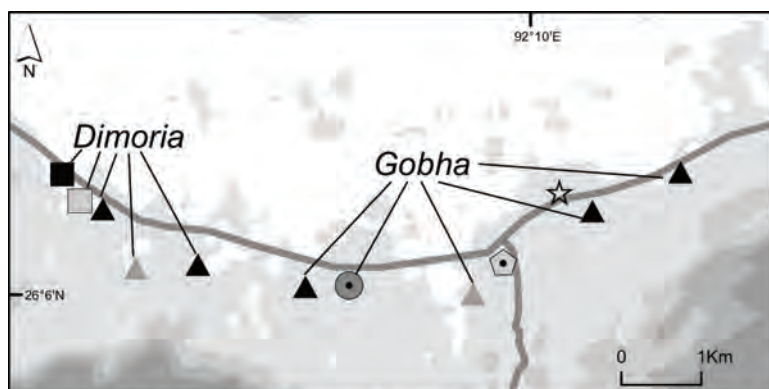
<sup>55</sup> The figures given here are merely estimates, the main reason being that locality-wise data are not published by the Census of India. Furthermore, Karbi Anglong district, where most hill Karbis live, includes densely inhabited plain borderlands as well as semi-urban areas. During the colonial period, the Mikir (Karbi) hills were part of the Nowgong and Sibsagar plain districts so that the hills/plains distribution of languages and ethnic affiliation remains unknown. In the early twentieth century, five per cent of all Karbi speakers were returned as living in the Northern Bank (Darrang district). (Census of India 1901-2 1902:56; Census of India 1931 1932:285).

clans, the three *longri* territories only cover the western part of the hills where Karbis are to be found, i.e. Hamren Subdivision of Karbi Anglong district; eastern villages remain politically and ritually autonomous. Furthermore, in the west, the shape of political institutions as well as their rules and attributions vary not only from one territory to the other but from one cluster of villages to the other. Finally, the general principles of political arrangements do not differ greatly between Karbis, Tiwas and Pnars beyond any specific designations that naturally vary from one language to another. In this respect, the common historical affiliation to the Jaintia State seems to have played a much more lasting role than the hypothetical innate tradition associated with each ethnicity.

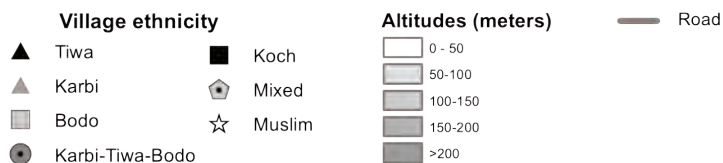
In the plains, social and cultural features associated with the Karbi identity are even more puzzling. Let us consider, for instance, the northern submontane belt of the Meghalaya plateau close to Guwahati. One may easily sketch a map of villages according to the ethnicities assumed by their inhabitants (Figure 1-3). This would look like a chain of alternating mono-ethnic Karbi, Tiwa, Koch and “Muslim” (Bangladeshi) villages. In the Karbi settlements, the mother tongue is dominantly—although not entirely—Karbi, and lineages are associated with one of the five major Karbi clans. Beyond these two specific traits, if one considers political institutions and rituals, the differences with Tiwa and sometimes even with Koch villages are less evident. While the names of social forms (e.g. rites, offices, deities...) may vary from village to village according to the language spoken in each of them, similar forms are found across linguistic and ethnic boundaries. Up to a certain point the similarity between rituals betrays the historical affiliations inherited from pre-colonial Ahom institutions: at a lower level the *khels* (see page 13), each worshipping a specific local deity (*gohain*); at the level immediately above, the small *rajās* to whom the Ahom delegated the administration of the submontane belt, mountain passes (*dvār*) and markets (Gobha, Nellie, Dimoria...), have lost their political prerogatives but are still recognized as ritual heads by territorial communities, irrespective of their ethnicity.<sup>56</sup> For instance, Gobha raja and

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<sup>56</sup> Interestingly, according to Ahom regulations, people migrating to another locality remained affiliated to and thus identified with their



(Dimoria and Gobha are not shown in their actual locations)



**Figure 1-3:** Ethnicities and affiliations to rajas in Khetri-Jagiroad area (Kamrup/Morigaon Dt.)

Dimoria rajas are each acknowledged by a series of Karbi and Tiwa villages, although the former is reputed to be Tiwa and the latter Karbi. A Tiwa from Amsong clan serves as *majhi* to Dimoria rajas, *majhi* being the typical designation of assistant priests in the Tiwa language. Similarly, among the dignitaries assigned to Gobha rajas, all bear typical titles found in the hill Tiwa polities except for one: the *bangthe*, i.e. plain Karbi term referring to a territorial chief. Moreover, the incumbent comes from a former Karbi family who adopted a Tiwa surname—a fundamental phenomenon that we will address in detail.

The ritual geography confirms the multi-ethnic character of local institutions, even though no single overarching structure is

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original *khel*, hence they could not escape their responsibility to the State. (Guha 1991:47) This provision, which may be regarded as an adaptation of the State to the population's mobility, partially accounts for the lack of correlation between ritual affiliations and inhabited spaces, in other words for the discontinuous nature of ritual realms.

to be found. In many but not all localities, an annual rite known by different names (Mahadeo puja, Dehal/Deosal puja, Jongkrang puja) but with very similar forms is dedicated to the assembly of all local deities, presided by Mahadeo. In addition, several other annual rites may be common to several villages irrespective of their ethnicity; some of them may be found throughout Assam, while others are exclusively local: Mal Gohain, Buda Mal Gohain, Deka Mal Gohain, Sani, Pagraja... Similarities in rituals do not correspond to similarities in ethnic identities, nor does their distribution always correspond to discrete divine territories. Similar deities or practices sometimes seem to have a territorial and political basis, and other times to have freely travelled from one locality to the other.

The interpretation of the links between rituals and ethnicity in these submontane tracts partly relates to the position that should be given to such rituals in the Hinduisation process. Some aspects of the plain tribals' religion may at first be interpreted as either proto-Hindu or as signs of Hinduisation. In this respect, Assam does not differ from other parts of India. The debate among Colonial Census officers about the classification of tribal religions versus animism and Hinduism is still going on in anthropological circles.<sup>57</sup> Mahadeo puja is certainly the most widespread collective ritual in the submontane belt but also in the foothill belt above it. With Mahadeo being a pan-Indian designation of Shiva, one might understand this as a Shiva cult. To start with, in the Assamese context, one should not be too hasty in establishing an opposition between Shaiva-like practices and conversion to Vaishnavism.<sup>58</sup> However, in these rituals, aniconic forms of Mahadeo are particularly worshipped among sets of other aniconic deities—a set standing in fact for all the local deities—whose designations only match those of common Hindu deities in some instances

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57 For the «Hindu» category as applied to tribals in the Census, see Hutton's very inspiring comments in the 1931 Census Report (Hutton 1933:385–388). For religious aspects of Tribal/Hindu distinctions, see for instance (Hutton 1946:1–7) (Sinha 1958), (Ghurye 1963), (Füerer-Haimendorf 1982), (Tiwari 2002:5–9), (Schnepel 2002), (Hardenberg 2010).

58 Surajit Sinha (1966:72) wisely remarked that “The vaishnava gurus are not concerned with replacing the traditional rituals of their clients”.



(Ai, Lakshmi, Sani...). Furthermore, when one inquires about what “Mahadeo” looks like, the answer is often: “He’s a tiger”. Designations must therefore be interpreted with great care. In the same vein, “Domahi” is spontaneously described as being the local designation of Magh Bihu, the Assamese harvesting festival that corresponds to Magh Sakranti elsewhere in India. However, in Karbi villages, Domahi consists in an ancestor cult. Similarly, how do we interpret in terms of Hinduisation the fact that in a village inhabited by Koches, thus supposedly “Hinduised tribals”, Vaishnavite cults and those dedicated to the local deity Bamun Gohain are held in the same sanctuary, described by villagers as “our *nam ghar*” but which is also called Bamun Gohain *than*, “the sanctuary of Bamun Gohain”?

The situation of Karbis and Tiwas in the plains provides critical instances in which neither the models of acculturation/Sanskritisation of tribals nor those of a hill/plain cultural cleavage suffice to at least describe the variability of local situations. Such models are accurate on a larger scale but in a somewhat statistical manner, as they reduce the dispersion of real cases by offering an “average” picture which can be verified only in very few cases.



**Figure 1-4:** “Hinduised” monoliths in the submontane belt

*Diverging social structures: the Mishings*

Despite their recent arrival in the Assamese plains, the 587,000 Mishings, known for a long time as Miris, display a remarkable variability. Mishings share a fair number of cultural features which confirms their affinity with the Adi groups living on the Himalayan side of the Brahmaputra. Although early chronicles mention the Miris among the Ahoms' neighbours, it seems that the term was in fact applied to anyone living between the Ahom settlements and the Himalayas.<sup>59</sup> In the first half of the nineteenth century, the Miris seem to have been confined only to a small portion of the submontane belt.<sup>60</sup> As soon as the end of the same century, 6,800 Miris were recorded as living south of the Brahmaputra; in 1931 their number was evenly distributed on both banks; in 1971 they were more numerous on the south bank and present in all areas of Upper Assam.<sup>61</sup> Though this amazing mobility may be accounted for by the fact that the Mishings' economy is closely linked to rivers, it gives some insight into the role that the mobility of populations in general may have played in ancient times.<sup>62</sup>

The Mishings also illustrate the importance of cultural differentiations among groups regarded as being of the same origin. The Mishing population is divided up into two sections, the Barogam ("12 clan chiefs") and the Dohgam ("10 chiefs"). Barogams and Dohgams are to be found in the same areas, although they live in separate villages and do not intermarry. Barogam marriages are bilateral, taking place between two local moieties with no geographical restrictions. Dohgams, on the contrary, are divided into six endogamous local groups comprising several exogamous

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59 In the chronicles, *Miri* seems to start replacing the Tai Ahom ethnonym *Kang lai* in the mid-seventeenth century, although the synonymy between both terms remains to be verified. (Barua 1985:179, 209, VI-142-153).

60 (Neufville 1828:354).

61 (Bhandari 1992:32; Hunter 1879:225). 1901 Census: Lakhimpur (22 000), Sibsagar (15 000), 1931 Census: Lakhimpur (36 000), Sibsagar (33 000).(Census of India 1901-2 1902; Census of India 1931 1932).

62 The prevalent idea of collective migrations happening over short periods, is now being challenged by clues of "longer cycles of shifting back and forth", as found by Toni Huber in Northern Arunachal Pradesh.(Huber 2012).

lineages.<sup>63</sup> We have no historical clues to help determine whether current differences in matrimonial rules reflect an original dichotomy or if they appeared after the Mishings spread throughout Upper Assam. We do not even know whether, before they spread to the plains, the ancestors of today's Mishings perceived themselves as a single entity. We only know that both of these matrimonial modes are found in the Adi area, from where the Mishings might have emigrated.<sup>64</sup>

The Mishings provide another example where ethnicity encompasses wide differences in one aspect as fundamental as social structure. Although we have little information about the processes that have led to such differentiation, their mere existence hints at the necessary conditions for drawing up a credible description of the regional anthropology. We have to acknowledge the existence of several levels of social phenomena, each ruled by particular laws, and we first of all have to consider ethnic phenomena as inherently separate—although obviously not disconnected—from other social and cultural phenomena. The few cases briefly described above for the sake of introducing North-East India, show that the complex series of local variations actually observed may not be accurately described by resorting solely to ethnic categories, whether assigned or asserted. Similarly, classifications in terms either of linguistic traits, or the caste/tribe or hills/plains dichotomies may be of some relevance on a greater scale but will be systematically blurred on a smaller scale.

### *The socio-economic origins of ethnicisation*

Ethnic categorisation should not be dismissed under the pretext that it is allegedly disconnected from other social processes. It is a central dimension of mutual perceptions and interactions and, as such, it effects how many aspects of cultures and societies are shaped. Before undertaking a deeper analysis of the multifarious relations between ethnicity and social structures, we will briefly consider a few elements of the regional socio-economic history which might help us to understand how ethnic categorisations inherited from colonial times have acquired the extraordinary

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63 (Bhandari 1992:27–30).

64 (Roy 1960).

importance they assume today. In this respect three processes have proved decisive.

At the start of the colonial period (1826), North-East India was one of the least populated regions of India. In 1901, the population density remained three times lower in the Assam plains (65 per km<sup>2</sup>) than in the neighbouring Province of Bengal (191 per km<sup>2</sup>).<sup>65</sup> Within less than one and a half centuries, a series of massive migrations led to tremendous demographic growth, from 4 M in 1872 to 37 M today. Since the late nineteenth century, hundreds of thousands of labourers have been forcibly settled in tea gardens.<sup>66</sup> Then, in the early twentieth century, a large, steady wave of immigration rose from undivided Bengal—and to a lesser degree from Northern India and Nepal—and continued on a large scale after 1947 from present Bangladesh.<sup>67</sup> This latter phenomenon remains a major issue in Assamese domestic politics, particularly in relation to its effects on the relatively less populated and politically sensible tribal zones.<sup>68</sup> In 2011, Assam (397 per km<sup>2</sup>) was still relatively less populated than the neighbouring Indian and Bangladeshi regions, as for instance West Bengal (1,029) or Rangpur Division (960).

The second major demographic change was urbanisation. This is a very recent phenomenon in North-East India.<sup>69</sup> In 1901, Guwahati had less than 15,000 inhabitants, against 0,8 M in 2001. The share of urban population, which in other Indian States has globally doubled since Independence, has increased more than

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65 (Census of India 1901 1903).

66 (Chatterjee and Gupta 1981).

67 Today, the population density remains twice as high in Sylhet Dt. of Bangladesh than in Assam (Assam 2001: 340 per km<sup>2</sup>, Sylhet 2011: 779). The exact extent of Bangladeshi immigration into Assam is still unknown; an official report estimated at 4 M the number of illegal Bangladeshi immigrants in the country in 1998. (Governor of Assam 1998).

68 (Fernandes 2005) On the issue of immigration in Tribal areas, see (Baruah 2003; Bordoloi 1991; Fernandes and Barbora 2009).

69 For Amalendu Guha, “The absence of big urban centres distinguishes the economic history of medieval Assam from that of medieval northern India.”(1991:25).

fourfold in Assam (1941: 3%, 2001: 13%).<sup>70</sup> The urban population has grown concurrent to the development of non-agrarian and literate classes. Before Independence, the rate of literacy in the North-East was more than three times lower than in Bengal (1941: Assam 4.7%, Bengal 16%). Assam has nowadays caught up with the national average (65%). The other north-eastern States, better equipped with Christian mission schools, are among the most literate in India (89% in 2001 for Mizoram).

The implementation (1935) of affirmative action policies towards Depressed Classes (low castes and tribes) in the form of reservations has had a major impact in the North-East. This region includes one of the highest proportions of Scheduled Tribes in India, with wide discrepancies between plains States and hill States (2001: 27% in total; from 12% in Assam to 94% in Mizoram; India: 8%). Only applied until Independence to seats in provincial and national assemblies, tribal policies subsequently extended to job reservations, education reservations, specific programs for economic development and the creation of autonomous territories in the form of Tribal districts and States.<sup>71</sup> The subject of intense debate, these measures have at least contributed to the steady development of educated and economically well-off tribal elites, a process in which large-scale missionary undertakings towards the hill tribes have also played a major role.<sup>72</sup>

The combination of these phenomena has considerably affected the geographical distribution as well as the social differentiations of north-eastern populations. As far as we are concerned, it has also transformed the way North-easterners perceive the regional human landscape, a mutation in which “ethnicisation” has no doubt played a major part. The vision imposed as being the dominant one is in fact of a proper ethnic nature, as it relies on a holistic and essentialist division of the human environment into discrete and primordial entities. According to this conception, the North-East would be made up of a multiplicity of people different in essence and consequently different in all respects. A number of correlates

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70 (Census of India 1941 1942).

71 For a history and assessment of the creation of autonomous territories, see (Baruah 1989, 1999).

72 On the impact of Christianisation on the emergence of a tribal identity among the middle-classes, cf. (Nag 2002:53–63, 139–140).

follow: to reconcile such essentially different entities would be an impossible task, which would account for a “fragmented society”; conflicts would stem from diversity/heterogeneity; and according to two points of view that diverge with regard to their interpretations but share a same paradigm, underdevelopment would be caused either by conflicts among communities or by the unfair distribution of resources among them. This translates, in the field of political action, as a contention which is not specific to this region but where it is particularly exacerbated: on the one hand, it is argued that different people ought to be ruled by their “own” laws, and on the other hand, that communal claims and insurgencies seriously impede regional development. Ironically, the very term “ethnicity” has, in common parlance, come to characterise political fragmentation and separatist violence, somewhat like the stereotypic “ethnic clashes” systematically used by Western journalists in reports about violence in Africa.

Ethnicisation has neither preceded nor resulted from political contention or from a quest for communal interests provided by reservation policies. These processes have taken place simultaneously and have mutually reinforced each other. Socio-political changes have spread new representations which have in turn affected social morphologies. Affirmative action aimed at smoothing out inequalities among communities has, by creating new resources, created elites who base their legitimacy on reviving identities and on reinforcing reservations. In a way, the North-East has never been so culturally homogenous: the new generations of tribal elites are mostly urban, and a product of the same national education system as non-tribal elites, and in many respects they all share the values of the pan-Indian middle class. Heterogeneity is situated primarily in collective identities and representations of the past. The following chapters will try to explore the social and cultural universe from which they have emerged and whose image they strive, rather successfully, to re-invent.

## Chapter 2: Groups and names: ethnicities in the margins

At the beginning of my investigations in North-East India, I attended Jonbil melā, an annual fair where people from the hills come down to barter their goods with people from the plains. They build temporary huts and spend two or three nights there in small groups with people from the same village. I went from one hut to another with two Tiwa friends, asking villagers in Assamese about where they came from and about their identity: which village are you from? What tribe are you from? Most of them answered willingly and said that they were Khasi or Tiwa from this or that village. One of the groups, however, seemed rather uncomfortable about answering my questions. They first simply stated that they came from Mawker, in Meghalaya. “But what is your tribe (*jāt*)?” After some hesitation, one of them finally replied: “we are Muktieh”. My Tiwa friends, who are educated people and involved in cultural movements, pressed them for more information: “that is not a tribe, it’s a Tiwa title, and it means Mithi. What is your tribe? You must be Tiwa, mustn’t you?” But the same gentleman calmly repeated: “no, we’re just Muktieh”. My friends expressed signs of deep despair at this and we left. They went on to share their thoughts with me: “in fact they are Tiwa, but as they have lived in Meghalaya for some time they behave like Khasi. Moreover, they benefit from some advantages by having Khasi status” (i.e. the Khasi Scheduled Tribe status). In the current ethno-political context of North-East India, the inability to state the name of your tribe is regarded as totally abnormal. This was obvious by my friends’ reaction: everyone has to have a tribe.

### *Looking for margins*

The explanatory models I put forward in the following chapters are inseparable from the ethnographic journey during which they took shape. My initial agenda was to describe the complexity of North-East India. As it was out of the question for me, even in the long term, to undertake an investigation over an area of 250,000km<sup>2</sup> with a population of 40 million, a realistically sized area for field investigations had to be selected. No part of this

complex whole could be regarded as more representative than any other. I had to confront its complexity for what it was, so I decided to opt for the description of a sub-region that I would delineate by voluntarily integrating all the empirical aspects of the complexity of North-East India; a region that is defined neither by geographical homogeneity, administrative boundaries nor, above all, by any correspondence between itself and the territories of such or such an ethnic group. In other words, my objective was to explore spaces and people that present the greatest possible number of discontinuities. This is how the idea of looking at what I call “the margins” emerged.

The administrative restrictions imposed on foreigners excluded the Himalayas as well as the Naga hills, so I looked at the northern fringes of the Meghalaya plateau. Following several exploratory journeys, I delimited an area (Figure 2-1) which combined many primary discontinuities: the plain-hill divide, a boundary between two States (Assam-Meghalaya), and the coexistence between several ethnic and cultural entities, Karbi, Khasi and Tiwa—to cite only the main ones. At first it was the Tiwas who attracted my attention to this particular area. This may seem a contradiction to my anti-monographic intentions until one realises that this group is one of the most atypical in the North-East, as it is divided into two highly contrasted cultural components. Finally, encounters with people with an unconventional identity—such as those evoked at the beginning of this chapter—convinced me that the region concealed atypical situations which might prove very useful to my project. Although certain orographic and administrative limits were set, this was not the case for the cultural and ethnic limits. Even assuming that the spatial extensions of collective identities is essentially subjective, if one wish to match them against other features, one has to start from a preliminary mapping, at least in order to determine the location of prospective local inquiries. Thus, my ethnographic journey started very empirically with an attempt to draw a rough map of subjective ethnic groups. No map of ethnic groups was actually available. And in fact, no precise map of any kind was available, since the Indian State is wary, to say the least, of allowing the publication of detailed maps.



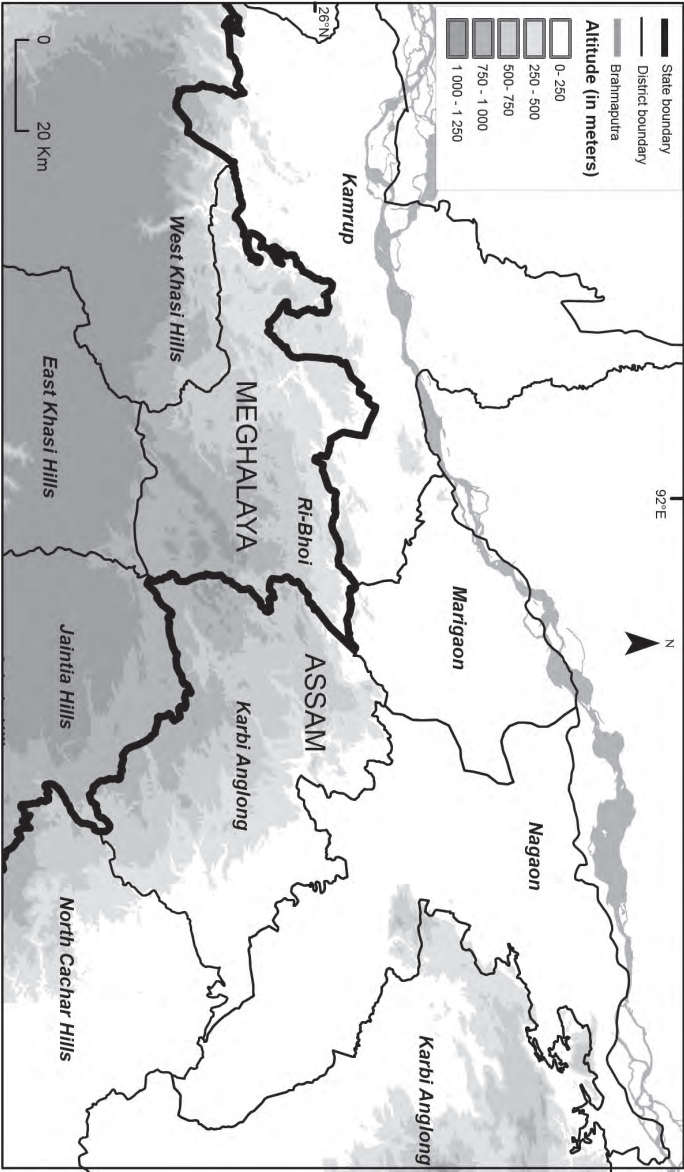


Figure 2-1: Area of study: administrative boundaries

*Surnames identification and ethnic ascription*

How is the ethnicity of an individual recognized in this region? Practically speaking, North-easterners and other Indians infer ethnic belonging from patronyms or surnames, commonly called “titles” in India. Physical aspects are often taken into account, but the “title” remains the most reliable indicator of social identities. Still, the accurateness of surname-based identification may vary greatly from one title to the other. Many titles are understood as the sign of membership to an entity at caste and tribe level. For example, everyone spontaneously associates the most common title in Assam, Barua, with an Assamese upper-caste, generally Brahmin—though with some uncertainty because the name also exists in Bengal. Yet some titles may be either more inclusive or more ambiguous: Das, one of the most comprehensive surnames, is hardly associated with any other social identity but Hindu. Pator may be either a plains Tiwa, a plains Karbi or a Tay Ahom surname. The regional context is decisive: Bordoloi, commonly associated with the plains Tiwa in Middle Assam, is understood to be a Chutiya title in Upper Assam.

Finally, surnames may refer to descent groups, i.e. clans or lineages. This is the commonest situation in the hills, where belonging to unilineal descent groups is much more explicit than in the plains. And as long as folk sociologies conceive tribes as being made of a discrete set of clans, in the hills, titles are spontaneously translated into tribal membership. From an ethnic point of view, the tribe is therefore defined as the sum of people bearing a certain number of surnames. Thus, coming back to the anecdote about Jonbil Mela, my Tiwa friends interpreted the title Muktieh as meaning a Tiwa identity, even though the people concerned did not seem to agree with this. My friends believed that these people have a “true identity” which cannot be wiped away by any other feature such as their mother tongue, appearance, and way of life or even by their own asserted identity. Their title was the last remaining clue as to their “true identity”. Consequently, making inquiries among villagers about the distribution of a group of people rapidly leads to evoking the distribution of titles.

– Where are Tiwas found in the hills?

– Most of them around here, in west Karbi Anglong. But there are many in Meghalaya, although they may not look like Tiwas and don't speak the language. But their titles are Tiwa: Puma, Lumphuid... They marry Khasi girls and take Khasi names: Amsong becomes Memsong, Puma becomes Umbah or Memba, Maslai becomes Mathlai, Mithi becomes Mukti. But they are still Tiwa.

Statements of this kind that I also recorded among Karbis and Khasis hide far-reaching inter-ethnic processes which I was not aware of in the initial stages of my research. We shall come back to this later. I did understand, however, that in some places there are people whose ethnic belonging is problematic when matched against their cultural appearance. On the evidence of the tone used by some of my informants, these discrepancies constitute a real political issue. In actual fact, the identification of titles has a direct bearing on the tribe's virtual population, thus on its weight in the competition for rights and advantages over other tribes.

### *Mapping surnames*

In contrast to the lack of statistics at village level in India, a very rich resource recently emerged in the form of “Electoral rolls” published online by the Electoral Officer of each Indian State since 2005. These lists are drawn up through regular on-the-spot censuses. They provide a breakdown of the adult population (i.e. approx. 57% of the total population) per village and per house, and give their age as well as their relationship either to a father, more rarely to a mother, or to a husband, for married women. Although they contain a varying proportion of errors, these lists nevertheless virtually reflect a real-life picture of the adult population and above all provide personal data that are missing from the general Census of India.

There are many anthropological uses for electoral rolls. Three particular applications were of interest to me: first, mapping the distribution of surnames. According to what we have just seen, this gives, for hills groups, a direct indication of the distribution of clans (Figure 2-2).

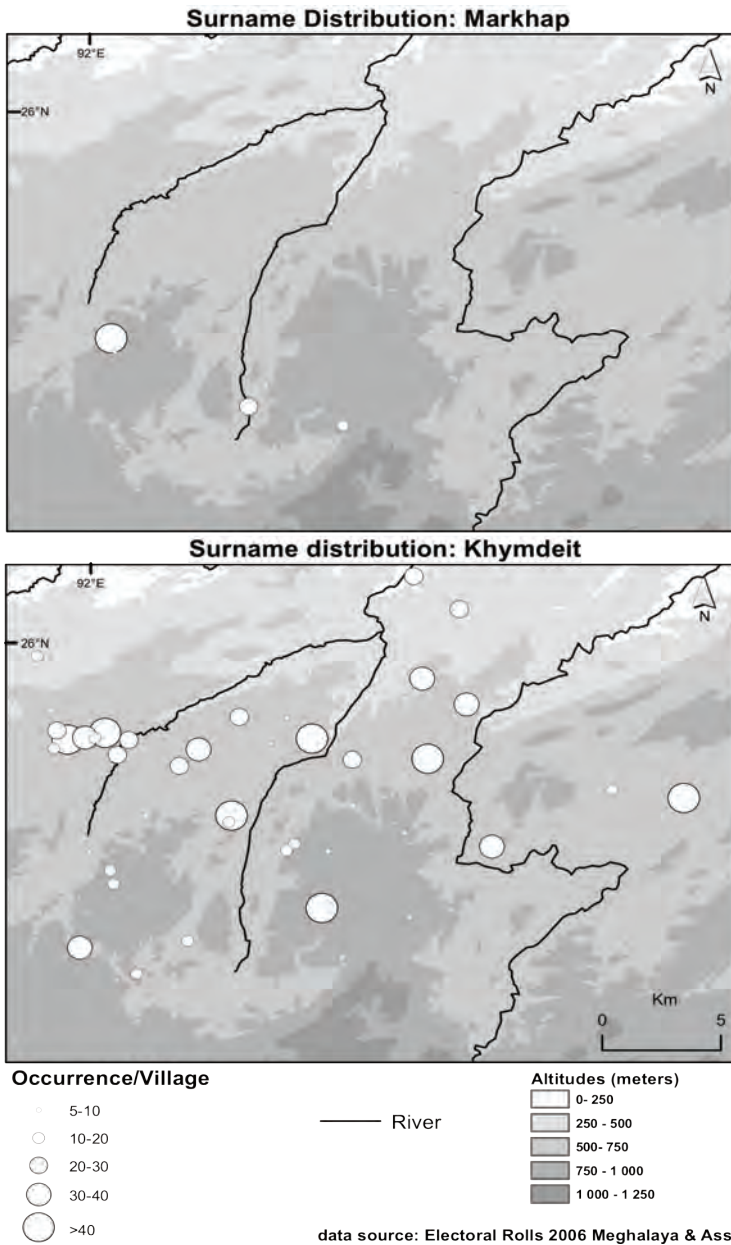
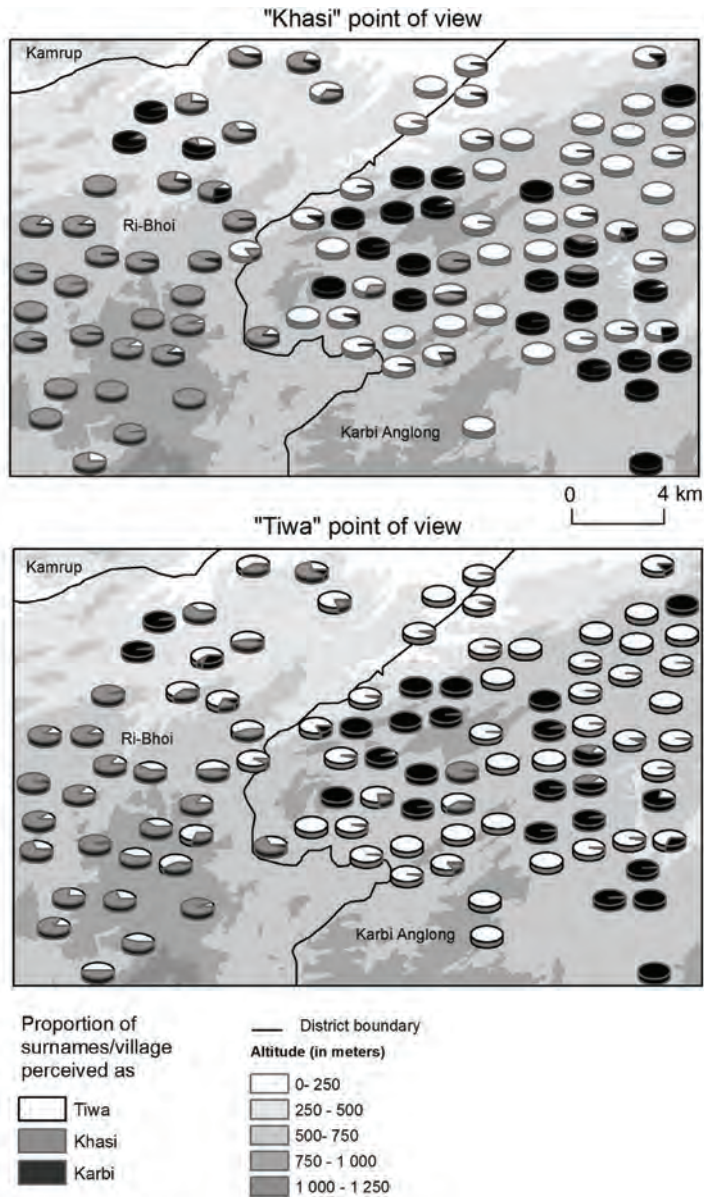


Figure 2-2: Two surnames distributions



**Figure 2-3:** Ethnicity attributions to surnames by village  
 Common ethnic identification of surnames applied to the distribution of surnames in the Assam and Meghalaya electoral rolls (2008)

And as long as clans are subjectively associated with ethnic affiliation, one may map the distribution of ethnic groups as perceived by a particular informant (Figure 2-3). Another possible application consists in mapping descent modes. By comparing an individual's surname with that of his father, one may deduce the matrilineal or patrilineal principle that was followed. The resulting map will reveal the proportion of each mode in different villages and thus villages of composite descent (Figure 2-4). Finally, corpora of surnames may be analysed in terms of isonymy: the patronymic composition of different areas may be statistically compared, giving clues about their historical genesis.

Thus, thanks to the electoral rolls, I had access to a set of spatial quantitative data which in themselves helped decipher the general social setting of this plural area. Furthermore, this provided me with a map of several "problematic areas" which suggested several areas where particular fieldwork would have to be carried out. Nevertheless, compiling a clean, numerable corpus from raw electoral data printed in different languages was a long, fastidious task. Indeed, some acceptable spatial limits had to be set. These demarcate an area of approximately 1,200 km<sup>2</sup>, encompassing 295 villages and 70,000 inhabitants corresponding to a corpus of some 40,000 registered voters. The area stretches along the lower basins of the Umsiang and Umiam Rivers from the first foothills above the Brahmaputra valley to the Meghalaya upland, and it is split into two by the state border running between Assam and Meghalaya, one side in the district of Karbi Anglong and the other the district of Ri Bhoi. Ethnographic fieldwork was conducted to a varying degree in the whole area but also in many neighbouring localities, to the east and west in the hills, and to the north in the plain districts of Kamrup, Morigaon and Nagaon.

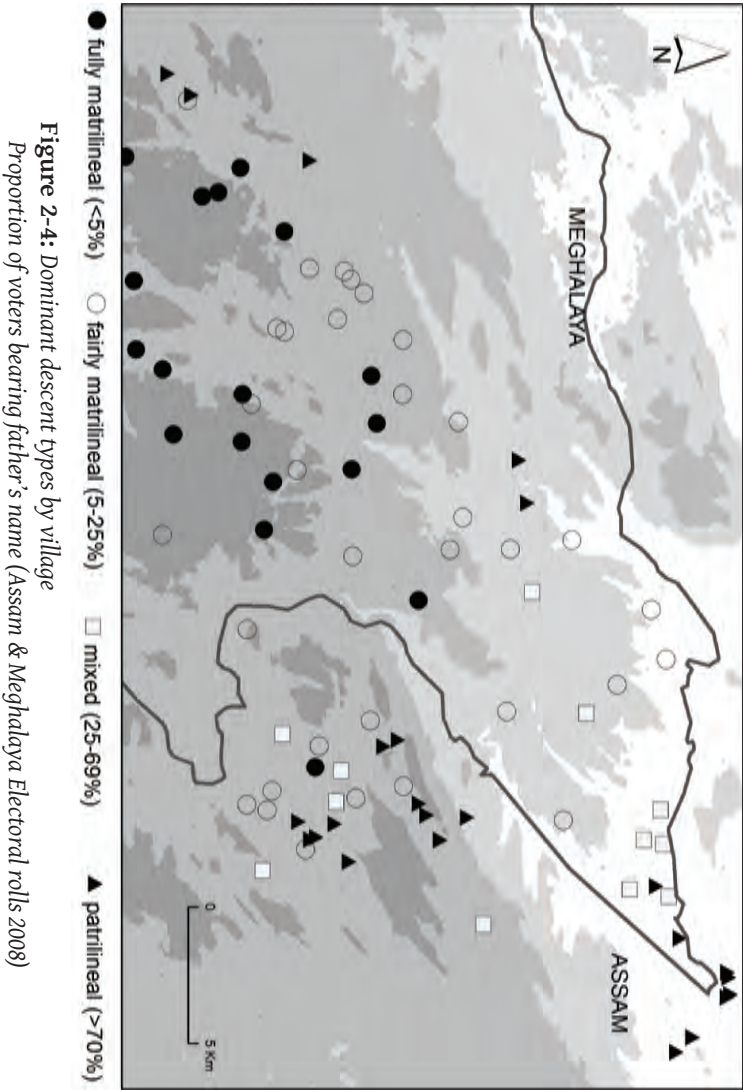


Figure 2-4: Dominant descent types by village

Proportion of voters bearing father's name (Assam & Meghalaya Electoral rolls 2008)

*Tribes*

My area of study is numerically dominated by three ethnic groups, or three “tribes”, to use the local term: the Karbis, the Khasis and the Tiwas. This area does not correspond to any named entity. I shall call it “the Triangle”, in reference to the coexistence of these three tribes. The English term “tribe” is a very common one in North-East India. Its uses make it very close to the Weberian concept of “ethnic group”: a group of people who assert, or are ascribed, a particular collective identity, irrespective of the common cultural features they might objectively share.<sup>1</sup> When defined as such, the Karbi and Khasi tribes constitute fairly discrete and continuous entities in areas to the east and west respectively, where, as Scheduled tribes, they have been granted “Autonomous districts” (Karbi Anglong, Khasi Hills); their population, however, extends well beyond these districts. Khasis are dominant throughout the eastern part of Meghalaya State (districts of Ri Bhoi, East Khasi Hills, and West Khasi Hills). This is also the case of the Pnars, who often also recognize themselves as Khasis and who mostly live in the Jaintia Hills Autonomous District to the south of the Triangle. Outside Karbi Anglong district, Karbis are found in Ri Bhoi district, and deep in the Assamese plains. As for the Tiwas, their settlements are always found to be alongside that of the Karbis, Khasis and Assamese castes—the latter being the main group in the plains. Other ethnic identities are found in small numbers in the Triangle: Garo, Bodo and Nepali. Assamese castes are not found in the Triangle, either in the hills and foothills or in the first belt of adjoining plains. The sketch above only lists the most widely represented ethnicities. I will soon describe less typical ethnic assertions at individual and collective level.

Karbis, Khasis and Tiwas are listed as Scheduled Tribes in Assam and/or Meghalaya. The official denomination of the Tiwas is still “Lalung”, as the tribe was formerly known. “Karbi” replaced “Mikir” in 2002.<sup>2</sup> And the common term “Khasi” refers to the official “Khasi, Jaintia, Synteng, Pnar, War, Bhoi, Lyngngam”. The extent to which each tribe is granted advantages associated with Scheduled Tribe (ST) status varies from State to State, and

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1 (Weber 1968:387ff.).

2 The Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes Orders (Amendment) Act, 2002.



in Assam it furthermore depends on whether this involves plain or hill dwellers and Autonomous districts or general districts. Providing accurate figures about Scheduled Tribes can be a rather delicate issue, one reason being that they are often referred to using outdated terms which have been rejected by the groups in question, not to speak of non-Scheduled Tribes and sections. Another reason is that the breakdown of each ST at local level is kept confidential by the Census authorities. Thus, we ignore the respective proportions of hill and plains components of each ST and similarly the exact breakdown of STs' in the Triangle area. The following estimates may be put forward for 2001 for the States of Assam and Meghalaya (Figure 2-5):

Scheduled Tribe	Meghalaya	Assam Hills	Assam Plains
“Khasi, Jaintia, Synteng, Pnar, War, Bhoi, Lyngngam”	<b>1,100,000</b>	<b>13,000</b>	
Karbi	<b>11,000</b>	<b>353,000</b>	200,000
“Lalung” (Tiwa)	1,000	10,000	<b>171,000</b>

**Figure 2-5:** Karbi, Khasi, Tiwa estimates 2001

(official names between quotes; common asserted terms within brackets; official Scheduled Tribes figures from Census of India 2001 in bold)

It would not be wrong to say that the three main tribes are associated with three fairly distinct languages (see previous chapter for their classification): Karbi, Khasi and Tiwa. The Tiwas, however, only speak Tiwa in the hills and in a few isolated villages in the plains, whereas the mother tongue of most plains Tiwas, i.e. the majority, is Assamese. The Karbis in the plains and foothills speak a distinct dialect, Kamrupi Karbi or Amri Karbi, which is hardly intelligible to speakers of hill dialects.<sup>3</sup> Among the Khasis in the Triangle, just as among all those on the northern fringe of Meghalaya, various forms of Khasi Bhoi dialects are found which differ from standard upland Khasi in major structural aspects.<sup>4</sup> The continuum of Khasi Bhoi variations is interrupted by several isolates such as Kharwang, close to Pnar, or Marngar, close to As-

3 (Grüssner 1978).

4 (Nagaraja 1994).

samese; both are spoken by people who assert a double identity: at a lower level, Kharwang and Marngar respectively, at a higher level Khasi. Finally, the ubiquity of plurilingualism must be underlined. This concerns not only the competence of anybody in the dominant language of each state, Assamese or Khasi, but also a very common fluency in the languages of neighbouring communities. Thus, the coincidence between a particular language and a particular collective identity is only relative and takes complex spatial forms.

When informants describe the cultural make-up of the area, they tend to simplify it by assigning continuous territories to particular tribes speaking a standard language and following distinct social rules. However, mapping data from the electoral rolls gives some insight into the ethnic and social diversity of the Triangle. As we have seen, attributing a surname to a tribe is subjective and may be controversial. Hence, the map of “tribal surnames” as seen by a Tiwa will differ from what a Khasi sees (Figure 2-3). By superimposing the maps of different, ethnically subjective attributions we may identify zones of consensual attributions as opposed to zones of controversial attributions. These maps obviously do not provide a true geography of self-asserted ethnicities; they correspond more to the geography of ascribed ethnicities. In fact, verifications in the field confirm the correspondence between consensual surname identification and locally self-asserted ascribed identities in many but not all areas. The maps of consensual attributions nevertheless contain valuable data since, given the blackout on village-wise official village statistics, there exists no other way of mapping an ethnic geography on this scale—the only alternative being to visit each and every one of the 295 villages to enquire about its affiliation.

### *Borderlands ethnicities and politics*

In so far as perceived ethnicities reflect relatively self-asserted ones, the most visible feature is the extent of multi-ethnicity in the Triangle. In a way this comes as no surprise, because the area was chosen for its multi-ethnicity. A more unexpected feature lies in the various spatial forms that ascribed ethnicities take. On-the-spot enquiries subsequently confirmed that this corresponds to various forms of multi-ethnicity as well as cul-

tural diversity. A comparison of two zones might be made (Figure 2-6). In the first zone, which corresponds to the Assamese side of the State border, villages are generally mono-ethnic, monolingual—in terms of mother tongues—and interlocked. On the Meghalaya side, with only a few exceptions very close to the border, villages are ethnically and culturally composite, presenting a wide range of situations: the minority of villages is mono-ethnic, while others display a collective double or triple ethnicity, while others yet again are truly composite with a large diversity of individually asserted attributed ethnicities. We may note, however, that even on the Meghalaya side, the spatial distribution of assigned ethnicities is not random, but follows some local continuities. In sum, the State border differentiates between a compartmentalised mosaic on one side and a continuum of blends on the other.

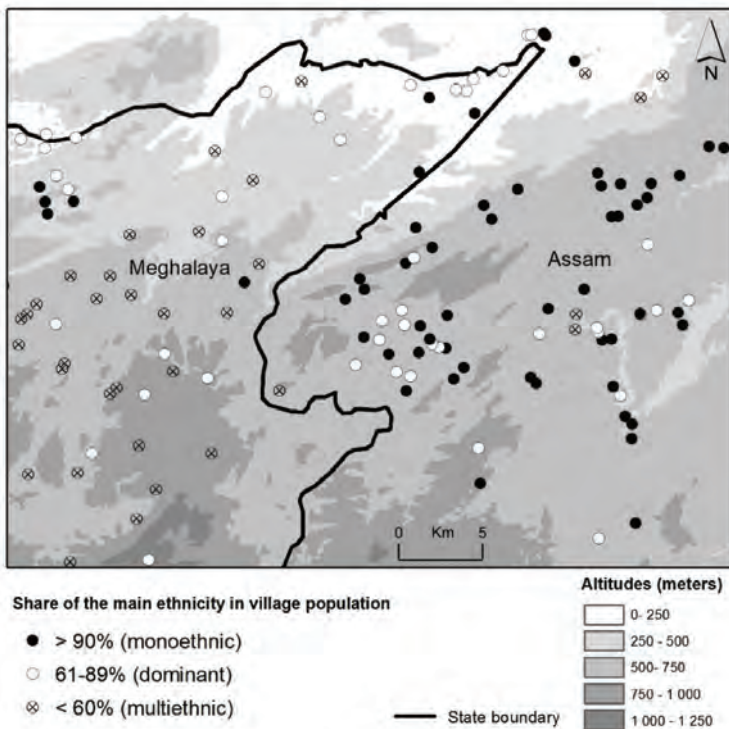


Figure 2-6: Forms of multi-ethnicity in the Assam-Meghalaya borderlands

The fact that the divide runs along the State borders suggests that different State policies or histories might be invoked. Some Karbi and Tiwa ethnic leaders argue that the composite nature of villages on the western side of the border is due to the attractiveness of Khasi Scheduled Tribe status for the Karbi and Tiwa minorities of Meghalaya. This is in keeping with the general acculturation-to-majority thesis which is put forward for instance to account for the Assamisation of plain tribals. Though this might indeed be a plausible factor, the conditions that render it effective and the reasons why, as the map shows, Karbi or Tiwa mono-ethnic villages are found here and there still have to be specified. In any case this particular margin is not a simple one that could be described as a mere transitional zone where two spheres of influence would meet: according to the places considered, transitions are gradual or abrupt.

The very existence of the State border has to be situated in the context of the distribution of and the political balance between pre-existing ethnicities. The State boundary might be seen as both a cause and a result of the shaping of the local ethnic landscape. Historically, there have been permanent interactions between the distribution of ethnicities and the delimitation of local polities. The main motive behind separating Meghalaya from Assam in 1972 was indeed the Khasi and Garo leaders' quest for an autonomous polity. The borders of the new State were drawn according to existing district boundaries, themselves inherited from colonial and pre-colonial times. The particular part of the border that concerns us here corresponds to the line where, since at least the early nineteenth century, the influence of the Jaintia State to the East met that of Nongkrem, now Khyrim State, to the west. In 1835, shortly after the arrival of the British in North-East India, Jaintia State was fully annexed to the Crown. The reason—or the opportunist pretext—was the killing of three British subjects who were sacrificed under the auspices of Gobha raja, a vassal king of Jaintia who ruled over the northern foothills. While the southern uplands of the former Jaintia territory were attributed to the Khasi and Jaintia Hill district, the northern part was amalgamated with the Mikir Hills tracts of the Nowgong district of

Assam.<sup>5</sup> Nongkrem-Khyrim officially remained an independent “Native State” ruled by a *syiem* (Kh. monarch).

These colonial divisions formed the territorial basis of post-Independence ethnic claims: Khasi, Jaintia (Pnar) and Garo leaders succeeded in obtaining full statehood for Meghalaya in 1972, while their Mikir (Karbi) counterparts secured the creation of the autonomous district of Karbi Anglong in 1976 from the former United Mikir and North Cachar Hills district.<sup>6</sup> Both areas are classified as “Tribal areas” under the 6<sup>th</sup> Schedule of the Indian Constitution. Access to land, customary law, as well as local development are regulated by Autonomous District Councils formed on a tribal basis: in our case the Khasi Hills Autonomous Council and the Karbi Anglong autonomous council.

It would be misleading to assert univocally that ethnic polarisation has resulted from the imposition of new administrative spatial units or, on the contrary, that ethnic aspirations have sparked off a territorial balkanisation. This region, like most regions in North-East India, has experienced both processes simultaneously, the reason being that these processes were and are still dynamically related. A pre-existing ethnic geography has induced an administrative territorialisation which now feeds back on the ethnic distribution by affecting movements and belongings—through attraction or repulsion. This is illustrated by a number of examples. The “large minority” condition of the Khasis and Karbis in formerly undivided Assam has legitimised the creation of new borders. This process in itself has produced new minorities that have been cut off from a large multi-ethnic entity to become isolated within a mono-ethnic one. These include the Khasis and Karbis who fell on the wrong side of the border, and of smaller groups such as the Tiwas.

Though colonial administrative divisions provided the rough layout for the present border between Assam and Meghalaya, its actual line through the hills was the result of a balance of power between post-Independence tribal leaders. The conclusions of the Mikir Hills Boundaries Commission set up in 1951

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5 Foreign Political Consultations, 14 avr 1836.

6 For a history of the creation of Ethnic States and districts in North-East India, see (Baruah 1999).

were naturally influenced by Karbi and Khasi leaders acting from within and outside the Commission. According to present Tiwa leaders, a major role was played by the Congress politician Bonily Khongmen, the first tribal and the first woman representative of Assam in the lower house of the Indian Parliament. Born a Karbi in a predominantly Tiwa area and married to a Khasi, she got the traditional Tiwa heads on the eastern bank of the Umiyam River to sign a request to incorporate the Mikir Hill district (now Karbi Anglong). For their part, Khasi members succeeded in getting Tiwa-inhabited areas on the western bank of the river (Cau Raid) included in the Khasi Hills. Protests by Tiwa politicians had little effect on the procedure.

The political and economic outcome of the territorialisation of ethnicities is easy to surmise. The intertwining of Khasi and Karbi settlements in the Assam-Meghalaya borderlands has been the pretext of regular territorial claims and provocations by both States. Differences over the precise drawing of the border in “Block I & Block II” areas is in fact related to broader inter-States issues as well as to ethnic politics within each State. Such diplomatic crisis have led to occasional communal clashes, though ironically to a lesser extent among Block I & II people than in Shillong campuses. Although Khasis are a Scheduled Tribe in Assam and Karbis a Scheduled tribe in Meghalaya, their small number leaves them little chance of securing any reserved ST seats in local state assemblies. And for hill Tiwas the situation is all the more trying. As Karbi politicians feared secession of the Tiwa-inhabited area from the Autonomous district, hill Tiwas were granted Assam ST status as late as 2002 with the “Hill Lalung” label; in Meghalaya they do not even seem to have contemplated this prospect.

For the Karbis and Tiwas landlocked by the boundary inside the heavily Khasi-dominated State of Meghalaya, Khasi ST status might possibly be very attractive. Being eligible for this status legally requires fulfilling a number of conditions pertaining to one’s culture and adherence to Khasi traditional values, which may in fact be summarised by a simple principle: those whose mother is Khasi can become Khasi. Hence, a non-Khasi man marrying a Khasi woman may obtain Khasi ST status for his children from which he himself will indirectly benefit. Another local explanation for the Khasi-isation of Karbis and Tiwas points to Christianisation. Converts to this religion have been taught by Khasi catechists

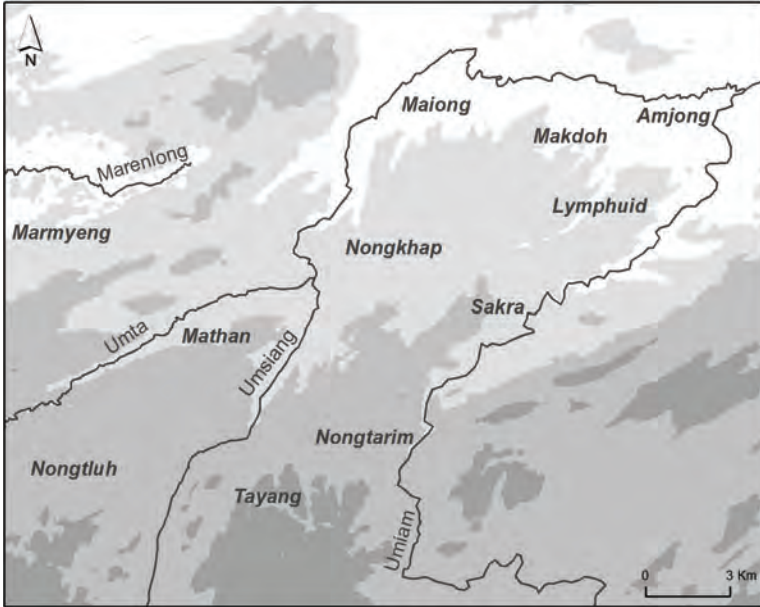
in the Khasi language and their bibles and missals are written in Khasi. The hard version of this argument has it that catechists themselves voluntarily encourage their followers to change their identity. The same scenario was explained to me to account for the Karbi-isation of Tiwas in the Assamese part of the Triangle.

At the beginning of my investigations, minority situations and religious conversions were the two reasons given for cases where surnames and cultures did not “match”. They come down to minorities assimilating to a numerically, spiritually or politically dominant culture, within a kind of balance of power. For me, this thesis was all the more acceptable since it was in keeping with many theories of ethnicity, particularly that of Barth: individuals strategically adapt to the dominant ethnic environment. It remained for me, however, to observe the precise conditions in which this happened, how in similar geographical and political situations certain people undergo an ethnic conversion and others do not; and how conversions to Christianity that took place at roughly the same time had varying effects on ethnicity.

### *Exploring the margins*

The corpus of surnames suggested a first broad area for exploring the regional set-up, by identifying locations of controversial or composite ethnic attributions: the first band of Meghalaya villages along the State boundary. A cartography of descent modes, based on the electoral data, narrowed down this area for possible fieldwork (Cf. *supra* Figure 2-4). The process was quite straightforward: when the surname of an individual corresponded to his/her father’s, this was counted as an occurrence of patrilineal descent; in the reverse situation, matrilineality was inferred. Summations at village level were classed into four categories according to their salient statistical distribution: matrilineal, moderately matrilineal, mixed, and patrilineal. When plotted on the map, the corresponding areas either matched or not those of ascribed ethnicities. There was obvious correspondence, for example, in the south-west between the dominant Khasi-ness of many villages and strong matrilineality, and in the North-East between Karbi-ness and patrilineality. Yet there were almost as many discrepancies. My attention was drawn to what happened in the corner of Ri Bhoi district in Meghalaya that sticks into As-

sam: there, several villages combined a mixed asserted ethnicity profile and a mixed-descent profile. These were indeed the atypical situations I was looking for. This is the area we will now travel through to discover through local examples what margins are made of.



**Figure 2-7:** *The polities of Northeastern Ri Bhoi*

Let us follow a track that leads us from the very first foothills above the Brahmaputra plains to the Meghalaya plateau, within the Ri Bhoi district of Meghalaya. “Ri Bhoi” is a very meaningful term as far as our interests are concerned. “Ri” in the Khasi language means “country”. Bhoi may be understood both as “border” and “the people of the border”. This was the term used by Upland Khasis to refer to the northern fringes of the plateau as well as, disdainfully, their inhabitants. Until forty years ago, “Bhoi” was deemed pejorative in the eyes of the locals as it was synonymous with “ignorant” in the Khasi language.<sup>7</sup> In a monograph published about the Khasis in the early twentieth century, P.R.T. Gurdon

<sup>7</sup> Cf. in Nissor Singh’s dictionary (1983:11).



notes that the term “Bhoi” is “a territorial name rather than tribal”.<sup>8</sup> He divides the “Bhoi” into Jinthongs, Mynris, Rynkhongs, and the Khasi-Bhois, observing that the first three “are not Khasi, but Mikir”, i.e. Karbi.<sup>9</sup>

In order to provide the reader with a minimum number of references, a few words need to be said about the socio-political set-up in Ri Bhoi. Beside the village (Kh. *shnong*) unit, the most tangible political unit in this part of Ri Bhoi, as elsewhere in eastern Meghalaya, is a community of villages called *raid* (Kh.). This administrative unit is part of the “traditional” political system in force within the Autonomous District: the States (Kh. *hima*), under the authority of a kingly figure, (Kh. *syiem*), are divided into a number of *raids*. *Raids* are ruled by clan representatives (Kh. *basan*), which in Ri Bhoi are presided over either by a vassal chief called *syiem raid* or by a *lynqdoh* (Kh.) priest.<sup>10</sup> However old and whatever the origin of its inhabitants, the *raid* is one of the main components of social identities. In the past, every *raid* came under the authority of the Tiger-god Ryngku (Khla Ryngku) who punished crimes and to whom an annual sacrifice was offered. According to the *syiem* of Khyrim, all *raids* in north-eastern Ri Bhoi willingly placed themselves under his predecessors’ authority in order to seek protection from Jaintia tyranny.<sup>11</sup> When the British arrived, the region was part of the Nongkrem kingdom and when the latter split a few years later (1853), the local *raids* were divided up between the States of Myllem and Khyrim along a line running north-south. The links between local *raids* and the *syiems* of Khyrim and Myllem, who both rule from the Shillong area, are mostly limited to the supply of a goat which is sacrificed at the annual Pomblang ritual. Except for the extreme tip of its north-eastern corner, almost all villages of Ri Bhoi district converted to Christianity in the twentieth century.

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8 (Gurdon 1914:2).

9 (Gurdon 1914:62).

10 For descriptions of the Khasi political set-up see (Gurdon 1914:68–75; Bareh 1997:39ff; Nongkynrih 2002:66–68).

11 Interview with Syiem Khyrim, Feb. 2006. The exact date cannot be recalled, but it must be remembered that it was before the partition of the Shyllong (Nongkrem) State, i.e. before 1853.

North of the river Umsiang, which marks the border with Assam, Raid Maiong (pop. 740 in 2001) is made up of three contiguous villages, Mawpdeng, Kraikojam and Maiong. Locals agree that Raid Maiong is inhabited by a large majority of Tiwas (titles: Amsong, Sagra, Hukai...), with about a quarter made up of Khasis (Dorphang, Nongrum...), Wars and Pnars (Lamare, Shylla).<sup>12</sup> By “Khasis”, locals refer indiscriminately to Bhois and Khyrnriams (people of the Uplands), and more rarely to Wars and Pnars. The only disagreement regarding the identification of surnames concerns Muktieh, which some Tiwa informants claim is merely the Khasi spelling of the Tiwa surname Mithi, adopted under the influence of Khasi missionaries. Maiong is the old settlement of the *raid*. Karbis are considered to have been the original inhabitants, yet not a single family identified as such lives there today—although a few individuals bear surnames that are recognized as Karbi elsewhere. Mawpdeng was set up by Khasi and Pnar immigrants who became Presbyterian in the first years of the twentieth century. In the 1970s, the first Catholics left Maiong and settled in Kraikojam, though Maiong rapidly became Catholic as well. Ninety-nine per cent of Mawpdeng inhabitants enjoy Khasi ST status, with less than a quarter in Maiong and Kraikojam. This reflects the fact that the Tiwas are not recognized as a ST in Meghalaya and this is in keeping with the ethnic identification of the surnames found in these two localities.

Matrimonial relationships across ethnicities are numerous both within these three villages and with outside villages. Raid Maiong genealogies, at least over the last three generations, reveal marriages not only among hill Tiwas and Khasis, both supposedly matrilineal, but also with plains Tiwas, Bodos, and even Nepalis, all reputed patrilineal. We shall come back to this point. It may simply be said here that the corpus of surnames shows a high proportion of matrilineal links in Raid Maiong: over ninety per cent in Mawpdeng and around seventy-four per cent in both Kraikojam and Maiong, a difference that it is worthwhile noting.

Linguistically, there is rather a contrast between Khasi villages and Tiwa villages. Wherever they live, all villagers are fluent in Khasi and Assamese, but while Mawpdeng people speak only Khasi

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12 Wars are concentrated in the south of the Khasi Hills, Pnars in the Jaintia Hills.

at home, Tiwa and Khasi are both used in Maiong and Mawpdeng households. As for other cultural features, particularly religious features, they are not easy to assess in a totally Christian context. Nevertheless, people who identified as Khasi and those who identified as Tiwa both visit healers (As. *ojhawala*) in the plains, and some Christians discreetly perform divination indoors.

Raid Maiong provides us with a vision of some of the ethnic dynamics at play in the region and is a good example of the importance of scale in describing the ethnic and cultural situation in the margins. On a larger scale, Raid Maiong may be reasonably regarded as a transitional locality between Assam and Meghalaya, or between Tiwa-dominated areas and Khasi ones, “combining” two ethnicities and two languages. However, at a closer scale, when local components are observed, one does not find a homogenous set of mixed households but differentiated neighbourhoods. Hence the mixture of socio-cultural elements perceptible at *raid* level is made up of spatially differentiated elements at village level. This leads to two problems, which will be partly resolved by examining other local situations: firstly, how do cultural differences between communities “survive” to constant inter-marriages? And secondly, how can people marry when they follow different descent rules?

Climbing southwards, one enters the typical Ri Bhoi landscape of the bamboo forest, the result of shifting cultivation practised on the slopes. Jhum, i.e. plots of slash and burn cultivation (Kb. *ret*, Tw. *mai ha*, Kh. *shyrti lyngkha*, As. *jhum*) are sown for a period of three years with dry rice, ginger, chilli and tiger grass (*Thysanolaena maxima*, locally called “broomstick”). They are then left fallow ideally for a period of 15 years, which is nowadays reduced to 3-5 years, and are then given over to bamboo. Beyond any domestic requirements, bamboo is sold to contractors who carry it down to the Jagiroad paper mill. Permanent wet rice is cultivated along river beds. This is how land is typically used throughout the hills. The trend today is towards a sedentarisation of the jhums, planting them with species to meet regional market demands.

Next to Raid Maiong is Raid Nukhap (pop. 1,700 in 2001), which also comes under Hima Khyrim. The term “Nukhap” associates a Khasi component, *khap* (“drain, ditch, fence, border”) with an Assamese one, *nu* (“new”), which perfectly reflects the locality’s geographical and cultural position. The Raid is made up of four

villages: Umtrai (493 inhabitants), Umlaper (731), Mawker (321), and Mawshiang (185), one hundred per cent Presbyterian and Khasi-speaking (Khasi Bhoi dialect). The figures for Raid Nukhap in the corpus of surnames would suggest a mixed composition comparable to that of Raid Maiong, though with an additional Karbi component: Tiwa 53%, Khasi 35%, Karbi 11%. However, contrary to the case of Raid Maiong, the corpus of surnames poorly reflects the local ethnic situation. A hundred per cent of Nukhap villagers are registered as Khasi ST. On a first encounter, Nukhap people do not overtly assert any particular ethnicity and neither do they explicitly identify their neighbours to a particular ethnicity. One of the Raid Nukhap villages is Mawker. The reader may remember that this chapter started with an anecdote about a group of Mawker people who were uncomfortable when questioned about their tribal belonging. This is in line with what I found among most informants in Nukhap, who do not spontaneously refer to ethnicity. At best, some informants describe the locality as inhabited by Khasis, Tiwas and Karbis, but only while referring to surnames, without making further inferences.

Lohin Lamare, a thirty-year-old man from Mawker, inherited his title, Lamare, from his father. His mother is a Matlai who came from a neighbouring Tiwa-speaking village, Makroh. When asked about his tribe, he simply answered: “When with Khasis I call myself a Khasi, when with Tiwas, I call myself a Tiwa”. Some of his neighbours seem to attribute even less importance to ethnic affiliation and confess to not being able to state if a surname belongs to this or that tribe. The first settlers in Mawker came from Nongbah Nukhap, the “Old village of Nukhap”, apparently following a smallpox epidemic. After they had converted to Presbyterianism between the 1930s and the 1960s, they were joined by other converts from neighbouring *raids*.

Umlaper, the biggest village in Nukhap, was founded in the very first years of the twentieth century by a couple expelled from the Old village. The couple was made up of a man of Amsong clan who had a forbidden relation with his wife’s elder sister. That women, a Dorphang, converted soon after settling here. Several families expelled from the Old village and neighbouring Pamlatar (4 km) for having converted to Christianity gradually came to settle in Umlaper. In some houses, the Tiwa language was still spoken by the elders some twenty years ago. Umlaper people associate sur-

names with particular tribes more easily than people in Mawker, a difference which may stem from a higher rate of literacy. Thus, Amsongs and Dorphangs are taken to be Tiwa. But as in Mawker, they do not generally assert any ethnicity spontaneously. Hence, when summoned to state their tribe, they hesitate between Khasi and Khasi Bhoi. In Umlaper therefore, being officially recognized as a member of the Khasi ST and speaking Khasi at home does not necessarily entail any obvious ethnic self-identification with the Khasi category. A distinction must be made here though, since households with a “Khasi title” seem more eager to introduce themselves as Khasi. And while it may seem natural for people bearing a Khasi title and living in a Khasi-dominated State to claim their Khasi-ness, the fact that those bearing a non-Khasi title do not claim to be either Khasi or non-Khasi appears atypical in the present ethnicised context of North-East India.

Nevertheless, the identification of a person in Nukhap must not be summed up as merely the choice between the Khasi identity and no identity at all. Nor may the assertion be made too hastily that uncertain ethnicities proves that Nukhap is experiencing a steady process of Khasi-isation. Other trends might well emerge.

The heir of the *lyngdoh* (Kh. territorial priest) lineage of Nukhap, Lachen Lyngdoh, who lives in Umtraï, recounts how his family came from the Jaintia hills in 1618 when the Jaintia king waged a war to crush a “local tribe”. They were given the office of priest of the *raid* and earned the title of Lyngdoh. Consequently, they consider themselves related to anybody else called Lyngdoh in Ri Bhoi and they therefore cannot marry them. Lachen describes himself as Jaintia by origin, but also as Bhoi: “Here everybody is Bhoi. Local Lalungs (Tiwa) and Karbis also call themselves Bhoi. In Nongpoh area [on the Guwahati-Shillong road], the Bhois call themselves Karew”.

### *Floating ethnonyms: Bhoi, Khasi Bhoi, Khasi*

Bhoi, as a self-asserted category, is a new and very significant one, which we need to contextualise. Jrisling Phangcho, a retired government employee, acknowledges the Karbi descent that his title suggests. When I interviewed him, he repeatedly referred to “us, the Karbis”, an assertion that might have been facilitated or

perhaps triggered by the fact that I was accompanied by a Karbi friend from Assam.

“Nukhap was originally established by Karbis alone, which means the Bhois, who came from Assam to flee a Bodo king from the plains. It is only afterwards that Tiwas, Pnars and Khasis came. Originally, my clan, Phangcho, was the same as the Pumbah, who became Tiwa, and the Umbah, who became Khasi Bhoi. We all came from the Himalayas and Burma. Only then did we divide into several clans”.

Jrilsing agrees with his neighbour, Belinstone Khwait, claiming both Karbi and Tiwa origins, about the fact that they are truly Bhoi, not Khasi. According to them, the local language, Bhoi, differs from standard Khasi because five per cent of it is made up of Assamese words. This is due to the fact that Bhoi people come from Assam.

“The Bhoi have lost their culture. That is why they speak Khasi and follow the matrilineal system. So we have to find out about our culture and preserve it”.

Although Jrilsing and Belinstone’s statements may not be backed by many Nukhap people, they help us uncover the main links that exist between ethnicity and culture in the area. The identity they both acknowledge is made up of a set of inclusions and exclusions, yet using terms whose scope no doubt varies from one statement to the other. Bhois, they insist, should not be mistaken for Khasis on the grounds that their culture may look Khasi. Hence in this instance, a definite distinction is stressed between Bhoi and Khasi. However, according to them, Bhois also comprise some people bearing Khasi titles (e.g. Umbah), and whom, on these grounds, they consider to be Khasi Bhoi. Strikingly, they consider that the latter descend from the same ancestors as those bearing Karbi and Tiwa titles. From this perspective, all Ri Bhoi people descend from an original undivided community which is now broken up into three components: Karbi, Tiwa, and Khasi Bhoi.

The issue implicitly addressed by Jrilsing and Belinstone is the ambiguity of the “Khasi” designation which in common parlance refers both to a broad set of people as well as to the dominant part of it. A familiar saying goes: “Khyrniam, u Pnar, u Bhoi, u War, u dei u paid Khasi ba iar” (“Khyrniam, Pnar, Bhoi, War, all belong to the Khasi people”). The slogan was popularised by cultural and

political activists in the 1970s to promote an all-Khasi unity, many of them of course hailing from the largest group, the Khyntiam Uplanders. However, the same formula is being used nowadays by various sub-regional activists—primarily from among the Pnars, the largest minority—to contest the cultural and political supremacy of the Khyntiams.<sup>13</sup> Some Pnars and Bhois feel trapped by the ambiguity of the “Khasi” label and its presumed synonymy with “Khyntiam”, preferring the much less commonly used Hynniew Trep, “the Four Huts” (the four ancestresses). Here is a classical situation where the extensive label (Khasi) of a plural ensemble is not perceived in the same way among the dominant group as among the minorities. This issue is less a matter of law than semantic politics. As a matter of fact, what is usually called “Khasi ST” is, in the Constitution, formulated as “Khasi, Jaintia, Synteng, Pnar, War, Bhoi, Lyngngam”.<sup>14</sup> Nevertheless, on the ground, a struggle is taking place for the denomination of spaces and institutions. In 2004, the powerful Khasi Students Union demanded that Ri Bhoi district, created in 1992, be renamed “North Khasi hills”, claiming that the term Bhoi was derogatory. The Confederation of Ri Bhoi People (CORP) successfully opposed this ploy, arguing that the locals had always been referred to in this way and they defiantly pointed out that the name of the State itself should be changed, since Meghalaya is a “foreign” name (“Abode of the clouds” in Sanskrit).<sup>15</sup> Similarly, while the 2011 Census operations were about to be launched, a fierce conflict erupted between the Seng Khyhlang, an all-Khasi religious organisation, and Seĩñ Rajj, its Pnar counterpart, after the former requested that people register their religion as “Niam Khasi” (“Khasi religion”) instead of “Niam Tre” (“traditional religion”).<sup>16</sup> And the struggle did not stop at the gates of the churches: Pnar leaders of the Khasi-Jaintia Presbyterian church successfully rejected a project to rename it Khasi Presbyterian Assembly.<sup>17</sup>

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13 For the Pnar point of view on the topic, see (Mohrmen 2011).

14 “Khasi-Jaintia” in the initial 1950 Constitution Order had to be changed to “Khasi, Jaintia, Synteng, Pnar, War, Bhoi, Lyngngam” in the 1956 Modification List. (India. Ministry of Law 1957; India. Ministry of Home Affairs 1957).

15 (Census... 2011).

16 (Seĩñ Rajj... 2011).

17 (Mohrmen 2011).

To get back to Nukhap, individual ethnic assertions depend on political involvements. First of all, people with little involvement in State-level public affairs do not seem to attribute much importance to ethnic affiliation. When they assert what may appear to be an ethnicity, the tone of their discourse proves that they are primarily referring to their language and locality: Khasi Bhoi, “the people of Ri Bhoi who speak Khasi”. Besides, their origins from villages with a different cultural background and the tone of their surnames do not seem to be much relevant to them. People with political views firmly assert one or more ethnicities and lend it a dialectical meaning. For them, the same “Khasi Bhoi” means a specific status within the dominant ethnicity in eastern Meghalaya. Their arguments invoke genealogical grounds: Bhois form an ancient entity that comprises a set of clans, eventually separated and only by their designations. And they seldom evoke cultural differences between localities speaking Tiwa or Karbi just on the other side of the Assam border. The reason might be that the backdrop against which ethnic identity is of relevance for the people of Ri Bhoi is first and foremost Meghalaya, to which political belonging is widely assumed; in this respect, cultural differences with Assam is less problematic.

In comparison to Raid Maiong, Raid Nukhap represents a second type of locality of the margins, that is more homogenous and closer to standard Khasi culture, and where ethnicity plays a lesser role both in personal identities as well as in the structuring of space. It would be tempting to consider that the absence of ethnicity or its ambiguity among the elite is due to a dilemma between the memory that villagers have of their non-Khasi origins and their Khasi-ised culture. Following on from this logic, further up towards the plateau one would expect to find even more Khasi-ised communities in terms of their culture and ethnicity. Culturally, most of the Raids above Nukhap confirm this prognosis, with Khasi Bhoi being the only mother tongue and Christianity the only (openly declared) religion. In identity matters, however, this is not the case. Firstly, adherence to the Khasi identity is no stronger than in Nukhap. And secondly, an apparent homogeneity on a broad scale hides very significant breaks.



*Composite identities under threat*

The most striking case of cultural and ethnic discontinuity in eastern Ri Bhoi is undoubtedly Raid Marngar, a group of nine villages east of the Shillong-Guwahati highway.<sup>18</sup> Raid Marngar is governed by a *syiem* under the authority of the State of Myllem and whose dynasty was founded nine generations ago. Locally, the 2,000 Marngar people have a reputation for being a unique tribe, indeed an odd tribe, because they speak a language of their own, which is structurally similar to Assamese, forming a linguistic island in the midst of a Khasi-speaking area.<sup>19</sup> This peculiarity cannot be attributed to proximity with Assam, as all the localities in the 20 km belt separating Marngar from Assam are linguistically Khasi. Leaving aside recent immigrants, Marngar people also differ from their immediate neighbours for not having converted to Christianity. In other respects, Marngar is not that unique either culturally or socially, if situated within the cultural diversity of Ri Bhoi. Only two of their eleven or thirteen clans—according to sources—are not found elsewhere. Matrilineality is prevalent. The set-up associated with the local ruler, Syiem Marngar, is very similar to the one found in Khasi-speaking States, notably the prominent role of the eldest woman of the *syiem*'s lineage (*khungri*, Kh. *syiem sad*) and the revenue that comes primarily from taxes on the local market.<sup>20</sup> Although the main collective rituals bear Assamese names, they share a great deal with the non-Christian practices found throughout Ri Bhoi—particularly the cult of Lukhmi, the rice-goddess—, and the language they use in rituals is Khasi.

Nevertheless, Marngar linguistic and religious resilience is remarkable when compared to the Khasi-isation that other communities, under similar geographical conditions, have experienced,

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18 For a more detailed description, see (Ramirez 2011). My ideas on Marngar have slightly evolved since, in the light of recent local events.

19 According to François Jacquesson, a specialist in Tibeto-Burman languages who visited Marngar with me, 20% of the words in the Marngar lexicon appear to be Tibeto-Burman but cannot easily be linked to neighbouring TB languages.

20 In the State of Gobha, associated with the Tiwas and which was once subordinate to the Jaintia State, the same term, *khungri*, designates the ruler's mother or sister.

and this must be taken into consideration among the possible forms that cultural diversity may assume in this region.

To what extent does Marngar people's identity match their cultural uniqueness? Interestingly, they define themselves not very differently from most Ri Bhoi people. They consider themselves as one particular kind of "Bhoi", namely "Bhoi Marngar", i.e. "the Bhois of Marngar", whom they differentiate from Bhoi Kāro, the Bhois of Nongpoh area, and Bhoi Marvet, the Bhois of the northern foothills towards Assam. Besides, they also explicitly identify with the Khasi label. As in the localities we described earlier, the local use of "Khasi" pertains to several levels: while acknowledging being himself a Khasi, a Marngar may, when describing his neighbourhood for example, differentiate between "Marngar houses" and "Khasi houses", the later meaning either Khyrniam or Bhoi Kāro houses. Although Marngar people had no difficulty in the past in obtaining Khasi ST status, since 2009 they have been denied it by the district authorities under the pressure of five organisations, but notably the Khasi Students Union (KSU) and the Ri Bhoi Youth Federation (RBYF), who consider that the Marngar is an alien tribe from Assam and should not be recognized as Khasi.<sup>21</sup> "To class the Marngar people as Khasis is unacceptable as they are not Khasis, they are quite different from the Khasis in respect to culture, language and religion". Some opponents expressed more mundane concerns about the reduction of reservation opportunities for themselves should the Marngars be recognized as Khasi. Marngar leaders appealed to the Chief Minister of Meghalaya. Their petition stated that "Marngar is not the name of our tribe, it is the name of the village where we reside, and we are wrongly designated as Marngar people". They argued that they were made up of thirteen clans which have been under Syiem Myllem for a long time. "Allegations that we migrated from Assam are very unkind as we have been here for more than three centuries." Their plea was backed by Syiem Myllem—one of the most influential Khasi traditional ruler—, and in July 2011 the Meghalaya Government issued an Order to confirm Marngars' eligibility to ST status. Their opponents launched a long-lasting movement, including the picketing of offices and a

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21 (Deprived residents 2009; Govt to revoke order 2012; JAC move ahead 2011; JAC, RBYF on warpath 2011).

hunger strike. To add to the confusion, people with Marngar as a surname, living throughout the State and not originating from that Marngar, felt that their own ST status was threatened and started to rally round. Finally, the Shillong authorities gave in to the pressure and the Order was revoked in March 2012, thereby putting a stop to the issuance of new ST certificates to Marngars.

For those theorists defending both the instrumentalist and interactionist foundations of ethnicity, in keeping with Barth and Cohen, Marngar would be a textbook case.<sup>22</sup> As far as we are concerned, we might say that the conflict substantialised two important dimensions of identities in the region: in the first instance, advocated by Marngar people, one is defined by belonging to a clan under a polity. In the second, defended by many Khasi activists, what matters is belonging to an ahistorical entity with a singular (i.e. non-plural) substance. This distinction may give us a more sophisticated view of the nature of atypical communities in the margins: they would not only be mixed communities at the border between dominant and more consistent cultures but they might also represent forms that were prevalent in the past and which were based primarily on the association of particular lineages within a polity. On a broader scale, this has ramifications for the set of dimensions that have to be considered when trying to decipher the genesis of the regional complexity: the current pervading assertion of ethnicities and the emphasis on a strong coincidence between identity (recognized by tribal labels) and culture definitely exert a powerful force. This force however is applied to local communities which were till recently structured along different principles and which may therefore not respond as expected by ethno-nationalists, adopting, though unconsciously, composite identities associating spatial, political and cultural references.

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22 (Barth 1969a; Cohen 1974:XIV-XX).



## Chapter 3: Across Ethnic Boundaries

### *Tribal conversions, clan continuities*

The atypical identities and the atypical ethnicity-culture connections observed in the Triangle do coexist with more “typical” ones. For instance, there is admittedly a rather large coincidence between Khasi or Khasi Bhoi-speaking groups and Khasi identity-asserting groups, which developed more recently into a coincidence between Khasi Bhoi-speaking areas and an emergent Bhoi identity. Does this mean that the larger and labelled ethnic and cultural aggregates (Khasi, Karbi, Tiwa...) reflect a historical continuity of physical populations? A set of data collected in the margins show that this is not the case.

Barth has recorded cases of ethnic changes in Pakistan where, by following geographical movements and adopting the way of life of the dominant ethnic group, minority groups have finally chosen to identify with the latter.<sup>1</sup> Haaland has described a somewhat similar phenomenon in Darfur, on the interface between Fur sedentary groups and Baggara nomads. Fur families who had become Arabic-speaking nomads came to identify themselves and to be identified with a Baggara sub-tribe.<sup>2</sup> The processes I came across in the Triangle area consist in more radical forms of “boundary transcendences”. Not only do people cross the boundary but they do it suddenly and via institutionalised means.

When trying to complete a jigsaw, one piece might well be left aside for a long time until the puzzle evolves enough to render its position obvious. At the beginning of my research, before working in the Triangle, I visited a Karbi village in the immediate vicinity of Guwahati, and asked what kind of villages were to be found thereabouts. “Now we have only Karbi and Bodo. In the past there was a Garo village but a few years ago they all converted to Karbi. They were alone in this area so they could not marry...” The idea that in a period of all-encompassing ethnic assertions, an entire village could shift from one identity to another was in itself very

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1 (Barth 1964; Barth 1969:123ff).

2 (Haaland 1969:65).

striking. But at the time I had not realised the significance of ethnic anomalies, so I considered this merely as an idiosyncrasy.

It was only seven years later that, passing by that village, which we will fictitiously call Santipur, I took the opportunity to find out more. Elderly villagers admitted they had been Garo in their youth. As there are few Garos in the area, I asked them to say a few words in their parents' language. It turned out not to be Garo, at least not standard Garo: the language had some structural similarities with Garo, noticeably the word order, but the lexicon—as far as the sample collected is concerned—displayed greater similarities with Khasi. According to the elders, the language is still spoken in several villages in the hills inside Meghalaya. It is from there they came some 25 years ago to settle in the lowlands their parents used to cultivate, in Khanaguri area dominated by Karbis and Bodos. After a while, they found that “nobody wanted to marry their girls”, i.e. no boy was willing to go for a matrilocal marriage. At the same time, the Karbi chief (*bangthe*) of Khanaguri came and offered to make them Karbi. They gathered together and accepted the offer.

The whole process was recounted to me as if it had been a very simple and ordinary occurrence. I still cannot decide today if this actually reflects simplicity in the procedure or some embarrassment about confessing a change of ethnicity, which I noticed in other similar instances. Seven Karbi *bangthe* from the neighbouring areas were summoned. The Garos made a contribution to the community in the form of a pig. They all then had to stand on the other side of the river on the outskirts of Khanaguri village. They had to pass under an arch (Kb. *bir*) and then cross the river. This rite was called *khāt kora*, an Assamese locution that local English speakers translated either as “purification” or “penance”, the latter term probably being a Vaishnavite interpretation of the former. Beside, each of the former “Garos” was adopted by a Karbi clan.

- How were the adopting Karbi clans chosen?
- This was done according to our former titles. Rongsho became Rongshon, Nongmalik became Nongphlang, Langdo became Teron, Langdoyang became Phangcho, Pator became Ingti, and Lado became Timung.

Some data collected in the Triangle came to my mind: snatches of informers' accounts about Tiwas being Khasi-ised—"They marry Khasi girls and take Khasi names; Amsong becomes Memsong, Puma becomes Umbah or Memba, Maslai becomes Mathlai, Mithi becomes Mukti, but they are truly Tiwa"—or about Tiwa villages becoming Karbi after converting to Christianity. The context in which I collected these statements made me initially feel that these were politically motivated but unfounded. Similar information with no ethno-political overtones was given by Christians from Raid Maiong and Nukhap:

You know, although we are Tiwa, we can marry any Karbi or Khasi except for those who have similar titles. So Mithis [Tiwa] cannot marry Muktiehs [Khasi] and Ingtis [Karbi]; similarly, Maslais [Tw.] cannot marry Khyndeits [Kh.] and Hanses [Kb.] and so on...

Even in this instance, when provided with actual evidence of a regulated exogamy among different tribes, I was still reticent to imagine its possible impact. I assumed that this was some invention by a local missionary to encourage marriage among his multi-ethnic flock. Only after having recorded the same accounts in distant localities and finding no clue as to the possible existence of a sorcerer's apprentice-missionary did I realise that I had put my finger on a genuine and possibly ancient institution.

Once I discovered the possible existence of "similar titles", I systematically inquired about it in each locality I visited. And indeed, in the whole Triangle area, as well as in many places outside it, from Guwahati to North Cachar, almost everyone knew about it. The principle lies in a rule of equivalence between surnames that theoretically belong to different ethnic groups. A surname in one ethnic group is said to be identical to a surname in another group. Depending on the places, the lists given to me differed. They usually contain no more than three series, but many convergences appear from one place to another. In the Triangle, a series of three surnames were generally provided. Figure 3-1 shows some of them.

“Karbi”	“Tiwa”	“Khasi/Khasi Bhoi”
Ingti	Mithi	Muktieh
Ronghang	Malang	Markhap
Hanse	Maslai	Khymdeit
Ronghang	Malang	Muksher
Be	Kholar	Lamare
Ingleng	Madar	Syngkli
Timung	Puma	Umbah
Teron	Amsih	Paraphang
Teron	Amsong	Mynsong

**Figure 3-1:** *Examples of equivalent surnames*

These are only some of the 34 pairs and triplets collected. Certain equivalences only concern two ethnic groups. Interestingly, a single title in one group may correspond to several in another, e.g. Teron to both Amsih and Amsong. This will be discussed further on when describing clanic structures among Karbis, Tiwas and Khasis. Let us simply underline the fact here that these equivalences were not only recorded among “mixed” localities in the margins but also in areas where ethnicity and social forms coincided largely. As surnames correspond to clans or lineages, surnames equivalences link up three rather different sets of descent groups: Khasi shallow matrilineages, Tiwa ambilineal clans and Karbi patrilineal and sub-clans. Equivalences involve two practical aspects: firstly, people who have “similar titles” are forbidden to marry; secondly, when individuals shift from one ethnicity to another they adopt a new title “similar” to their former title. These two aspects are closely related as exogamy among equivalent surnames reflects continuity between the former and the new surname of an ethnic convert. This second point is relatively more difficult to address than the first. It is easy to understand that sexual relationships are forbidden between people perceived as belonging to “similar” descent groups, as the similarity is, moreover, often expressed in terms of uniqueness: “our clan is the same; we are from the same clan...”. It is less obvious that people may for instance “convert from Tiwa to Karbi”—to use the local wording—while at the same time keeping a memory of their previous clanic affiliation. The question is: to what extent do they convert, just how far do they leave one group for another?



We have seen that when Santipur people became Karbi they underwent what was conceptualised as a “purification”, *khat kora* in the local Plains Karbi dialect as in Assamese. In several Northeastern cultures, “purification” should be understood as “transformation”, and as a matter of fact the first phase of the conversion of Santipur people—crossing the river—is characteristic of a “rite de passage”, a bodily and/or social transformation. The forms taken by this purification evokes that of classical Hinduism, as well as the universal concerns about social pollution.<sup>3</sup> Its function, however, is the opposite of Hindu purifications although it may be compared to that of the *śuddhi* movement.<sup>4</sup> Indeed, it concerns the dangers of a foreign substance overstepping a limit. Yet whereas Hindu purification re-establishes a limit after removing the external agent, here it enables it to move into the group. In local Karbi-speaking villages a similar rite is performed in at least two other instances. One is Dehal puja, the annual sacrifice to the locality’s tutelary deity. The sacrifice itself is preceded by another “purification” (Kb. *kapangthir*) which consists in all householders walking in a procession to the very same river at the village’s boundary and passing through the very same arch (Kh. *bir kilut*, “entering the arch”) before returning to the village (Figure 3-2, page 67). The second instance is incest. The way incest, once punished by death whether among Karbis or Tiwas, is handled has evolved towards milder forms.<sup>5</sup> If a sexual relationship between two members of the same clan is disclosed, the partners are taken across the river. There, they are “purified” and then they come back and pay a fine. Other possible outcomes of an incest are directly linked to our topic: if the incestuous couple gives birth to a child, the latter is adopted by the clan of his *lok*

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3 (Douglas 1966:123).

4 However, the *śuddhi* promoted by the Arya Samaj in the late nineteenth century, like the recent Hindu nationalists’ initiatives against Christian and Muslim conversions, are conceived more as re-conversions than as conversions *per se*. For a comparative study of these movements, see (Jaffrelot 1994; Jaffrelot 2011); on re-conversion of Muslims, see (Sikand and Katju 1994).

5 In certain Tiwa localities, death for committing incest has also been recorded (Gohain 1993:94). In others, a rite of “purification” was sufficient. Among the Khasis, incestuous couples were banned from the village. (Gurdon 1914:123)

(Father's sister's husband). This adoption standardises the child's social position, as it is thereafter considered to have been born into the clan into which, according to matrimonial rules, its mother should have married.<sup>6</sup> The second possible outcome is that the boy in the incestuous couple is allowed to change his clan, which will enable him to marry her erstwhile forbidden lover.

Thus, in the Karbi context, thorny social problems may be resolved by clanic shifts. This may help to understand how the Garos readily "converted" to Karbi". But a question immediately arises: was their adoption into Karbi clans a condition for their adoption as Karbis, or did they become Karbi as a consequence of being adopted into Karbi clans? In other words, was it primarily an ethnic concern or a clanic concern? My question might well be brushed aside as being irrelevant by arguing that it was both. "Clan" and "ethnicity" may be conceived as external categories which are not that distinct for an insider. To belong to one of the five Karbi clans would mean being Karbi, in the same way that being Karbi would necessarily mean belonging to one of the five clans. And one might add that the investigation process should be seriously questioned. To address these phenomena with questions such as "how did the Garos become Karbi?" naturally introduces an ethnic bias, while the same phenomena could have been investigated by asking: "how did the Langdo become Teron?". However, the mutual determination of clanic belonging and tribal belonging cannot be asserted so easily, precisely because of the existence of equivalence rules. If Garos were to fully become Karbis, and if Karbis were defined as an exclusive set of clans, what would be the point of caring about their previous clan affiliations? Still on this point, we should be careful not to switch too quickly from "titles" to "clans" under the pretext that Karbi *kur* are understood as "clans" by anthropologists and local intellectuals. A title does indeed point to a clan, but not necessarily to the whole of it. When Santipur people converted they changed their *kur*, their "designation"; what is less obvious is whether they changed their clan in the sense of an aggregate of individuals forming a body. Although I will continue to translate *kur* as

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6 Among Karbi-speaking groups, the prescribed marriage is with classificatory MBD which, in the old days, came within a "generalised exchange" among the five major clans.

“clan”, when appropriate, the reader must be aware of this distinction.



**Figure 3-2:** *Entering the arch (Kb. bir kilut)*  
Participants to a Dehal territorial cult in Kamrup district cross the boundary river to get purified before the main rite.

### *Entering Karbi clans*

Procedures allowing non-Karbhis to become Karbi, though rarely applied, are known outside the very culturally mixed area where Santipur is situated, including in places exclusively inhabited by Karbi-speaking communities. And this is not a recent phenomenon. During the 1821-1826 Burmese invasion of Assam, many plains Karbis fled to the hills, together with Assamese families which subsequently became Karbis. In the early twentieth century, the Sub-divisional Officer of North Cachar Hills reported that “outsiders” used to be admitted among Mikirs (Karbhis). They were adopted in a *kur* after being “purified”.<sup>7</sup> What was done in the case of Santipur seems to be a simplified version of a more

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7 (Stack 1908:23).

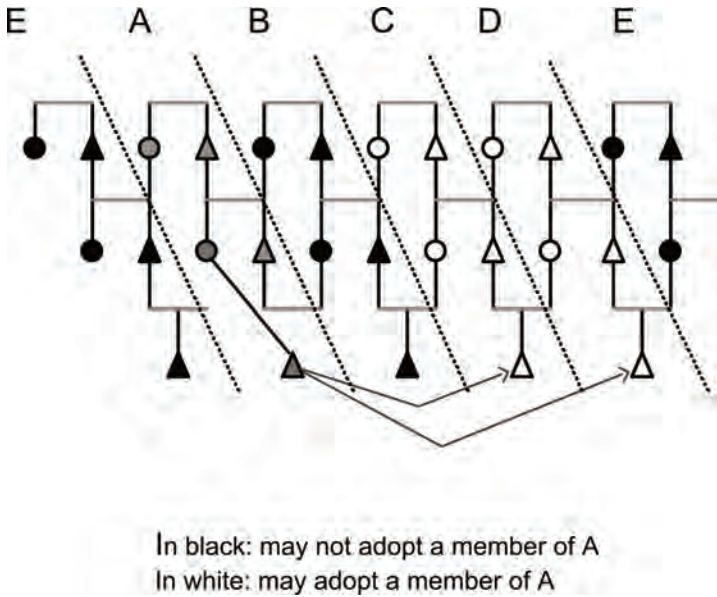
sophisticated rite. The detailed description I collected in the Karbi polity of Rongkhang gives some clues as to the links between surnames, clans and Karbi-ness. Rongkhang, on the eastern fringes of the Meghalaya plateau, is considered by many Karbis as the hub where their ancient culture has been preserved. Rongkhang dignitaries are reputed to be the most knowledgeable in the realm of traditional rituals. This is how two of them described the different adoption procedures. The adoption rite for a non-Karbi takes place in the middle of an annual ritual, *Peng karkli*, when the lineage tutelary deity (Kb. *peng*) is worshipped in each house. On this occasion, new members are introduced to the *peng*: newborn babies, adoptees from other lineages and clans, and non-Karbhis. What is very significant is that, in the case of conversions, three different rites may apply:

– *Deng pharlo* (“cult group-change”): performed when an individual moves, within the same clan, from one lineage (*jeng*) to another lineage which does not follow the same domestic rituals. The rite is very simple. The lineage elder (*kurusar*) attaches a white thread to the adoptee’s wrist (*hon kekok*: “thread-tying”) and splashes him with sacred water.

– *Kur pharlo* (“title/clan-change”): the general form is identical, but a divination has to be performed beforehand to ensure that the rite will be accepted by the deity: *vo sangtar kelang*. This concerns a change of clan and surname. *Kur pharlo* is rarely performed, as “the four clans must be different” (Figure 3-3): mother’s brother’s clan, mother’s brother’s wife’s clan, mother’s mother’s clan, and the new father’s mother’s clan—in other words in the context of a cycle of matrimonial exchanges, a child can be adopted neither by the wife givers nor by the wife takers of the clan he was born into.<sup>8</sup> The adoptee is given a new

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8 A Karbi woman remains in her father’s clan after marriage. The “4 clans” rule actually reflects the ancient marriage rules: in addition to her own clan, a woman should not marry into the clans of her father’s and mother’s wife givers. It is interesting to note that although the rule is seldom applied to marriages nowadays, it is still taken into consideration for changes of clan.



**Figure 3-3:** The “Four clans rule” in the Karbi speaking area of Rongkhang. In this example, a member of clan A might be adopted neither by that clan’s wife-givers (B) nor by its wife-takers (E).

first name which corresponds to the name of the ancestor he is the reincarnation of (*menchi*: name-soul).<sup>9</sup>

These last two rites, which do not significantly differ from those for an ordinary child, are performed either for children born of an incestuous relationship or of no known father, or of a widow after she remarries into a different lineage or clan. In both instances, the same formula, *Deng kepon*, is recited by a singer (*lunsepo*). It takes the form of a request made on behalf of the mother’s brother to his sister’s new husband: “this child has been found to have no known father. He is the son of “*hambi* seed and

<sup>9</sup> Newborn babies are considered to be reincarnations of a deceased person from their patriclan.

grasshopper” (i.e. children’s games).<sup>10</sup> Please take him into your family, he will be a great man and will make your name famous”.

– *Bang kur kepon* (“another-title/clan-taking”): the third rite is more sophisticated and concerns the adoption of a non-Karbi, i.e. to be more precise, somebody who does not already have a Karbi *kur*. The adoptee is given a new father and mother. Three cocks are sacrificed: one to Hemphu, the paramount god, as a preliminary “purification”; one as *Sangtar kelang* (“omen-look”), just as when a new baby is born, to foresee his future; and one on the roof of the house whose blood is left to run down the main pillar to prevent any illness from outside, *arlo avur* (“inside-illness”). As the singer sings in a secret language, the new mother’s brother introduces the adoptee to Hemphu: “he [or she] doesn’t know his lineage (*jeng*) neither his clan (*kur*) nor tribe (*khei*). He came to ask me about his lineage, clan and tribe. We have brought him to complete your work, to complete the world. I will throw this *khap* (split bamboo section), tell me what you decide”. If the omen proves positive, the adoptee passes through a rolled mat and his new mother pretends to carry him on her back, while a song is being sung: “The 100 gods have gathered and created him, they have sent him in a boat on the river...”. This refers to the Karbi clans creation myth in which one of the six original brothers fell into the river.

The three procedures clearly consist in adoptions on three levels of transmutation: from lineage to lineage, from clan to clan, and from no-clan/other clan to clan. There is no one-to-one correspondence, however, as the child of an unknown father, thus of unknown descent, is adopted in the same way as the child of a deceased father with a perfectly identified *kur*. The adoption of a natural child supposedly born of a Karbi father is not as problematic as the adoption of a non-Karbi. The issue is to find it the right place by taking into account the existing affinity relationships of its mother’s clan. The rite for a non-Karbi differs in its focus on the bodily transformation—passing through a mat and being carried by the mother—and in its concern for external dangers. The foreignness of the non-Karbi is explicitly asserted,

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<sup>10</sup> “Son of hambí seed and grasshopper” (*hambí polong aso*) refers to two common children’s games: playing with grasshoppers and the Snuff box sea bean (*Entada rheedii*, Kb. *hambí*, As. *ghila>ghila khel*).

just as the plea to Hemphu describes him as “ignoring his tribe”. And it is no coincidence that in this case the deity addressed is Hemphu, the paramount deity of Karbi pantheon and creator of *kurs*. There is no doubt that the content of the rite pertains to an essential limit in terms of the transformation and the dangers involved in crossing it. It must be made clear that among Karbis, a foreigner in himself does not seem to represent a danger, nor does his body carry any inherent impurity. Rongkhang priests, who are by and large very cautious about preserving their purity, made it clear to me that the mere physical presence of a foreigner does not affect them in any way and that they do not even object to “sleeping in the same bed with a foreigner”. This clearly contrasts with the attitude of the priests of neighbouring Dimasas, the *jonthai*, who avoid any impure proximity (Dm. *gushu*) with a non-Dimasa. Thus, in the context of adoption, it is definitely the fact that limits are overstepped which constitutes a danger, not the foreignness of the adoptee per se.

These examples of adoption procedures show that the ethnic boundary, at least among Karbis, is perceived as both tangible and surmountable. Crossing it involves supernatural hazards and requires careful arrangements but represents an institutionalised enactment, and this is true even in Rongkhang, which is supposed to represent the sanctuary of Karbi traditions. Moreover the sophistication of rites dedicated to the adoption of foreigners in Rongkhang may well be due to its exceptional nature: no actual case can be recalled nowadays and, interestingly, the only instances we know of, thanks to the colonial administrators quoted above, concern people from the plains. On the contrary, in the multi-ethnic environment of Santipur, adopting a foreigner is a less dramatic affair.

### *Surname equivalences*

Equivalence rules appear to be structurally linked to ethnic adoption and inter-ethnic matrimonial relationships. This phenomenon has been reported for various regions of the world but has rarely been rarely analysed, with the exception of Günther

Schlee for Eastern Africa.<sup>11</sup> Concerning North-East India, the only mention of clan equivalences is to be found in two monographs on the Nagas by Mills and Hutton in the 1920's.<sup>12</sup> Hutton noted that a Sema clan "often identifies itself with a clan belonging to a neighbouring tribe" but, save some exceptions, he dismissed it as "entirely superstitious" and motivated by the mere interest of enjoying protection from related clans when visiting alien villages.<sup>13</sup> Mills asserted that the system of "inter-tribal corresponding clans" existed in all Naga tribes. People formulated such correspondences in terms of "being the same", "being one". Mills provided a few examples consisting in equivalences involving from three to four tribes: Lhota, Ao, Sema and Rengma. As in the Triangle, Naga equivalences are/were linked to local integration of alien elements: "A Sema who comes and settles in Are [a Lhota village] becomes a Lhota and incorporates himself into the clan corresponding to his old clan. If he or his children go back they slip into their old clan again." However, many but not all corresponding clans may freely marry because "they are regarded as being so widely separated...that there is no harm in intermarriage".<sup>14</sup> Mills expressed the same scepticism than Hutton towards the clan equivalences, as these rarely did fit in with the seamless genealogy of Naga clans they were both eager to reconstruct. This attitude is all the more surprising since both of them provided many examples of groups being absorbed or merging with others, or of individuals moving from one clan to another.<sup>15</sup>

The Naga material shows that surname equivalences in the Meghalaya-Assam borderlands may not be a local and/or recent invention but may have been part of a larger, ancient inter-ethnic apparatus. Equivalences do indeed possess some very practical aspects, as the following paragraphs will go on to prove, but they should not be viewed merely as technical knowledge or as a device which would only be used by matchmakers and village heads in the pursuit of local strategies. One day, not far from Rongcek,

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11 (Schlee 1985; Schlee 1989). Cf also (Barbeau 1917) on the Iroquois of North America and (Toulouze 2003) on the Nenets of western Siberia.

12 (J. H Hutton 1921; Mills 1922).

13 (J. H Hutton 1921:134-135).

14 (Mills 1922:92-93).

15 For example (J. H. Hutton 1921:108, 118-119).



on the Karbi Anglong side of the Triangle, I met an elderly Karbi lady working in her *jhum* field. I was accompanied by Joden Maslai, a Tiwa friend from Umswai valley, some 15 km from there. We started to talk to the old lady, and after a while her husband came, climbing towards us with a basket on his back. He put the basket down and asked: “who are you people?”. Joden replied: “He is a foreigner studying our culture, and I am Joden Maslai, from Umswai.” The old man, obviously a bit deaf, turned to his wife, frowning: “Joden what?”. Thereupon the lady shouted: “he said his name is Joden Hanse!”. That was enough to satisfy the old man. Thus, within less than a second, she had been able to translate a Tiwa surname, Maslai, into its Karbi equivalent, Hanse.

This very brief experience taught me how equivalences were not a matter of any specialised knowledge but could be a very ordinary skill used in the daily language. Although Tiwa and Karbi villages are not far from each other in this area, and their inhabitants constantly interact, inter-ethnic marriages are not that frequent, and no ethnic adoption is known to have taken place recently. The old couple told us that a few local girls had been married to “Langlu” boys (<Lalung, i.e. Tiwa) some years ago, but that no Langlu girl had ever come as a wife to live in the village. So what might be the practical use of such a skill? The husband and wife easily gave us a series of six surname equivalences and admitted that more existed but that they could not remember them. Obviously they had not “learnt” them in case somebody married a Tiwa and they apparently had no project to help convert the Tiwas of neighbouring localities to Karbis. They simply identified at a basic cognitive level a particular Tiwa as belonging to a clan called Maslai in Tiwa and Hanse in Karbi. Such an operation could be perfectly qualified as a translation, especially a translation done by an interpreter or a bilingual person.

I had long felt that equivalences could have contributed to a larger extent to inter-ethnic matrimonial relationships, but in the Triangle itself these were limited to isolated cases, and often the incoming spouse would not change their surname. Then I heard about Ghilani, a small Tiwa-speaking village of seventy-three houses, a long way to the east of the Tiwa mainland and completely surrounded by Karbi, Bodo and Assamese settlements. Situated on the first flatlands below the hills, Ghilani is one of the very few Tiwa villages of the plains speaking Tiwa, but like all Tiwa

villages in the plains, descent is largely patrilineal and marriage patrilocal. The first woman I spoke to in Ghilani was the village head's (*qaonbura*) sister-in-law. She introduced herself as Kathe Mithi, thus using a Tiwa surname. After a while, when discussing marriage, she told me that her title was Ingtipi, -pi being the feminine suffix added to Karbi women's surname and Ingti being one of the main Karbi clans. Now in her seventies, she had been born in the neighbouring "Karbi village" of Satgaon. She generally uses her Tiwa surname while in the village and her Karbi surname when introducing herself to Karbi speakers. Ghilani is remarkable in that more than a third of the men bearing Tiwa surnames are married to supposedly Karbi or Bodo girls. Marriage with Assamese girls remains an exception.

A non-Tiwa spouse has to be given a Tiwa title. The set of rules differentiates between Karbi girls and others. In the case of a non-Karbi, she is free to choose any title except, of course, her future husband's: it may be for example the title of a friend or of a household she likes. She has ample time to choose; several months may elapse, and in the meantime the wedding may take place. However, the elders may possibly influence her choice since they ensure that incoming girls are well distributed among the different clans. In the case of Karbi girls, they are given a title equivalent to their original Karbi title: Ingti will become Mithi, Teron will become Amsi and so on according to five equivalences. Both Karbi and non-Karbi girls are simply presented publicly to the whole village and a thread (Tw., As. *sut*) is attached to their right wrist by the *borjela*, the (adoptive) lineage elder. Karbi and Bodo wives speak Tiwa fluently. But, contrary to many "converted" wives I met in other regions, they do not seem embarrassed about stating their origins.

The descent structure of Ghilani is made up of five clans: Sagra, Amsi, Mithi, Kajar, and Puma. When translated into Karbi surnames following local rules, they become: Terang, Teron, Ingti, Inghi, and Timung, i.e. the five major Karbi clans. Thus, in terms of clanic components, Ghilani society resembles a microcosm of Karbi society. None of the marriages I recorded locally or from the voter's list contravene Karbi exogamy among the five clans. And, strikingly, neither do they transgress standard hill Tiwa

exogamy rules based on the grouping of Tiwa clans into four main phratries (Figure 3-4).<sup>16</sup>

<i>Kholarwali</i> : Kholar, Madar, Lumpheid, Dilar, Mithi
<i>Maslaiwali</i> : Maslai, Sakra, Samsol, Agari, Damlong, Melang, Khorai, Hukai, Malang
<i>Pumawali</i> : Puma, Phamsong, Tarphang
<i>Amsongwali</i> : Amsong, Amsi, Ampa

**Figure 3-4:** Hill Tiwa Phratries

Interestingly, when describing the way marriages take place, informants never state that Karbi rules and Tiwa rules are combined in Ghilani. Instead, they merely give examples, without seeming to care much if the surnames are Karbi or Tiwa. Forbidden matches between existing titles in the locality are perfectly well known to them. On the contrary, possible exogamic relations with locally unrepresented titles are barely known or unknown. This is in keeping with what I observed elsewhere.



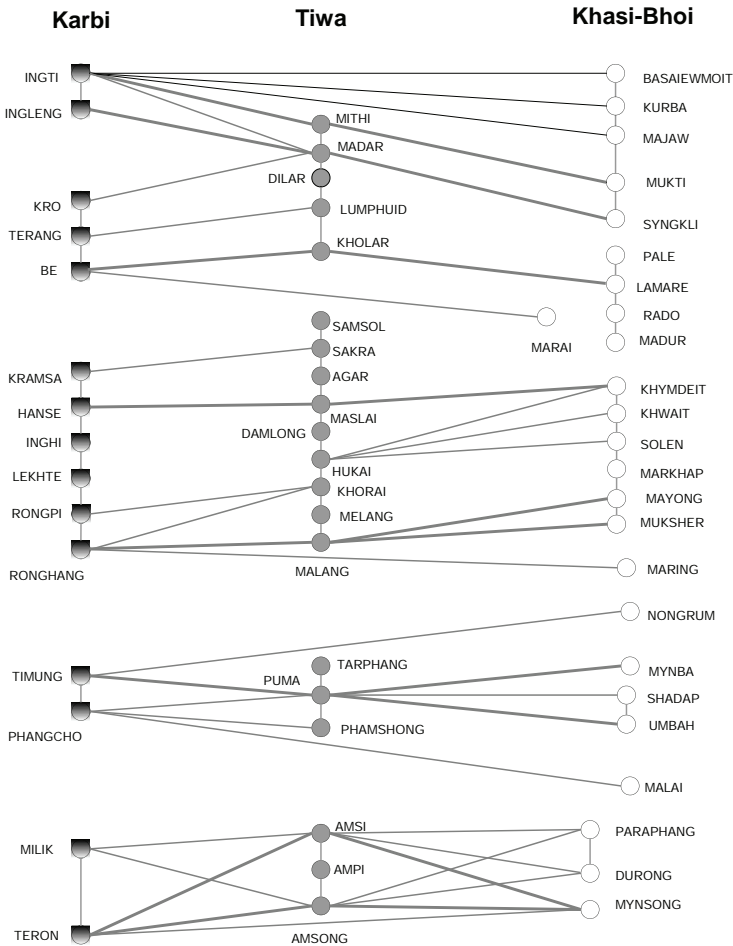
**Figure 3-5:** A loom in West Karbi Anglong (Kb. kherang)

<sup>16</sup> One or two additional phratries may be listed in some localities but these include rarely represented clans. The distribution I recorded does not match the list published by Gohain (1993:41) which obviously contains some inconsistencies. According to Gohain, these phratries are called *maharsa*; the term however simply means “group” and also applies to entities at other structural levels.

*Transethnic exogamies*

It is indeed tempting to check how far the exogamy rules prevailing in communities asserting different ethnicities match each other. The result is striking. In Figure 3-6 I have depicted the exogamy relationships recorded among Karbis, hill Tiwas and Khasi Bhois in the hilly part of the Triangle. Surnames have been marked according to the ethnicity they are commonly identified with. Although this does not do justice to possible conflicting or uncertain identifications, it has no bearing on the principles I would like to highlight. Two types of exogamies have been superimposed here: inter-ethnic and endo-ethnic. Inter-ethnic equivalences are the relationships of similarity and thus of exogamy between two surnames. Endo-ethnic exogamies are defined by the social system prevailing in one particular ethnic group, forbidding marriage between certain patronymic groups which correspond closely to descent groups (lineages or clans). Endo-ethnic exogamic groups form sets whose extension and nature differ slightly from one group to the other: the five major or maximal Karbi clans (*kur*); the four main Tiwa phratries (*mahar/khul*); and a large number of Khasi phratries (*teh kur*: “bound matrikin”) and clans (*shi kur*: “one matrikin”). As Khasi phratries are numerous, I have presented only the Khasi entities involved in inter-ethnic exogamies recorded in the Triangle.

The diagram clearly shows that surname equivalences are part of a global and very consistent transethnic system linking together exogamic units that are specific to each ethnic group. Exogamic units among different ethnic groups strongly converge. Kholarwali, one of the Tiwa phratries, corresponds to two Karbi maximal clans (Terang, Ingti); hence the four Tiwa phratries match the five Karbi maximal clans. The three other Karbi clans (Timung, Inghi, and Timung) are still marriageable by any Kholarwali member. Thus, the relationships between Karbi and Tiwa surnames can be reduced to four transethnic exogamic units. Khasi inter-ethnic exogamies do not run counter to the correspondence between inter-ethnic and endo-ethnic exogamies. Khasi units that are exogamic to Tiwa units remain exogamic to the corresponding Karbi units. However, it is worthwhile noting that several Khasi patronymic groups remain “separate”, i.e. are not represented as being part of an endo-Khasi phratry. This is firstly due to the high number of Khasi patronyms and phratries. Even if only those



**Figure 3-6:** Endo-ethnic and interethnic exogamies among Karbis, Tiwas, and Khasi-Bhois of Assam-Meghalaya borderlands.

Dots represent patronymic groups, lines represent relations of exogamy (bold lines : three-terms exogamies when given as such by informants). This diagram highlights the convergence of exogamies within ethnic groups (same colour clusters) and across them.

present in the Triangle are taken into consideration, several of them still do not show any equivalence with Karbi and Tiwa surnames. As mentioned above, I have retained only the latter. The multiplicity of Khasi surnames is both due to structural factors—a higher incidence of fission—and a demographic factor: the Khasi population is much larger (1.1 M) than the Karbi (hills: 0.4 M) and Tiwa (hills: 0.01 M) populations.

The existence of a structured matrimonial set-up spanning several ethnically defined social systems seriously challenges the way each of them is depicted in isolation. And to start with, it raises several questions about the conditions of possibility for such a transethnic system. Two questions are central here: firstly, how did it appear and how did it maintain itself and secondly, do the three different structures influence each other through inter-ethnic marriages?

When documenting the recent reification of Kachin ethnicity in Northern Myanmar, contrasting it with the “perennial nature of the clans and lineages”, François Robinne described how the wife-giver/wife-taker system (*mayu-dama*) contributed to the coherency of the Kachin subgroups.<sup>17</sup> Different local sets of clans taking part in the overall system were recognized as “homonymous clans” or as “common clans with different names”. This situation is all the more comparable with the one in the Triangle since clan equivalences extended beyond the Kachin social and cultural space to include the neighbouring Lisu and Chinese communities, which did not practise *mayu-dama* exchanges. “The *mayu-dama* system has an inclusive dynamic that imposes upon the groups that neighbour the Kachin in Kachin State”. As the Lisus and Chinese married Kachins, those of their clans contracting a marriage became the equivalents of the local Kachin clans. When a Lisu, for example, married a Kachin girl, his clan was considered to be a wife-taker clan of the girl’s clan. This *mayu-dama* relationship constituted a first small structure which affected future marriages in the local area and contributed to the spreading of clanic correspondences.<sup>18</sup>

Coming back to the Triangle, I suggest that the structural repercussions of only a few inter-ethnic marriages and/or a few

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17 (Robinne 2007).

18 (Robinne 2007:291–293).

inter-ethnic adoptions suffice to produce the coherent equivalence system in existence today. Prohibitions imposed by surname equivalences negatively define the circles of potential matrimonial unions. It would be obviously misleading to suggest that the four exogamic components of the system recorded in the Triangle stand for clues to an oriented exchange. No testimony nor genealogy nor statistical data confirms any orientation of the matrimonial relationships in the present time. Nevertheless, the existence of prescribed exchanges in only one of the groups involved in inter-ethnic marriages logically leads to the emergence of transethnic exogamy rules. Such exchanges actually existed among the Karbis. Elders recall that in the past, marriages could take place only in a prescribed direction. Girls were given in marriage according to the following pattern: Terang>Teron>Inghi>Timung>Ingti>Terang. This cycle looks very much like what following Lévi-Strauss, anthropologists call “generalised exchange”.<sup>19</sup> For a Karbi man, prescribed marriage was with his classificatory mother’s brother’s daughter (*neng*) and each clan therefore held the position of wife-giver (*ong*: MB) and wife-taker (*meh*: ZH) to two other clans. It would seem that at local level, the cycle generally ran across less than five components, three clans being the minimum number logically required. The rule has long been abandoned, and is not perceptible in the Karbi genealogies I have collected. Thus, a simulation might be helpful in order to assess the consequences of inter-ethnic marriages on exogamic relations.

Let us limit ourselves to a local network of matrimonial exchanges involving three Karbi lineages that are affiliated to only three different maximal clans and who will marry among the Tiwas (Figure 3-7). The sole rule we will set is that Karbi wife-givers and wife-takers retain their relative positions to each other. We suppose that their Tiwa partners are not subjected to such a rule but only to universal clan exogamy. We consider them as matrilineal, as this is most common among hill Tiwas, but this does not affect the outcome.

After one marriage has been contracted between an Inghi boy and an Amsong girl, Amsong girls become non-marriageable by Terons: Amsongs become wife-givers of Terons’ wife-takers (Inghis), and both fall therefore in the same structural position. In

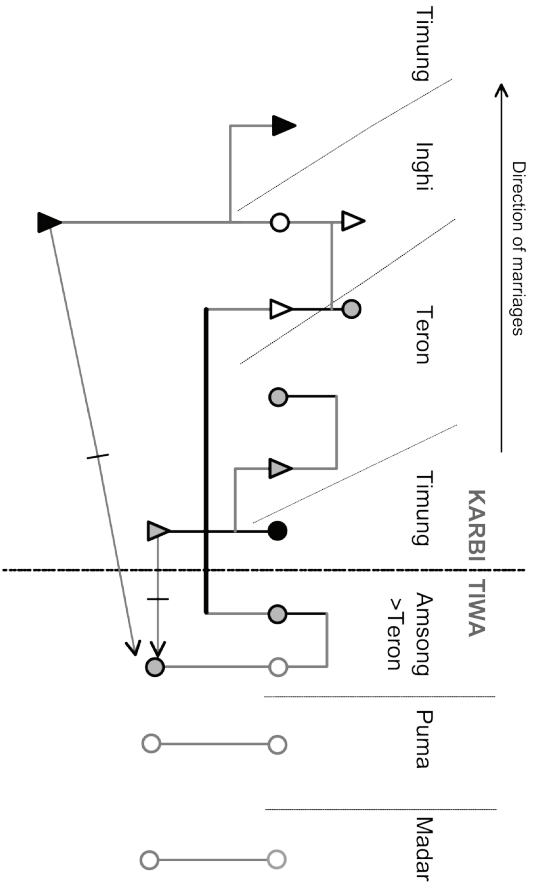
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19 (Lévi-Strauss 1969:133ff).

other words, Amsongs are now “like” Terons. Following on from the same Inghi-Amsong union, Timung boys are not allowed to marry Amsong girls, because Amsongs have become the wife-givers of their wife-givers, thus their wife-takers. If now a second Karbi-Tiwa marriage subsequently takes place, with a Teron boy marrying a Puma girl for instance, the possible matches are even more limited: Timungs and Inghis will be forbidden from marrying Puma girls. The only possible match remaining for Inghis will be Madar girls. If such an union happens it will completely seal the system, with each Karbi clan having only one marriageable clan among the Tiwas. Finally, as each of the Tiwa clans is itself part of a Tiwa phratry, any Karbi clan becoming the equivalent of a Tiwa clan will avoid marriages with the whole corresponding Tiwa phratry.

From the Tiwas' point of view, three clans from different phratries would have been enough to maintain a viable network, by marrying among themselves and, when Tiwa partners were found lacking, by marrying Karbis without breaking the rules on either side. The same processes may have operated in marriages between Karbis and Khasis, although the smaller size and the bigger number of Khasi phratries would have imposed fewer constraints on the local matrimonial market, making the short-term emergence of transethnic exogamies less crucial. The possible role of Khasi-Tiwa matrimonial relationships in the emergence of transethnic exogamies is more difficult to ascertain. Although Tiwa kinship terminology shows some sign of a restrictive exchange between two moieties, the existence of such an exchange in the past has not yet been ascertained. Thus, given the state of our current knowledge, it is wiser to suggest that the Karbi to Tiwa and Khasi matrimonial relationships, as well as Karbi inbound conversions, played a major role at the origin of the transethnic exogamies. The scenario suggested above may have developed both for Karbis marrying matrilineal Tiwas or Khasis, and for Karbis marrying patrilineal Tiwas, on condition that, from the Karbi point of view, wives always moved in the same direction. This means that nowadays, given that Karbi clans exchange spouses regardless of any orientation, transethnic exogamies might have self-organised though at a slower pace, if only the non-Karbi partner in a couple had been given a Karbi title.





**Figure 3-7:** Inter-ethnic marriages and exogamies  
Inghi boy marries Amsong girl (thick line). Amsong girls become non-marriageable to Timung  
and Teron boys (striked lines).

A second major factor contributing to the development of transethnic exogamies may obviously have been the Karbi social system's capacity to "adopt" alien elements, a property which may have been closely associated with its capacity to contract inter-ethnic marriages. The consequences of adoptions on a local matrimonial layout may be highlighted even more easily than inter-ethnic marriages. The critical representation behind this is that adoption does not cancel out the original descent affiliation of the adoptee. This seems to have particularly applied in the case of local adoptees, i.e. adoptees from another cultural milieu in the same local society. As soon as a Tiwa or Khasi was adopted into a Karbi clan, his new clan would have been identified with his former one, directly forbidding any future marriage between the two. After adoptees from other Tiwa clans had been brought in, the constitution of new transethnic exogamies would have established a framework for the regulation of inter-ethnic marriages. This process is somehow chronologically opposed to the one above, but the final outcome is the same and, in fact, both of them could have happened conjointly.

Ethnic adoptions among standard Tiwa and Khasi societies also exist, although they seem less dynamically related to transethnic exogamies. Ghilani is the only locality where I recorded effective instances of conversion to Tiwa clans and we have seen how Ghilani, though a very meaningful example, constitutes a very singular society. In the more typical hill Tiwa villages of the Umswai Valley, I was told about the possibility of clanic adoptions, including of non-Tiwas: authorisation has to be obtained from the politico-ritual head of the locality, the *loro*, as well as from the *khul mindei*, the lineage deity residing in each house. While investigating the same area fifteen years before me, Gohain reported that if a non-Tiwa boy comes in to marry a local Tiwa girl he will be adopted by a clan (*khul*) or phratry (*maharsha*) which is different from his wife's.<sup>20</sup> However, neither Gohain nor I was able to record any actual case and the possible matrimonial outcome upon inter-ethnic marriages remains unknown. Khasi upland society provides the opportunity to adopt a girl into a matriline, *ting kur*

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20 (Gohain 1993:46) Obviously being adopted by another *khul* from the wife's phratry or by a different phratry altogether makes an important difference if local matrimonial exchanges are taken into consideration.

(“adopt matrikin”) and according to Nongkynrih, this concerns mostly non-Khasi girls.<sup>21</sup> The descendants of an adopted girl will be integrated in the lineage with the consent of the elders from all the sub-lineages (*kur*, which Nongkynrih calls “collaterals”) and considered for all intents and purposes as any other member. They will however be identified by a specific surname, thus forming a new sub-lineage. Here, adoption seems to erase all the foreign individual’s links with his native society and thus will not affect the local matrimonial network.

It might be worthwhile examining the extent to which socially viable inter-ethnic marriage could take place without resorting to ethnic adoptions and equivalences. In fact, when an “alien” spouse originating from outside the neighbouring communities is introduced, and when this remains an exceptional case, the smooth running of local matrimonial exchanges will not generally be affected. In certain situations, however, things may still be problematic. One example from North Cachar was reported to me by Morningkeey Phangcho. A Khasi man, with Lyngdoh for his surname, was married to a Karbi girl of the Ingti clan and the couple chose to settle in the girl’s village (Figure 3-8). The birth of their children raised the issue of what title they should take. Staying in a Karbi village, they had in principle to follow the Karbi rules. However a contradiction naturally aroused between Karbi patrilineality and the fact that the Khasi father “had no *kur*”, i.e. no Karbi surname/clan to hand on to his children. Breaking patrilineal rules by accepting them into their mother’s clan would not have been an appropriate solution, not so much for orthodox reasons as we will see, but this would have seriously upset relations within the mother’s kin and hampered the prospective marriage of her sons. Prescribed marriage according to Karbi rules would be with his classificatory matrilineal cross-cousin (MBD), i.e. a cousin from his mother’s clan. Thus, if he were to take his mother’s clan, Ingti, he would obviously not be allowed to follow this prescription and this would affect the position of his mother’s lineage towards other local lineages. Similarly, his sister, deprived of any classificatory paternal uncle would not have been able to enter the matrimonial cycle.

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21 (Nongkynrih 2002:40).

The solution chosen was to have the children adopted by their mother's mother clan, i.e. Rongpi. This in fact "reintroduced" the problematic children into the established exchanges. However, it must be understood that this is the same kind of "repair job"

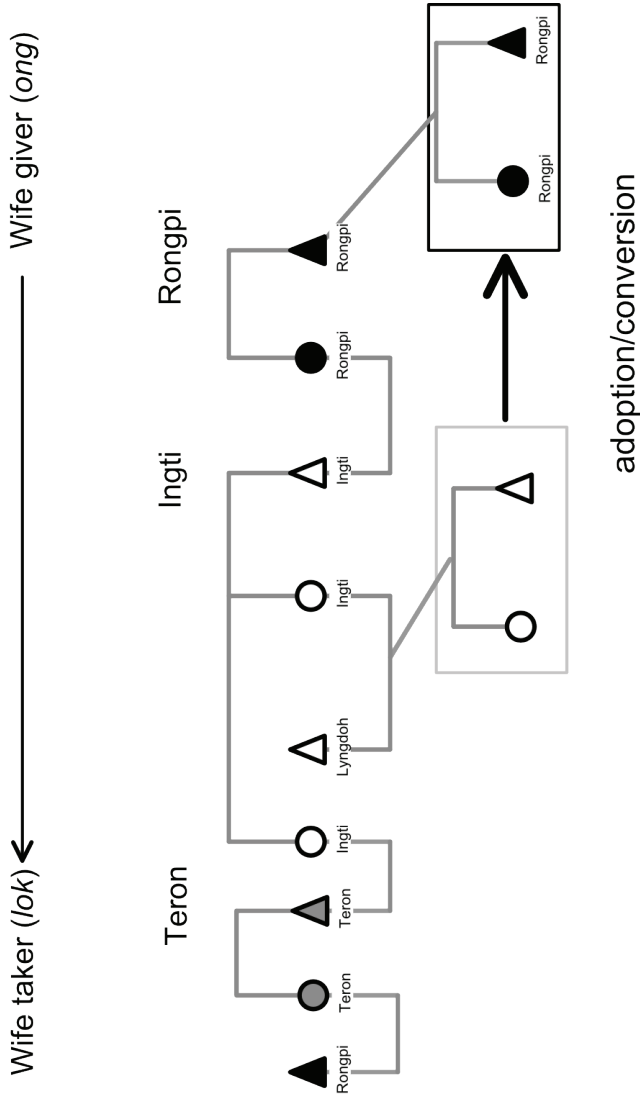


Figure 3-8: Dealing with the issues of a Karbi-Khasi couple

that is undertaken in cases of incest or unknown fatherhood mentioned above. The adoption's purpose was definitely not to establish a framework for further relationships with the Khasi father's community. Had the Khasi husband been adopted by one of the local clans, logically the Teron, Ingti's wife-takers, a link would have been forged with his community of origin in the form of a Lyngdoh-Teron exogamy. Here adoption was an effective way of dealing with cultural differences by simply removing the links that posed a problem.

To conclude on the topic of links between equivalences, ethnic conversion and inter-ethnic marriage, I will briefly evoke a case in the making which might provide us with a better vision of the conditions in which equivalences emerge. In Karbi Anglong, right on the border with Meghalaya, to the far east of the Triangle, there lives a community of about eighty houses which identify themselves as Sakechep. Their neighbours are Karbi, Khasi (Khyrniam), Pnar and Nepali. No other Sakechep community is to be found in the vicinity. Sakecheps, numbering some 20,000 in all, are found mostly in the North Cachar hills and in Tripura, the only state where they benefit from Scheduled Tribe status, under the designation "Halam".<sup>22</sup> They speak a Kukish (Tibeto-Burman) language. In Karbi Anglong, they are all Christian, mostly Presbyterian. They are divided into eleven exogamous patrilines. The Sakecheps I met asserted that they could marry members of any "jāti" (As. caste, tribe, kind); but not Nepalis, "because they are not Christian". Inter-ethnic marriage has only become common over the last few years. Most marriages are to Karbis. The matrilocality of local Khasis, themselves all-Christian, is invoked to explain why there are fewer marriages with them: Khasi families are not in favour of marrying out their girls and, similarly, Sakechep boys do not like the prospect of leaving their own family. Over the same period that the number of marriages to Karbis has increased, more and more Sakecheps have taken Karbi surnames. The reason given by converts is that it facilitates their social life in Karbi Anglong, and particular by allowing them to access reserved public jobs. Some informants were able to provide me with a list of equivalences between six Sakechep surnames and six Karbi surnames, which

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22 Halam seems to be a generic designation of Kukish speaking groups who submitted to the Tripura raja.

reflects the conversions that have already taken place. I was not able to assess the role of adoptions in the local matrimonial network. Interestingly, the absence of such equivalences with Khasis was attributed by an informant to their matrilineality: “we cannot compromise with them because of their maternal clans”. Nevertheless, there seems to be no consensus yet on the legitimacy of identity between Sakechep and Karbi surnames. This is the first and as yet only instance of disputed equivalences that I recorded. When discussing the topic, I encountered angry reactions from several men who strongly objected to the possibility of such a rule: “A Sakechep cannot become a Karbi! How can a jackfruit tree give mangoes?”.

The fact that equivalences have recently appeared in the Sakechep area may naturally explain why they have not been internalised as in other areas. The idea that different surnames might be identical from one tribe to another is not immediately obvious everywhere in North-East India. It emerges and thereafter is sustained only in very specific conditions pertaining not only to descent and matrimonial inherited rules within each cultural component of a local area, but also to their relative demographic and political positions. The numerical strength of one group compared to another has a direct bearing on matrimonial opportunities and strategies and, similarly, a minority situation might encourage either assimilation or, on the contrary, a fallback into endogamy. Only a particular balance between these factors, translated in terms of mutual interest, may enable transethnic exogamies to take root. In this respect, equivalences do not merely represent vestiges of long gone structures. They remain one of the paths that today’s societies might follow in a multi-ethnic context.

In the model I put forward here, conversions and equivalences are hardly the object of conscious manipulations. They essentially emerge from the individual’s and small-group’s behaviour as they adapt to multi-ethnic or multi-cultural environments. Within certain sections, particularly in the Triangle, they may have been internalised enough to become a cognitive property, which actors consider unremarkable, even totally natural. This is not how they are perceived everywhere. I have described how, even in the Triangle, a “battle for surnames” is taking place. Some believe that a change of surname threatens their own tribe’s position; that the next tribe is winning by stealing their own people.

Nevertheless, the “battle” in the Triangle is still only very tame. In other parts of the North-East, it may take on a more serious aspect. In a recent web article on “The Problem of Nagaisation in Manipur” requesting the Manipur government to “impose a ban on ethnic conversions”, a columnist did not perceive them as being natural at all.<sup>23</sup> The backdrop is the old demands made by some Naga movements that areas inhabited by Nagas in Manipur be attached to a “Greater Nagaland”. For the author, the recent conversion of some Manipur Kuki-speaking groups to a Naga identity is part of a politically motivated Naga-isation process. He stigmatises a central government’s envoy for having described “changing loyalties among members of small tribes in North-East India as a natural phenomenon”. Instead, “the unethical phenomenon of ‘ethnic conversion’ may be described as a de-humanised condition in which the victim is brainwashed [...] to the effect that he loses all inhibitions to totally change his entire outlook on tribal life and values”.

#### *Adaptive descent modes*

The occurrence of regular inter-ethnic marriage may raise questions about the possibility of marriage between groups not sharing the same descent rules. In the simulations above, we have seen that a difference in descent modes does not logically affect an exchange cycle between a patrilineal community and its matrilineal partners. Two local communities, Karbi and Tiwa, can exchange spouses and still remain respectively patrilineal and matrilineal. However, this implies that residence rules supposedly in keeping with descent rules are not always observed, as for example when a married girl leaves her matrilineal—and supposedly matrilocal—family to live with her in-laws. Real cases confirm that “patrilineal families” and “matrilineal families” do apparently exchange spouses regularly, but they also expose a flaw in such a formulation, as we will come to realise. Furthermore, they show that, although ethnic Karbis most generally follow patrilineality and patrilocality (virilocality), and Khasis matrilineality and matrilocality (uxorilocality), both hill Tiwas

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23 (Thadou 2008).

and mixed communities at the margins may follow “uncoupled” or seemingly conflicting descent and residence rules.<sup>24</sup>

The anthropological literature on the region and local depictions always assume an adequacy between a given ethnic group and a typical unilineal descent rule, whether matri- or patri-lineal. Therefore Khasis, Pnars, Garos and hill Tiwas would be “traditionally” matrilineal; Karbis and plains Tiwa would be “traditionally” patrilineal.<sup>25</sup> With regard to the hill Tiwas, B.K. Gohain considers that the “marriage of a Hill Lalung [hill Tiwa] male with a female of another tribe upsets the matrilineality of the tribe and so Hill Lalung males avoid [it]”.<sup>26</sup> Though my field data appear to confirm this portrayal as far as Karbis and upland Khasis are concerned, save some exceptions, this opposition is largely unfounded in the Assam-Meghalaya border area and for hill Tiwas. The map of descent modes given above (Figure 2-4, page 39) showed a large proportion of “mixed” or “moderately matrilineal” villages. A hasty look would interpret them as ethnically mixed—which would be wrong in many cases — or at least to be made up of matrilineal households living side by side with patrilineal ones—which would still prove wrong for a fair proportion of them. Closer examination of the cases at hand reveals that a large number of houses follow the two principles conjointly. How is this possible?

B.C. Allen in the 1905 Nowgong Gazetteer expressed his surprise at Lalung (Tiwa) matrimonial practices: “their own rules of inheritance are 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”.<sup>27</sup> This could apply today not only to hill Tiwas but also to most inhabitants of northern Ri Bhoi,

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24 Out of consideration for non-anthropologists, we will use matrilineal and patrilineal instead of uxori-local and viri-local, which for our purposes will have no consequence.

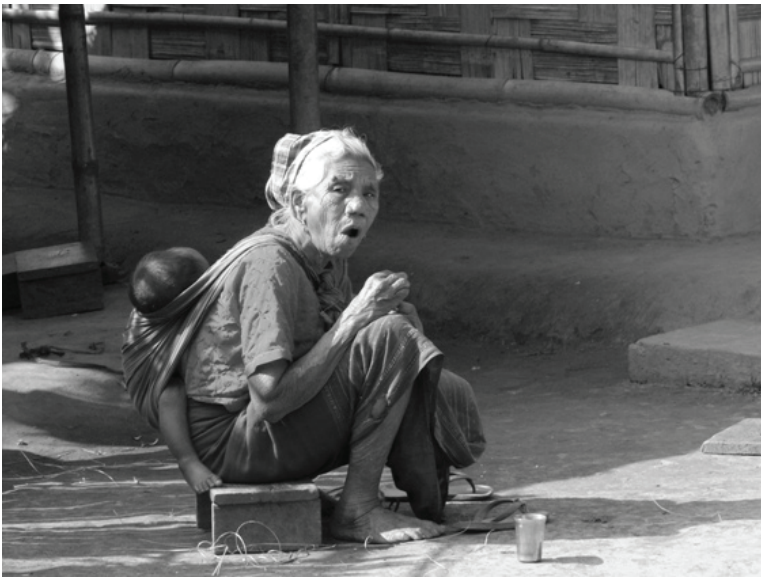
25 Nakane’s extensive analysis of Khasi kinship (1968) does not mention instances of patrilineality, nor does Nongkynrih’s more recent sociology of the Khasis (Nongkynrih 2002). Gohain describes the Hill Lalung (hill Tiwa) clan (*khul*) as the “most important social grouping” and defines it as an “exogamous matrilineal descent group” (1993:41).

26 (Gohain 1993:46).

27 (Allen 1905:83).



whatever their ethnicity. When questioned about their matrimonial rules, many Ri Bhoi villagers explain that “one inherits one’s mother’s name when born into her house and one’s father’s name when born into his house”. When questioned again about how it is decided that a married couple should live in the husband’s house instead of the wife’s house, people unanimously answer that this is a matter of “personal choice”: “the couple will decide; or for example the girl’s parents may prefer for the boy to come because they have married out their other daughters.” These “personal choices” are all explained in terms of mutual sympathies or of practical concerns about the internal balance of households. I was very seldom told that a “rule” had to be followed in deciding the place of residence and that, for example, being Tiwa, a couple had to live with the girl’s parents.



**Figure 3-9:** *A grandmother chewing areca nut  
Tiwa-speaking village of Bormarjong (Karbi-Anglong)*

In the Triangle, descent is second to residence, and residence depends primarily on pragmatic considerations. Residence practices over previous generations seem to play a role but there is no compliance with an ethnic “tradition” per se. Such principles do not prevent the simultaneous coexistence of two descent modes in the same house, a situation which the analysis of electoral rolls proves to be very common. The best example is in fact the Khasi Bhoi-speaking families of Mawker (Raid Nukhap) whom I met at Jonbil mela and who were “unable” to state their tribe (page 31). Figure 3-10 shows the four households of Kil Pangcho’s children. Kil, in her sixties, although having a surname which is considered elsewhere typically Karbi (Phangcho), is the head of a matrilineal and matrilocal family. Her three sons have married outside and her two daughters live in her house with their incoming husbands. Thus, looking at Kil’s household alone, one would believe to be in a true matrilineal society. On examining the descent links among Kil’s affines this impression is immediately dismissed. Her eldest son-in-law, Phimroy Lamare, inherited his typical Pnar surname from his father.<sup>28</sup> Kil’s last son, Jermen, married into another Lamare family with three sons and a daughter who took their father’s surname. Now, whereas the parents chose patrilocality (Kh. *lam kurim*: “bring wife”), their two married children opted for matrilocal marriages (Kh. *leit kurim*: “go [to] wife”); it is only after their son Brendo died that his wife and daughter came to live with her in-laws. To many ethnically minded Northeasteners, this is a very confused situation indeed: people with “Karbi surnames” (Phangcho) being matrilineal, people with “Pnar surnames” (Lamare) being patrilineal, all marrying each other, and rules changing from one generation to the next, everything challenges the generally accepted association that exists between ethnicity and a fixed descent rule.

So far we have little information about the inside workings of such families and this is the topic of an ongoing enquiry. One of the questions that spontaneously spring to mind is: what happens to kinship terminology in cases where there is a shift in

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28 As Khasi, Pnar descent is reputed matrilineal but Pnar residence might either matrilocal or duolocal, with husbands staying and working in their sister’s house at daytime. (Gurdon 1914:76; Lamare 2005:17–18).

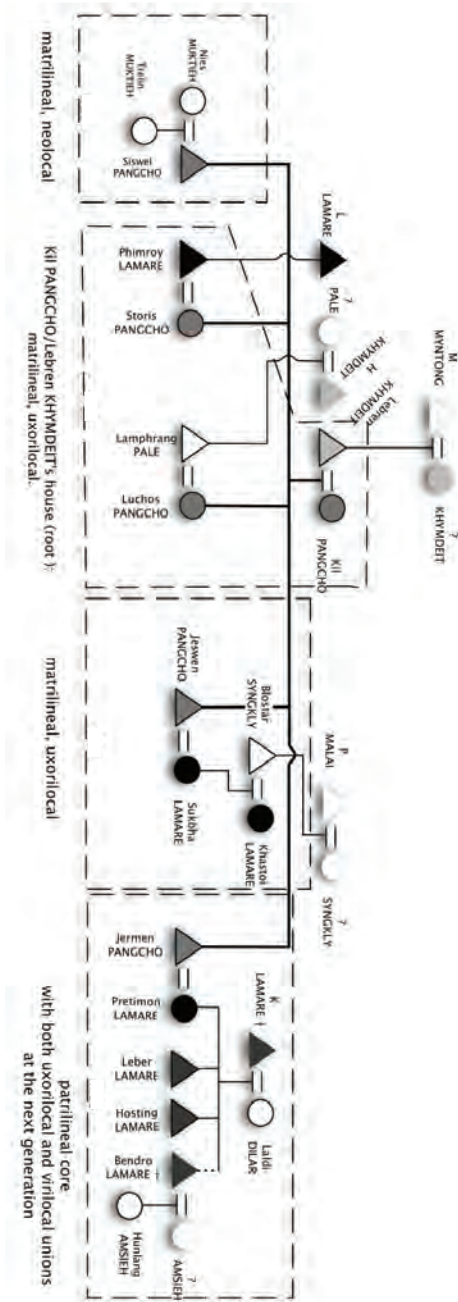


Figure 3-10: Multiple descent and residence principles in a village of the margins

the residence modes? Whether terminologies accurately reflect social rules—and whether kinship itself is a cultural reality—has a central debate in anthropology.<sup>29</sup> It might nevertheless be wisely postulated that the form of descent has always some bearing on the structure of the terminology. Therefore, what happens if the line of descent changes over generations or if different lines coexist among siblings?

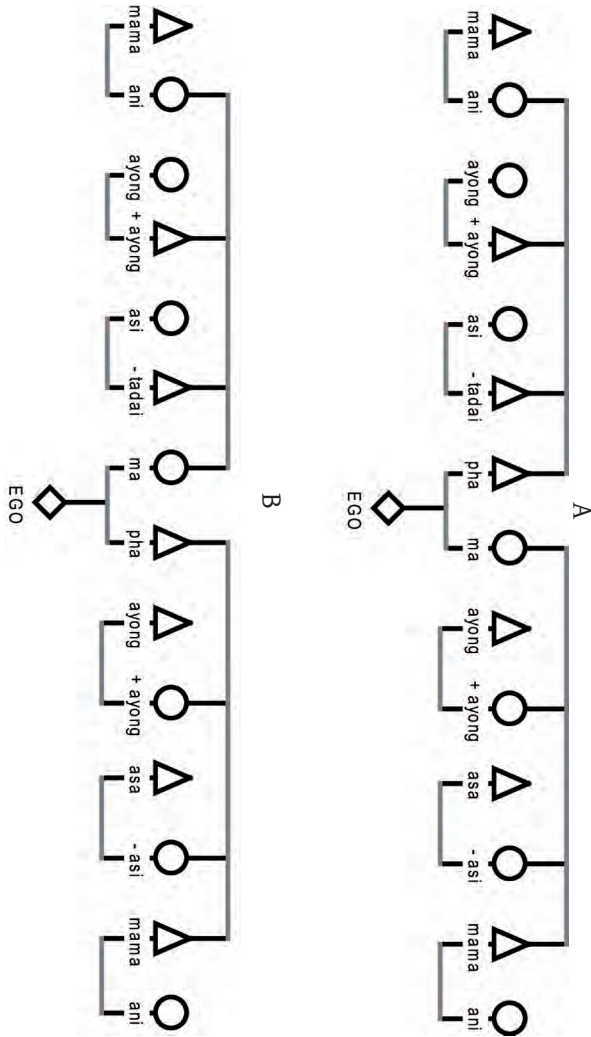
The Tiwa language distinguishes between two residence modes: *gobhia*, in which the husband comes to his wife's house (i.e. matrilocal), and *poari*, in which the wife comes to her husband's house (patrilocal); children born from a *gobhia* couple will belong to their mother's descent group (*khul*), and those born from a *poari* couple will belong to their father's *khul*. In the hills, a majority (about 80%) of married couples fall into the *gobhia* category, and when questioned about kinship terminology, informants implicitly refer to a *gobhia* context. It is the same point of view that we will adopt to start with (Figure 3-11A).

Hill Tiwa terminology resemble many terminologies in the region in that it differentiates, though in a unique manner, between parental siblings according both to their relative sex and seniority:  $FeB=MeZ \neq FyB \neq MyZ \neq FZ \neq MB$ . A differentiation is made between parallel aunts and uncles according to their relative age, with masculine and feminine elders being grouped together; cross-sex kin are identified regardless of their age. All the kin of ego's generation are assimilated to siblings. The terms used for affines in the parental generation almost mirror the terms used for parallels, as if parallels of one side were married to cross-sex of the other:  $FZ=MBW$  (*ani*),  $MyZ=FyBW$  (*asi*),  $FZH=MB$  (*mamai*),  $FeB=MeZH=MeZ=FeBW$ , the only exception being  $FyB$  (*tadai*)  $\neq MyZH$  (*asa*). This would indicate a restrictive exchange between two descent units, the existence of which is not recalled however by informants, although marriage of a boy with a girl from his father's lineage, and remote by several degrees, is common. One peculiarity of this terminology is a number of reciprocal terms which symmetry is not always easy to inform: grand-parents and

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29 See especially (Kroeber 1909; Rivers 1914) and for a synthesis of the debate (Schneider 1968). The problem relates more generally to the relationship between language and culture. (Carsten 2004:76). See also (Schneider 1984) for his radical critique on kinship studies.

grand-children refer to each other by the same terms (*ajo/abi*); to a masculine ego, FeB=yBC (*ayong*), FyB=eBS (*tadai*); to a feminine ego, MeZ=yZC (*ayong*).



**Figure 3-11:** Hill Tiwa kinship terminologies  
 A: ego born from matrilineal couple (gobhia)  
 B: ego born from patrilineal couple (poari)

Now, what is interesting as far as we are concerned is that a child born to a patrilocal couple (*poari*) uses the very same terms but shifts them from the maternal to the paternal side. The difference was described to me as follows: “*ani* (FZ) becomes *asi* (MZ)”, and it was further justified as “in *poari*, the man becomes the woman and inversely”, i.e. father’s position is substituted to mother’s position. Paternal aunts become maternal aunts and all the remaining terms follow suit (Figure 3-11 B). In this respect, the coexistence of patrilocal and matrilocal families is much less problematic than expected: individuals address their relatives according to either the *gobhia* terminology or the *poari* terminology depending on whether their parents are *gobhia* or *poari*. As for a Khasi Bhoi linguistic environment like Mawker, the coexistence of matrilocality with patrilocality is even less problematic for kinship terminology, as Bhoi terminology displays a similar and simpler structure than hill Tiwa’s with similar terms for parallels of both sides (Figure 3-12). This however will have to be checked through a specific investigation.



Figure 3-12: Khasi Bhoi kinship terminology

The “swapping of aunts” confirms the primacy of residence over descent in the hill Tiwa social milieu: children are not born *a priori* “into a matrilineal descent group” or “into a patrilineal descent group”; they are born into their mother’s house or into their father’s house. As for the Triangle area, no hesitation should be had in moving even further away from common assumptions about descent. When we were conducting an interview in the “mixed-descent” village of Tharakunji, my friend Raktim Amsi ran a very inspiring point past the village head: “suppose a Mithi man is married in *gobhia* into an Amsi family. His wife dies. He stays in the same house and remarries in *poari*, this time to a Puma girl. What will their children’s *khul* be?”. The headman’s response came without the slightest hesitation: “they will be Amsi, because it is the house’s *khul*”. This takes us one step further: ultimately, it is not the *khul* of either the mother or the father that is transmitted to a child, but of the house itself. This principle is clearly reflected in the Tiwa conceptions about the transmission of bodily substances from parents to children. In a matrilocal situation (*gobhia*), children will inherit the “seed” (*kodia*) of their father’s clan, while symmetrically, children born from a patrilocal couple (*poari*) will inherit their mother’s clan’s “seed”. Houses reproduce thanks to a fertilizing substance brought by the incoming spouses, whatever their sexes. And a lineage will consider all the offsprings of his out-married consanguines as its “seeds”.

Hill Tiwa social identities may be understood primarily in terms of domestic belonging. These are expressed by surnames and bonds to specific deities. As a matter of fact, more than the physical space of the house, it is the particular set of gods inhabiting it that establishes a person’s identity. When a child is born, it inherits the house’s *khul* and a relationship to the deities residing in the house pillar (*thundaphang*). On a broader scale, the child is associated with all houses bearing the same *khul* and worshipping the same *khul* deity (*khul mindei*). This has repercussions mostly on the choice of spouse. On a smaller scale, that of the village or extended village (a root-village and its offshoots), the child belongs to the “group” (*mahar*) of closely related houses worshipping both the same *khul* deity and the same “group deity” (*maharne mindei*) and entitled to assume specific political and ritual positions. This local lineage actually forms a single ritual entity organised around a root house (*nomul, nobaro*: “house-main”), where domestic rituals are performed by the eldest man born of the *khul* (*borjela*).

Domestic deities are the prime criterion for lineage identification. There are altogether only a dozen domestic deities that may, depending on the case, assume the role of either *khul mindei* or *maharne mindei*. Two individuals bearing the same *khul* surname may possibly express their relative unrelatedness by stating that they do not worship the same *maharne mindei*. Domestic deities are the supreme authorities over their domain. The introduction of a new member, whether adopted or married into the house, depends on whether the deities give their authorisation. In the same way, the relationships between local deities and certain houses define the effective political structures. When the head priest (*loro*) of an extended village dies, his successor's identity is revealed when the new house where the deity has chosen to settle has been identified. And the bond between a "new village" (*kraikodal*) and an "old village" (*kraibaro*) is defined by the fact that a new village has no *loro* and consequently cannot perform territorial rituals on its own.

Under such circumstances, we may reconsider our initial reflection on how matrilineality can coexist with patrilineality in the Triangle. The shift from one descent mode to another is not at stake in Tiwa and Khasi Bhoi societies. Houses merely reproduce when children are born from a couple made up of a native member and his/her incoming spouse, whatever their gender. People do not transmit their identity to their house; the opposite is in fact the case. People adopt the identity of the house, whatever the identity of their parents. The hill Tiwa case fuels an old controversy among anthropologists about the respective importance of descent groups and houses as organising principles of social structures.<sup>30</sup> Lévi-Strauss forged the concept of "house societies" ("sociétés à maison") to account for non-strictly unilineal societies, which had posed a problem since the origins of anthropology and which could not fit into his own famous alliance theory.<sup>31</sup> In such societies, descent groups do not impose a form on the inhabited space but are shaped by it instead. Leach went one step further, arguing that some societies are not organised by descent or by kinship, but by territorial interests.<sup>32</sup> Kuper went so far as maintaining that lineage models could not even apply to emblematic

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30 For details of the debate, see (Carsten and Hugh-Jones 1995:6–18).

31 (Lévi-Strauss 1982:170–176).

32 (Leach 1961:300).



unilineal societies, such as the Nuers, and as a whole had “no value for the anthropological analysis”.<sup>33</sup> I agree to warnings against a reification of lineages and clans, and against overestimating unilineal descent, but I do not deem it reasonable to completely do away with descent groups as an analytical concept. Though social relationships at a very local level may be described without referring to lineages and clans, at a higher spatial level, identifications and matrimonial exchanges do indeed concern sets of houses that take the form of unilineal descent groups. The unilineality of the *khul* may be contested if one refers to the commonest definition of unilineality as descent being traced exclusively through a male or female line.<sup>34</sup> Descent groups of the Tiwa *khul* type, comprising alternating matrilineal and patrilineal links, have been traditionally classed as “ambilineal” and included in the “cognatic descent systems”.<sup>35</sup> In ambilineal descent, affiliation to the mother or father’s group is not fixed by a set of rules, but by domestic and lineage strategies. The *khul* certainly satisfies this criterion and as such, may be rightly considered ambilineal. As Goodenough remarked on the ambilineal groups (*kainga*) of Gilbert Islands, these “descent groups resemble unilineal lineages in that they do not overlap their membership.”<sup>36</sup> The problem lies in the assimilation of ambilineal descent groups to other “cognatic descents groups” made up of several lines and which are only ego-defined. By contrast, ambilineal groups form a single line spreading from an assumed common ancestor, a property that has rather different consequences on kinship reckoning and the definition of collective rights. The hill Tiwa case somehow reconciles contenders in the “descent versus house” dispute.

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33 (Kuper 1982:92).

34 It is surprising that opposition between unilineal and cognitive descent still prevails in many anthropological writings and that it is taught to generations of students, and even more surprisingly that Murdock is taken as the main source of such opposition. As early as 1940, Murdock pointed out the classification problem posed by “double descent” which he differentiated from both “bilateral” and “unilinear” descent. (Murdock 1940).

35 Firth was the first to use the concept of ambilaterality/ambilineality to describe Maori descent groups. He included “ambilineal descent” in “non-unilineal descent” (Firth 1929:98; Firth 1963).

36 (Goodenough 1970:57) and (Goodenough 1955:74–75).

Tiwa houses perfectly illustrate Lévi-Strauss's approach to Yurok houses as well as to European noble houses, as summarised by Carsten: "Yurok houses were perpetual establishments whose names [...] were used in turn by the house owners"<sup>37</sup> However, this is not incompatible with a linearity, in the sense of a single line linking together different houses. Leach's vision of social groups originating out of territorial interests does indeed apply to the linkages between domestic units as long as they are observed at the very local scale. However, at a higher level, Tiwa houses are plainly organised into ambilineal groups which by and large assume shapes and positions very similar to the classical unilineal descent groups. Once again, the scale of observation and the level of organisation in question prove crucial in defining social forms. Opting exclusively for this or that analytical concept (descent group, house...) does not help to account globally for a social system; instead of invoking a single constitutional principle, one may acknowledge the fact that different organising principles are at play at different levels. Put more simply, Tiwa structures are organised by house and space at a lower level but nonetheless by descent at a higher level.

While it would be entirely reasonable to envisage an emergence of Tiwa ambilineality out of contacts between patrilineal and matrilineal groups, this would assume that patri- or matrilineality are more natural or simpler organising principles than ambilineality, which cannot be taken for granted. The question of origins is nevertheless not one we are primarily concerned with in the description of the regional multi-cultural system. What interests us first and foremost is precisely how the system operates and in this respect we might make do with suggesting that the absence of a strictly unilineal descent principle among several groups of the Triangle, among which hill Tiwas are the most identifiable, definitely facilitates matrimonial relationships between more typically patrilineal and matrilineal groups. Ambilineality, and to be more precise, house-based descent, together with title equivalences and adoptions provide for connections that link up communities organised along different social principles.

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37 (Carsten and Hugh-Jones 1995:6).

## Chapter 4: Markets, myths and politics: looking for assemblages



**Figure 4-1:** *Iewduh market, Shillong*

If we assume that North-East India has experienced a deep process of ethnicisation over the twentieth century, we must try to conceive what its former society roughly looked like. This chapter may be regarded as a historical experiment. It is in some respects a simulation; not a simulation consisting in a fiction or an artificial model, but in the sense of “doing as if”; in this case “doing as if” ethnicities did not exist. I have tried to organise this simulation not according to a hypothetico-deductive sequence, but by unravelling a series of social or symbolic assemblages that seemed to me either independent of, or historically anterior to the present ubiquitous ethnic perception of the anthropological landscape.

*What makes a society: the market, the dog and stinking peas*

How the Dog came to live with Man (from Gurdon, *The Khasis*, 1914:174-175)

In olden days, when the world was young, all the beasts lived happily together, and they bought and sold together, and they jointly built markets. The largest market where all the beasts used to take their articles for sale was "Luri-Lura", in the Bhoi country. To that market the dog came to sell rotten peas. No animal would buy that stinking stuff. Whenever any beast passed by his stall, he used to say "Please buy this stuff." When they looked at it and smelt it, it gave out a bad odour. When many animals had collected together near the stall of the dog, they took offence at him, and they said to him, "Why have you come to sell this evil smelling, dirty stuff?" They then kicked his ware and trampled it under foot. The dog then complained to the principal beasts and also to the tiger, who was at that time the priest of the market. But they condemned him, saying, "You will be fined for coming to sell such dirty stuff in the market." So they acted spitefully towards him by kicking and trampling upon his wares. When the dog perceived that there was no one to give ear to his complaint, he went to man, who said, "Come and live with me, and I will arise with you to seek revenge on all the animals who have wronged you." The dog agreed and went to live with man from that time. Then man began to hunt with the assistance of the dog. The dog knows well also how to follow the tracks of the animals, because he can scent in their footprints the smell of the rotten pea stuff which they trod under foot at Luri-Lura market.

This story is a myth in the purest form: it tells us about an origin. Were we to believe the conclusion, this would be the origin of the companionship between hunters and dogs. It is in fact how Gurdon introduces this narrative in his monograph on *the Khasis*.<sup>1</sup> Now, this story about the origins of hunting takes place on a market and in the undivided universe of origins: animals behave like humans and, among other things, hold a market. In this respect, the precise regional setting is not fortuitous: Bhoi country, i.e. what Upland Khasis perceived (in early twentieth century, when the myth was recorded) as the wild borderlands inhabited by primitives. We do not know what was exchanged

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1 (Gurdon 1914:174).

on the market but we understand that a rather sophisticated order prevailed. The Republic of Georges Orwell's *Animal Farm* comes to mind: a political institution composed of elders (*rongbah*) and presided by the "market priest" (*lyngdoh iew*) settles cases and imposes fines. The market, the council of elders and the priest: we shall see how these three figures are linked in other instances.



**Figure 4-2:** *Wednesday market, Umswai (Karbi Anglong)*  
*Vegetables carried from domestic farms by kho (Tw. conical basket)*

Myths obviously possess their own structure and do not literally translate empirical social realities. They may be regarded as assemblages of patterns stemming from a particular social environment but then travelling and evolving independently to a large extent from conscious human agencies. And they at least draw our attention to the—past and present—representations with which they interact.

Henceforth, men have differentiated themselves from animals. Wild animals live in the forest where they fall prey to other creatures. One of them, however, escaped this fate: the Tiger. Significantly featured as the priest on the market in the myth of origin, he has long remained the divine lord of village territories,

under the name Khla Ryingku.<sup>2</sup> Until conversion to Christianity and even now among unconverted communities, he is the one who punishes either those who violate his own estate or transgress local social laws. In converted villages, Khla Ryingku is said to have disappeared: he no longer makes himself visible and people do not feel compelled to worship him.

### *Markets as spatial and temporal nodes*

Marketplaces have been the topic of sophisticated studies in economy, archaeology, and to a lesser extent, in anthropology.<sup>3</sup> This “node in the economic landscape”, proved essential to Skinner in his quest for “regional systems” in China.<sup>4</sup> It has the advantage of offering a cross-sectional point of view, across the more canonical perspectives centred on the village or the ethnic group. The social aspects of markets in North-East India may not differ much from what is found in other rural parts of the world.<sup>5</sup> Whatever the case, markets were among the most recurrent forms when I worked in this area and which I ended up tracking more systematically. By “markets”, I mean two specific forms: the weekly market (Kh. *iew*, As. *haṭ bazār*) and the fair (As. *melā*), two institutions whose economic weight is on the decline, compared to the permanent bazaar in towns and cities, but which still play very active social roles. Trading is generally done on a yearly basis and is closely associated with the ritual calendar. Periodic markets are of considerable importance throughout South Asia.<sup>6</sup> In North-East India, they have for the moment survived the development of metalled roads, even sometimes benefiting from it, since traders are able to reach small remote markets more easily. We

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2 Khla Ryingku corresponds to the ordinary four-clawed tiger, and must be differentiated from the five-clawed weretiger, Khla phuli, a human assuming the form of a tiger under certain circumstances. For weretigers, see (Kharmawphlang 2001a, 2001b) and (Kaiser et al. 2003).

3 See for instance (Larson and Harris 1995; Mohan Reddy 2010; Smith 1974; Vidyarthi and Rai 1976:108–111; Yang 1998). Alfred Gell’s study of the symbolic and social dimension of a Bastar market is obviously one of the most inspiring anthropologies of marketplaces (Gell 1982).

4 (Skinner 1964:6).

5 (Granovetter 1985; Plattner 1985; Polanyi 1957).

6 (Yang 1998).

may, moreover, invoke the enduring effects of spatial structures generated before the advent of roads. The dialectical relationship between social structures and the spatial distribution of market towns might be an intimate and complex one, as evidenced by Skinner.<sup>7</sup> Moreover, the combined effects of physical geography, transportation networks and traders/customers' strategies follow specific spatial laws accounting for the location of "nodes" (markets or towns) in "nested hierarchies", as formulated by the "central place theory".<sup>8</sup>

Before roads were built in the Triangle area, as a rule, people used to frequent two or three markets. For example, in the 1960s', people from Maikramsa and Tharakunji in Karbi Anglong used to go downhill on Mondays to Nellie to sell their products: silk cocoons, shellac, sesame, chilli, taro and cotton. There they bought salt, dried fish, tobacco and tea. Since Nellie is more than a four-hour walk away, they had to spend two nights there, which they did in a makeshift inn owned by a Bengali. Some of the transactions were done on a bartering basis.<sup>9</sup> They also used to go uphill to Mawhati or Umsning, where markets were held on Mawshai day (a Khasi weekday, cf. below). To walk there took more than a day. They sold rice and bought cloth. They were therefore involved in two types of trade and exposed to two linguistic milieus: Assamese in Nellie and Khasi in Mawhati and Umsning. The reckoning of time was also different: in the plains the periodicity of markets is based on the seven-day week. In the uplands, the perspective is somehow reversed, as the days are based on an eight-day market cycle. Each day takes the name of the main market that is held that day (Figure 4-3).<sup>10</sup>

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7 (Skinner 1965) for a theory on the spatial distribution of markets.

8 (Christaller and Baskin 1966; Lösch 1954).

9 The nature of goods exchanged in the foothills was somewhat similar during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, see (Edwards 1909:14).

10 For similar time reckoning systems, e.g. among Etruscans or in West Africa, see (Zerubavel 2003). Significantly, the very first figures that appeared in the Statistical Handbook of East Khasi Hill District (2008) were the list of periodic markets (East Khasi Hills Statistical Office 2008). The role of markets in Khasi language time reckoning makes very surprising a remark by the brilliant historian David Syiemlieh

	<b>Jaintia hills</b>	<b>Khasi hills</b>
1	Ka hat	Yeao-duh
2	Kilino	Lynkah
3	Pynaing	Nongkrem
4	Maolong (Nartiang)	Um-Iong/Maolong
5	Maosiang	Ranghop
6	Maoshai	Shillong
7	Pynkat	Pomtih
8	Thym blein	Umnih

**Figure 4-3:** *Markets and weekdays in Jaintia & Khasi hills*

Thus, regional market systems associate space and time structures, and possibly social structures as well, as we will see.

#### *Markets, sacred groves and megaliths*

In the story of the dog and the rotten peas, the holders of authority (the elders, the Priest-Tiger) seemed to be closely implicated in market affairs. This definitely fits in with historical and ethnographic evidence available today, suggesting that marketplaces during certain pre-colonial times were political and ritual centres. Some of evidence of this is the numerous vestiges found throughout the hills of Meghalaya and Karbi Anglong, and more particularly on Jaintia state territory, formerly the most important State in the hills. In Nartiang, the hill capital of Jaintia, the setting up of the market is associated by local folklore with the foundation of the capital. The marketplace is closely linked to one of the largest megalithic sites in North-East India (Figure 4-4). Most of the megaliths are parts of lineage cults, although interestingly enough, some informants claim that they were in fact the stalls of the ancient market. One monolith might have fulfilled a different function however: the tallest (8 m) is supposed to have been carried there by the Jaintia hero, U Mar Phalyngki, all the

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that there did not appear to have been markets in the hills until late eighteenth century (Syiemlieh 2004:329).



way from the older market in Raliang in order to set up Nartiang market. In the narrative published by I.M. Simon, it is said that once the monolith had been moved, Raliang market ceased to exist; it was later re-opened and held the same day as Nartiang, i.e. Mulong (Kh. Maolong), a day that is also in fact called “Nartiang”.<sup>11</sup> Nartiang and Raliang illustrate the existence of very substantial and in fact genealogical relationships between marketplaces. In this respect, markets appear to mean more than mere economic nodes; they are part of more consistent social structures which may possibly be reproduced into several local varieties.



**Figure 4-4:** *Megaliths in Nartiang market*

The role of megaliths deserves a few lines. British interest and glosses about these artefacts have been abundant.<sup>12</sup> Let us simply bear in mind here that in this region megaliths fulfil three functions which often overlap: celebrating heroes, worshipping the dead and marking roads or boundaries. Depending on the locality and the people, megaliths may be given various meanings and their shape may be different, occasionally anthropomorphic. In Nartiang on market days, a rite is performed at the foot of the great monolith in order to worship “the Market god of Nartiang” (Pn. *ka Knia Blai Iaw Nartiang*). Worship is carried out by the *doloi* and the *pator*, i.e. the head of Nartiang *elaka* territory and his as-

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11 (Simon 1966:56).

12 The first consistent description was provided by (Godwin-Austen 1872). See also (Hutton 1922a, 1922b, 1923). For a recent description, cf. (Mawlong 2004).

sistant. Furthermore, an annual sacrifice used to be made to the Market god. It was reintroduced in 1997 after a lapse of 41 years.



**Figure 4-5:** Iewduh market, Shillong  
*The market's deity (ka blei hat) sanctuary. (Courtesy of Lang Kupar War)*



**Figure 4-6:** State ritual of Mylliem State at Iewduh market  
*Reading omens for the year (Courtesy of Lang Kupar War)*

Similar associations between marketplaces, ancestor cults and political authority are found at several sites on Jaintia territory and in the Khasi States. Following a massive wave of Christianisation during the twentieth century, the religious aspects of markets have only survived in the form of relics. Nevertheless, these might help to piece together the pre-colonial social fabric of which we know very little, despite the valuable work by Hamlet Bareh.<sup>13</sup> The annual ritual in the State of Myllem takes place at Iewduh, Shillong's largest market and, to be more precise, around a set of monoliths standing at the top of the sloping marketplace (Figure 4-5). A sacrifice is offered to the god Shyllong to ask for protection against epidemics and omens for the year to come are read (Figure 4-6). Similarly, in Rangblang (West Khasi Hills), although the first phase of the annual ritual took place at the *iing sad*, the ruler's residence, the sacrifice was performed on the marketplace itself.<sup>14</sup>



**Figure 4-7:** *The market's deity in Nongpoh*

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13 (Bareh 1997).

14 Bareh (1997:243–244) writes that “Dancing also forms a part of certain ceremonies performed at markets for the prosperity of the State and for the good of trade” but doesn't provide any example.

While searching for markets we come across politico-ritual centres, but the opposite is also common. Karbi-speaking villages which formerly came under Jaintia's authority (present-day Hamren subdivision of Karbi Anglong district) are scattered over three territories (Kb. *longri*): Rongkhang, Chinthong and Amri. Within these polities, territories and clans are organised in order of seniority. The clans of the eldest territory, Rongkhang, are represented at a parliament, *pinpomar*, situated in Ronghang Rongbong, an isolated locality at the top of a hill near Hamren. The name of the place means literally "capital of the Ronghang", Ronghang being the eldest clan in Rongkhang. By extension, Ronghang Rongbong is nowadays described as "the historical capital of the Karbis". Like other so-called "traditional" political institutions in the region, the *pinpomar* parliament as well as the local authorities over which it presides, wields authority in matters of customary law and rituals. This political set-up only concerns, nowadays at least, Karbi-speaking villages and is based on Karbi clans, but to describe it in exclusively ethnic terms might, for our purposes here, hide its possible historical connections with non-Karbi forms. It would be wiser to follow the common conception of villagers who, contrary to Karbi intellectuals, do not speak of a "Karbi political system" but only of *habe* and *lindok*, i.e. village cluster chiefs and high-ranking chiefs.

Ronghang Rongbong is exclusively occupied by the residences of dignitaries, grouped around a sacred enclosure dedicated to the snake-deity, Thlen. If the size of the trees can be regarded as a clue, it seems to be a rather ancient settlement. Over the last ten years it has been fitted out by the Karbi Anglong Autonomous Council with various facilities including a museum. Older bamboo and wood edifices, as well as previously open-air altars have been replaced by concrete structures. Yet, 200 metres below the official complex, an interesting site has not yet been affected by modernisation and may easily escape the attention of most visitors. At the foot of one of the largest banyan trees stands a series of five stone slabs topped by vertical monoliths (Figure 4-8).

The dignitaries who took me there presented the place in the following manner: "this is the seat of the great king (Kb. *Recho kethe anghoi*)". Each slab is supposed to have been the seat of one of the dignitaries who attended the Rong Arak market, flat ground situated just below and now used as a rice field. From



**Figure 4-8:** *The seats of the dignitaries, Rong Arak market  
Ronghang Rongbong (Karbi Anglong)*

left to right stood Rongpi Lindok, Killing Lindok, Rongchecho Lindok, Ronghang Lindok, and the *dili*, i.e. the elected chiefs of Rongkhang's four subdivisions, plus their minister. Ronghang Lindok, representing Rongkhang's eldest clan, sat under the largest monolith. It is there that "local and foreign personalities were introduced to the people attending the market." No ritual associated to was mentioned by my local Karbi informants. Three routes criss-crossed here, one from Jaintia State's hearthland and Bengal in the south, one from Central Assam in the north and one from Lower Assam in the west. The market was abandoned in 1951, after a man went crazy and killed several Jaintias and Karbis before committing suicide.

In terms of its material form, this site closely resembled what in Khasi or Pnar cultural contexts is described as either a bone repository (Kh. *mawbah*) or a memorial structure (Kh. *maw bynna*): in both cases, horizontal and vertical stones stand for female ancestors and their brothers respectively, while the eldest maternal uncle is represented by the tallest monolith. Nevertheless, let us bear in mind the connection between a trading site and a

political-ritual institution, whatever its attributed ethnicity. As in the tale of the dog, my informants seem to take for granted the patronage of a market by chiefs and priests; it is perceived as a familiar pattern which requires no further explanation. In both cultural contexts, “centres” are marked and understood in a similar way.

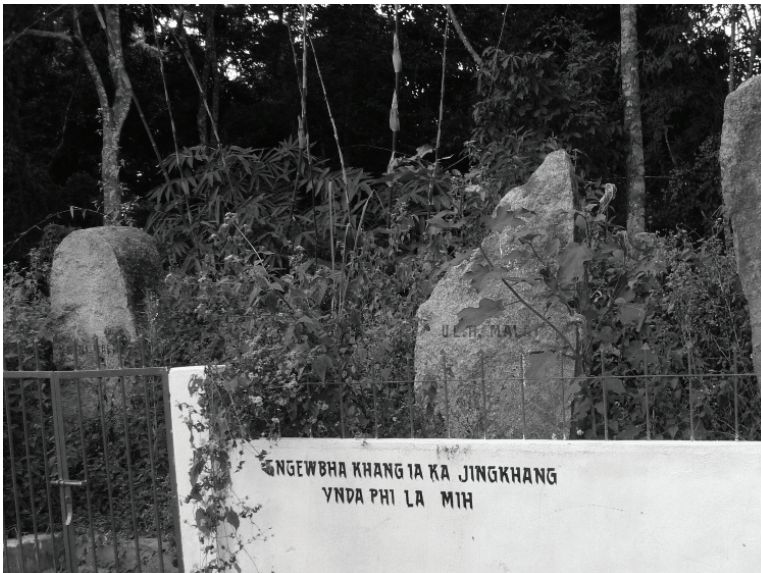
In Ri Bhoi district, the opening of a motorable road in the sixties led to the creation of Umden market. The market is situated in Raid Nongtluh. Nongtluh, which covers eight villages, was attributed the status of *raid syiem*, being presided over by an individual chief, the *syiem*, who comes under Hima Myllem, one of the largest Khasi-speaking polities. In 2008, the *raid* and the Khasi Hills Autonomous Council financed the construction of a pillar (*u mot*) on which the list of Nongtluh Syiems was engraved (Figure 4-9). In practical terms, this monument could have been more easily erected in one of the town’s public spaces, for example near the crossroads where the permanent bazaar is situated.



**Figure 4-9:** A recent pillar at Umden market  
Ri bhoi district

It is worthwhile noting that it was precisely the small corner of the periodic market that was chosen, as if the *syiem*’s lineage was in essence linked to the market.

Compared to Nartiang and Ronghang Rongbong, the politico-ritual morphology of Raid Nongtluh displays a third configuration in which the current market and settlements are spatially distant from the old territorial centre, U Nongbah, i.e. the “elder village”. This is a very common situation in Ri Bhoi. In each *raid*, inhabited villages claim to descend from a root-village where the main territorial rituals are either still performed or are remembered for having been performed before Christianisation. These *nongbahs* are generally uninhabited and surrounded by a sacred wood, the famous “sacred grove”. In many respects sacred groves are not specific to Ri Bhoi, to Meghalaya, or to India.<sup>15</sup> They resemble, in shape and function what the Greeks called *temenos* and the Japanese *mori*.<sup>16</sup>



**Figure 4-10:** *U Nongbah Nongtluh*  
the “old village”/sacred grove of Raid Nongtluh

Nongbah Nongtluh is a couple of kilometres away from Umden and comprises several dozen megaliths: some giant monoliths built by heroes, a group of monoliths commemorating local chiefs

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15 On a sacred grove in Tamil Nadu, see (Kent 2009).

16 For a European comparison, see (Dowden 2000:133–143).

(Figure 4-10), and finally a series of slabs which, as in Ronghang Rongbong, are said to have been the seats of “the council of dignitaries” (*darbar u syiem rongbah*). The whole complex is designed as a *darbar* endowed with gates and a guards room. A corridor made of blocks leads to a spot above a spring where human sacrifices were offered to the main local deity, Mawlong Kajaw. Since all neighbouring villages are now Christian, rituals are no longer performed in Nongbah. However, the monoliths erected in memory of chiefs are carefully managed and—here also—concrete platforms and walls are regularly added. The grove is still regarded as sacred and no trees are cut within its limits.

The forms found in Nongtluh closely echo those found in Nartiang and Ronghang Rongbong, although their layout is different. The erection of the market’s pillar, whether in reality or merely in historical representations, has marked the displacement of the actual political centre from old Nongbah to the new headquarters of Umden. Nongbah remains a historical site, identified with ancestors and mythical heroes, but it is no longer an actual centre of community life.

The association of political and ritual symbolic centres with periodic markets may be taken as a pattern of a regional society which may have been undermined but which still retains its structuring capacity. It is one of the principles that organises society into material spaces and which does this across ethnic boundaries, as we have seen in Ronghang Rongbong. Even when devoid of an actual ritual function, the material manifestations of centres cannot simply be summed up by traces of past social activities. Local Karbi activists, contesting what they perceive to be unmerited Khasi supremacy over Ri Bhoi, point to the list of Nongtluh rulers on Umden market’s pillar, and show that one of them was a Karbi. This illustrates the fact that artefacts marking the spot from where power emanates also mark, though perhaps unintentionally, the place where it can be contested.



*Markets as economic and political assets*

What do we know about the regional level's economic and political framework into which the local centres were incorporated? In the hills, land was not subjected to tax. In Jaintia state, as in Khasi states, local polities (*raids* or villages) used to send a goat every year to the State as a contribution to the sacrifices performed at State level, e.g. *pomblang* for the State of Nongkrem/Khyrim. Rulers drew their revenue almost exclusively from market taxes (*ka khrong*). The British learned it the hard way after they attempted to introduce a house tax in the Jaintia hills, sparking off the most violent and enduring upheaval they experienced in North-East India (1860-63).

Jaintia kings drew their revenues from two sources: on the one hand, from their personal agricultural estates, *raj*, most of these being irrigated land (*hali*) situated in the Bengal plains; and on the other hand, from market taxes. As for the Syiems of Nongkrem and Myllem, market taxes were practically their only resource.<sup>17</sup> Taxes were levied by local chiefs who kept a percentage. Markets were part of the matrimonial property which rulers passed down to their nieces.<sup>18</sup> This regime was maintained by the colonial administration in the Khasi hills classed as "excluded areas" governed under the principle of "indirect rule". And this still applies today as markets are still patronised by lower-level (*raid*) and upper-level (*hima*) *syiems*. In Umden for instance, market taxes are shared equally by Nongtluh Syiem and his overlord, Myllem Syiem.

In the plains, markets were not rulers and local chiefs' sole revenue, but were nevertheless essential. As we will see in the next chapter, marketplaces were granted by Assamese rulers as concessions, either to officers or tributary chiefs. The taxation rules were sophisticated, including very specific rates, just as in the eighteenth century on Raha market: "for one ox, 3x80 cowries for three legs".<sup>19</sup>

Even though the political outcome of trade naturally intensified with the arrival of the East India Company, it is fairly well

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17 (Allen 1906:101; Bareh 1997:246; Gurdon 1914:67).

18 (Bareh 1997:87).

19 (Bhuyan 1990:251-252).

documented for the preceding periods as well. Conflicts between hill and plain dwellers pertained less to land than to trade, and more specifically to trade rights over markets. On the Bengal side, *havaladar* collectors, as well as *zamindars* regularly clashed with hill people as both were trying to establish their control over foothills' markets.<sup>20</sup> In 1783, for instance, some hill dwellers raided Pandua market, one of the main trade spots between Khasi hills and Bengal: the local *havaladar* had prevented them from levying taxes on the market. A few years later, to avoid such conflicts, the collector of the Company, J. Willes, made the recommendation that markets not be set up in the foothills.<sup>21</sup> On the Assam side, during recurrent crises with the Jaintias in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the Assamese closed submontane markets or banned Jaintia traders from markets in the plains.<sup>22</sup> Nevertheless, in periods of less political tension, the Assamese State used to allow Jaintias to set up markets well inside its territory, as in Phulaguri, now Nagaon district.<sup>23</sup>

### *Connected assemblies*

One spontaneously interprets the centrality of markets in symbolic landscapes as obviously related to the value attached to the exchange of goods and more generally to material prosperity. Yet another set of very pragmatic representations seems to be closely linked to the market in the local culture, i.e. whatever pertains to meeting, assembly.

It is only on realising that marketplaces were perceived as privileged locales of assemblage that I was able to decipher what Lyngdoh Nongkrem told me about the market deity. Phrik Lyngdoh is the main priest (*lyngdoh*) at collective rituals held in the large Khyrim State. I once asked him if a market deity (Kh. *blei iew*) existed on his territory. Initially, his response seemed incoherent to me. I had the impression that the *lyngdoh* was lost in his own thoughts.

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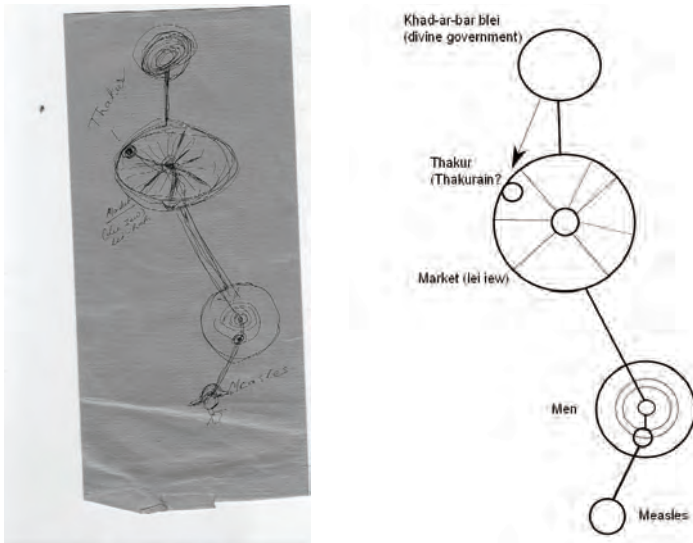
20 (Montgomery 1976:686–687).

21 (Dutta 1982:36).

22 (Bareh 1997:57; Gait 1906:69).

23 (Baruah 1985:379).

Market deity? We have plenty of. I will tell you. Please give me a sheet of paper...[Figure 4-11] You see, according to us, this is the place of Almighty. We don't know where this place [is]. Only his government; his government came down to one chamber. Here there are many gods and goddesses. One god who sees [looks after] the village, one god who sees the circle, one god who sees the cultivation, one god who sees...there are so many! One blacksmith [Biskurom]...so many...the *darbar* [assembly/council] of gods and goddesses, what we call *Khad ar phar blei* ["all 12 deities"]. So, the government [comes] from here. These gods and goddesses, after the decision of *darbar*, they choose one god, the image of this god [is] *Thakurain*.[...] They instructed to the servant of god: stay here, don't commit any sin, help men, know men, know gods. That is according to our religion. Even now, the children when they suffer of measles, according to our beliefs, we don't give them any medicine. We just pray to this god, *Thakurain*. [...]



**Figure 4-11:** *Connected assemblies*  
left: as drawn by Phrik Lyngdoh

Phrik Lyngdoh's description is explicit enough to be taken literally—which I had not realised in the first instance. What he sketched was an arrangement of assemblies. For the "assembly of gods" he used the precise Khasi term: *Khad ar phar blei*, "all 12

deities”.<sup>24</sup> The apparatus illustrating the relationship between gods and men is made up of connected assemblies, including the market which occupies a central position: men have access to the gods through markets. And when affected by some disaster, they may find help there from deities present in the marketplace. Thus, according to this picture, the world is actually made up of a series of connected assemblies. In actual fact, Phrik Lyngdoh’s views may be regarded as very sophisticated; I never came across similar statements in villages. They do, however, remarkably correspond to what the concrete aspects of marketplaces suggest.

### Connecting hills and plains

Let us move on and imagine that the marketplace, both as a perceptible form and a principle, might be considered as a structuring pattern of regional society—in the same way that it contributes in a very empirical way to the structuring of time. At least two clues of a mythological nature will provide us with deeper insight into the region’s symbolic landscape.

In a first narrative, published by Ivan Simon,<sup>25</sup> markets as well as roads and cultivable land feature among the assets associated with “the plains”.

U Lei Shillong [Shyllong] had two wives who were sisters, Umiam the elder and Umgot the younger, both rivers. Their mother lived in the plains... One day he invited them to go on a visit to their mother. To the Umiam he said: “Let us go to your mother [so] that she gives you roads and byways, plenty of land for your possession as well as markets”.

In the second narrative, published by Gurdon<sup>26</sup> with the original Khasi text, several patterns that we have already come across are interlinked: it starts by evoking a “sacred market” (*ka iew blei*) situated close to a “sacred bridge” (*ka jingkieng blei*). The Khasis and people from the plains (*ki dkhar*) gathered at a market to discuss how they could get rid of a snake demon (*thlen*) blocking the road. After having killed the *thlen* they convened another council

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24 Using 12 to mean “all” is common in India. So 12 may either point to 12 actual entities or may insist on the idea of the total number.

25 (Simon 1966:65).

26 (Gurdon 1914:175).

(*ka dorbar*) and decided to share its meat: “the Khasis should eat half, and the plains people half” (ki Khasi ki’n bam shiteng bad ki Dykhar ki’n bam shiteng). There were so many people from the plains that they were able to eat their whole share; hence *thlen* are no longer to be found in the plains. The Khasis were fewer in number so they could not finish the meat and that is why there are still *thlens* in their country.

We notice how these two narratives from the hills introduce the plains and its inhabitants in a very natural way. The plains are indeed considered to be distinct from the hills. In the first story, the plains are personified and related through affinity to a mountain: U Lei Shyllong, “God Shyllong” actually inhabits the highest peak of the plateau and is the tutelary god of Nongkrem State. The matrimonial or sexual relationships between the Uplands and the Lowlands, and more generally the fertilizing role of exchanges between the Hills and Plains, is a recurrent motif in Meghalaya, which has so far hardly been explored. It involves nothing less marginal than the origin of rice itself and its divine aspect, Lukhmi (Tw., Kh.). In many parts of India, Goddess Lakshmi is conceived as the provider of cereals (Annapurna) and naturally, in Eastern India as the provider of rice. This association is also very perceptible in the hills of North-East India, although in another form. In fact, Lukhmi has little to do with the classical Hindu Lakshmi, except ironically with regards our main concern here, since she is considered to be rice itself. In contrast to Lakshmi pūjā, which aims to bring general prosperity to households, the worship of Lukhmi is explicitly and exclusively concerned with rice cultivation. Numerous narratives relate how Lukhmi came up from the plains.<sup>27</sup> Similarly, in the next chapter, we will see how in Jaintia State’s myths of origin the up-and-down movement of human and divine characters generates a series of distinctions and complementarities between the hills and the plains, and ultimately the country’s specific social as well as geographical forms. And one of Khyrim’s myths attributes to a curse the fact that its territory is restricted to the plateau: an ancestor disobeyed an order from Lei Shyllong thereupon preventing Khyrim from extending to the plains.

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27 See in particular (Kharmawphlang 2005).

What we learn from these last narratives is that hill people, at least those who produced these stories, do not conceive the hills and the plains as disconnected spaces nor as clashing spaces, the type depicted by James Scott<sup>28</sup>. On the contrary, when seen from the hills, the plains are regarded as a source of fertility (the origin of rice) and, to be more precise, the relationship and exchanges between the hills and the plains create vitality. It is not that hill people and plains people never fight, never compete and live in total harmony; yet they are fundamentally connected to each other.



**Figure 4-12:** *Boundary megaliths in Ri Bhoi*  
The three megaliths are said to mark the point where three village polities (Kh. raid) meet.

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28 (Scott 2009).

## Chapter 5: Politics on the margins

### *Naming the hill people*

What is the state of historical knowledge about the plain dwellers' perception of mountain-dwellers before the colonial era? We will focus on the question of ethnic categorisation since it is crucial to a proper understanding of historical accounts about the relationship between the hill and plains, as well as of how ethnic perceptions have evolved. Although studies by modern historians on this topic are of substantial interest, they deserve to be reconsidered regarding a particular yet critical aspect: what particular populations did the main sources, i.e. the *buranjis*, refer to?<sup>1</sup> Episodes on which historians rely to describe the plain-hill relationship, or State-tribes relationship, include ethnonyms which are surprisingly similar to those attested to for the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. This might give the impression that the populations the Ahom had to deal with after their arrival in the Brahmaputra plains in the thirteenth century were the same as those that the British found six centuries later. However, the *buranjis*, which are the exclusive source for these episodes, are of a composite nature. They associate first-hand testimonies concerning events that happened around the time of their writing with older events passed down from earlier texts and possibly re-interpreted. Hence, for the same events, ethnonyms found in the chronicles in the Assamese language might often be anachronistic "translations" of those inherited from the early chronicles in the Ahom language. This has gone unnoticed or at least has been neglected by contemporary historians, since they relied on the English section of what long remained the only edited chronicle in the Ahom language, the *Ahom Buranji*.<sup>2</sup> The translation from Ahom to English, which was supervised by G.C. Barua in 1930, suffers from several drawbacks, and as far as the ethnonyms in particular are concerned, from hazardous and anachronistic interpretations. Ethnonyms were systematically made into what

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1 For example (Baruah 1985:365ff; Devi 1968; Gait 1906:117, 122, 160).

2 (Barua 1985) I have not yet explored the Thai translation by Ranoo Wichāsin (1996), which is reputed to be more faithful.

the editor held to be their equivalents in the twentieth century's Assamese categories (Figure 5-1).

Ahom text	English text
<i>mɛn ; kha</i> (when unspecified)	Naga
<i>tiuwra</i>	Kachari, Chutia
<i>timisa</i>	Kachari
<i>rang yeu</i>	Barahi
<i>kula</i>	Hindu
<i>lä phang</i>	Muslim
<i>môtuk</i>	Matak
<i>kôsô</i>	Koch
<i>kang lai</i>	Miri
<i>sungngi</i>	Chungi
<i>yoitä</i>	Jayta, Jointia

**Figure 5-1:** Translation of ethnonyms in G.C. Barua's AB edition

Barua's edition nevertheless offers the advantage of including the Ahom text. This gives us an access to the ethnonyms actually used in the chronicles, although in all likelihood not always to those actually used at the time of the events that were being retold. Most of the *Ahom Buranji* text concerns the first period of Ahom history and thus deals mostly with Upper Assam before the seventeenth century. People living on the periphery of the Ahom domain were often referred to using compound terms pertaining to different orders.<sup>3</sup>

– locality: *Tâ bat lung, Khalyang, Taimung, Banfade...*)

[1536AD] The heavenly king despatched an army against *Tâ bat lung* [translated as “against the Tâblungia Nagas”]. (VI-51-74)

– geographical space: (*khang*: “hill people”)

Poi an yim sön cao sü kä phā lung mä doi khang rang yeu nai cit riun

<sup>3</sup> For this analysis, I used the Ahom lexicon edited by G.C. Barua (1920), the very useful Ahom Dictionary Resource Project published on line by S. Morey (n.d.), and the Shan dictionary by Cushing (1881). I have kept the spelling as found in the *Ahom Buranji* for the first quotation, and then a simplified form. On Thai ethnonymy, see (Pain 2008).



In ancient times when Sukāphā, the king, came down, he brought with him the following persons of seven *Khang rang yeu* families [“seven Barahi families”]. (V-2-34)

- status, real or virtual: *rai* (taxpayers) or *khā* (“slaves”), the general term used by Tai-speaking people for upland or forest tribes.

[1647] The Rai khamyang [“Khamjangia Nagas”] came...saying that the *Kha Khomting* [“Nagas of the village of Khamting”] the *Kha Mälumä* [“Nagas of Kha and Luma”] had harassed them... (VI-126-134).

- physical appearance: *kang lai* (in Shan: “bare, naked, irresponsible”)<sup>4</sup>.

[1647] The *Sungngi* and *Khä kang lai* [“Chungis and Miris”]... took to their heels. (VI-126-134)

- then comes a series of terms which have no obvious meaning in either Tai languages or Assamese: *mej*, *miri*, *ä kä*, *rangyeu*, *tiwra*, *tumisa*, *môtuk*.

Laknī katmöt khön riun din ci ran cō mön kulä bā rong pur ;[...] Cao thum lung phvā sijn müng kon tun cam bā luk tiuwra ; Sao-phrang cam kon tan ban luk môtok ;[...]meupia luk mīn ;[...] lan siuw meu cam bā luk rang yeu...

In 1704, the king moved his capital to Chemun which is called Rangpur by the *Kula* [“Hindus”] ; [among the officers were:] Chāo-Thumlung (Bār Gohain) of a *Tiuwra* [“Kachari”] family, Chāophrang of *Môtok* [“Matak”] [...], Maupia of a *Mīn* [“Naga”] family, [...] Lānsheomā (Ghorādharā) of a *Rangyeu* [“Barahi”] family...” (IV-5-31-32)

A few remarks may be made here. These basic terms are often associated with each other to form compounds: *khā mej*, *nā kä pung bang pung khu*, *khä mīrī*...: the Min slaves, the Nākä of Pungbang and Pungkhu, the Mīrī slaves... Secondly, two common terms are almost always associated with geographical directions: *mīn* with the east and *miri* with the north. This may be interpreted in two different ways. Either the reference is to two culturally or politically homogeneous, well localised people; or to two broad categories of “unruled people in this or that direction”. Furthermore, the *Buranji* also contains what looks like more specific entities: Rangyeu, Tiwra, Tumisa, Motuk. It is no coincidence, I

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4 (Cushing 1881:4).

believe, that the four seemingly designated plains people. Tumisa and Tiwra must have something to do with the modern Dimasa and Chutiya, thus two groups associated with the two States that the Ahom had direct dealings with in Upper Assam. Rangyeu is translated as Barahi, a people reputed to have died out.

Finally, the question of the relatedness of some of these ethnonyms should be raised. They were not all exclusive to the Ahom. Some were and are still being used more to the East: the most striking are Khang and Yeh Jen, which seem to have been commonly applied by different groups in Upper Burma to refer to their neighbours living in the hills above them (Figure 5-2).<sup>5</sup>

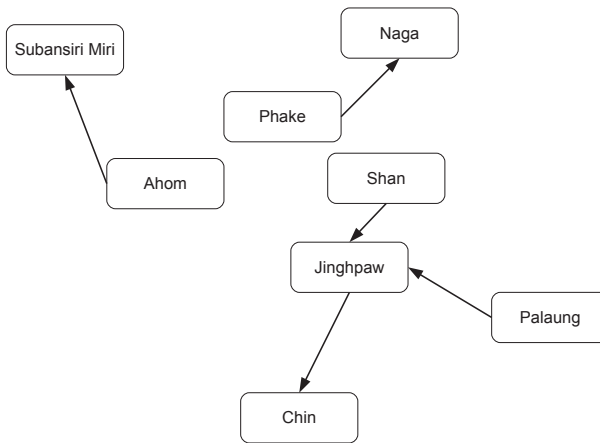


Figure 5-2: “Khang”: a relative ethnonym in upper Myanmar and Assam

Thus the *Ahom Buranji* suggests that the Ahoms used relatively precise ethnonyms for people living not far from them in the plains, yet vague and relative terms for hill-dwellers.

5 (Matisoff 1986:6).

	Ahom buranji	Assamese buranjis	Colonial
Tiuwrā			
Timisā			
Rang yeu			
Lā phang			
Kulā			
Môtok			
Möj/müj			
Äkä			
Yoitä			
Khang lai			
Sungi			
Mij			
Nôgä/Nâka/Naga			
Miri			
Kotsô/Kôsô/kachari			
Sonowal			
Misimī			
Moran			
Muluk			
Lälung			
Dafala			
Dhekeri			
Khamti			
Garo			
Mikir			

**Figure 5-3:** Some ethnonyms' occurrences in Ahom buranji, Assamese buranjis and Colonial texts

In the more recent *buranjis*, written in Assamese and corresponding to a period when Ahom rule spread further to the west, other ethnonyms appeared (Figure 5-3): Mikir, Lalung... Almost of all them were still used during British rule and some of them are still used today. Is this an indication that the people referred to by the same terms were the same ones? The disturbing case of “Garo” may prompt us to be cautious. In the early nineteenth century, Hamilton noted that

My informants say that Garo is a Bengalese word, nor do they seem to have any general word to express their nation, each of the tribes into which it is divided having a name peculiar to itself [Achhik, Abeng, Kochunasindiya, Kochu, Nuniya=Dugol].<sup>6</sup>

A century later, Playfair confirmed that

Garos never use the name except in conversation with a foreigner but always call themselves Achik (hill-man), Mande (the Man) or Achik-Mande...<sup>7</sup>

As we know, the term was adopted only recently as an autonym by all Garo-speaking groups, the same process happening in the past with “Achik”.<sup>8</sup> In actual fact, from the Assamese *buranjis* we understand that most of those living on the Meghalaya plateau were called Garo by the Assamese and the inhabitants of north-eastern Bengal. The first British maps of the region reflect this classification (Figure 5-4).<sup>9</sup> Godwin-Austen notes that “Karo” is used by Kukis and Nagas to refer to the Khasis, and by the Khasis to refer to the Garos.<sup>10</sup> On the border of Garo country, he adds, only “clan names” are used. And people from West Nongstoin, i.e. in the present-day West Khasi hills, call the Garos “Dékor” (Dkhar), which today means foreigner from the plains. “Garo” provides a remarkable instance both of the subjectivity as well as of the transposability of ethnonyms (Figure 5-5).

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6 (Hamilton 1940:89–90).

7 (Playfair 1909:7–8).

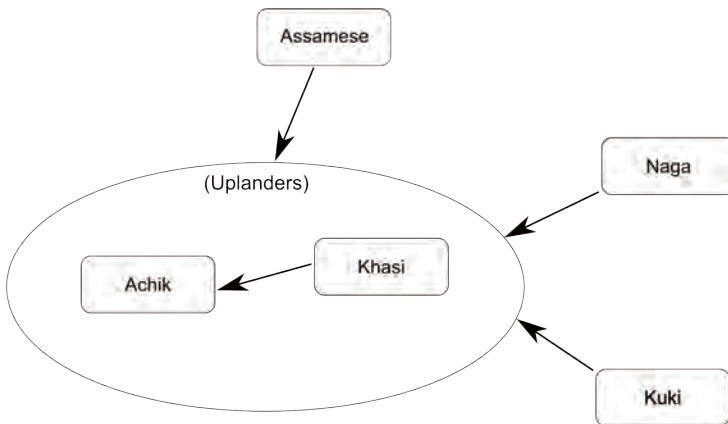
8 (Bal 2007:72–74).

9 (Bhuyan 1933:160–165). Hamilton reported from Assamese and Bengali informants that “The Raja of Jaintiya is by birth a Garo” (Hamilton 1940:88).

10 (Godwin-Austen 1872:124–125).



**Figure 5-4:** “Garros” on Rennell’s map (1786) (Rennell 1786, thanks to David Rumsey). Note the absence of “Cossya”, which will be featured on post-1830 maps.



**Figure 5-5:** “Garo/Karo” as an ethnonym in early 19th century (except for Achik, terms in boxes are exonyms)

The similarity between ethnonyms in different historical documents is not a definite clue to any similarity between the people referred to. The series of ascribed ethnonyms found in the chronicles nevertheless provides two important clues. Firstly, that the plain-hill limit actually constituted an important structuring element for ethnic classification by Ahom elites. Secondly, that contrary to the ethnonyms recorded in modern times, those used by Ahoms were primarily geographical and political, rather than cultural. In this respect, interpretations by modern historians are misleading when they describe relationships between plains States and “tribes”. This short overview strongly suggests that the Ahoms entertained a relationship with villages and polities rather than with ethnicities or tribes understood as discrete entities.

(call >)	Assamese	Karbi	Khasi	Tiwa
Assamese		<i>Mikir</i>	<i>Khasi</i>	<i>Lalung</i>
Karbi	<i>Keche</i>		<i>Chomang</i>	<i>Lalung</i>
Khasi	<i>Dkhar</i>	<i>Mikir, Bhoi</i>		<i>Lalung, Bhoi</i>
Tiwa	<i>Mekdo</i>	<i>Mikir</i>	<i>Melang</i>	

Figure 5-6: The relativity of ethnonyms (present time)

### The discovery of the margins

It is only in the mid-eighteenth century that the Ahom State settled permanently in the plain belts north of the Meghalaya plateau. Fortified posts (*cauki*) were built in Kapilimukh and Raha. From here, small troops protected Ahom interests and explored the surrounding area. *Deodhai Buranji* devotes a very significant part to this period, *Dāṭiyaliyā Burañji*, literally “a Frontier History”. *Dāṭi* is better translated as “frontier”, “march”, or “border”, than “boundary”, as it may mean both the—often indefinite—limit of a territory and its neighbouring areas.<sup>11</sup> The Ahom State

11 As Monica Smith has remarked, in most parts of the world “the presence of firm boundaries is relatively rare in practice”(2007:31); for

comprised three “Governors of the borders/frontiers”, the *Dantiyaliya Gohains*.<sup>12</sup> This particular Frontier History deals chiefly with the foothills and submontane belt north of the Meghalaya plateau, which was annexed by the British in 1835 and fell within Dantipar mehal (*mehal*: revenue domain). In 1853, Moffatt-Mills reported that

a great part of the mehal is covered with a dense forest...The villages are scattered...The country is inhabited chiefly by Lalongs and Mikirs, who are supposed to be the aborigines: each mouzah [lower revenue unit] was under a Rajah or Chief, appointed formerly by the Rajah of Jynteah [Jaintia].<sup>13</sup>



**Figure 5-7:** A typical landscape associated to shifting cultivation Western Karbi Anglong. Plots are cultivated for 3 years and then re-colonised by bamboo and wild banana trees.

One of the episodes from the Frontier History recounts the discovery of the *Dātiyal*, the “Frontier people”, by Ahom soldiers, in a style reminiscent of Columbus on “discovering” the Amerindians.<sup>14</sup> It can be summarised as follows. From his post in Raha, the officer (*baruvā*) sees a fire burning every day in the neighbouring hills. Wondering what the cause could be, he sends

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a comparative perspective of boundaries in ancient civilisations, cf. also (Smith 2005).

12 (Saikia 1997:159).

13 (Moffatt-Mills 1984:446).

14 (Bhuyan 1990:228–229).

up troops to inquire about it and to check what kind of people is living up there. So the soldiers ascend the foothills. On seeing them approach, the people flee. The soldiers are forced to feed on whatever they find in the abandoned houses. At the sight of this, the Frontier people (*dā̃tiyal*) say to each other: “Oh, they eat the same things that we do. That means they are of the same stock (*kuliyā*).” The soldiers eventually come across a small group of disabled and old Frontier people who were not able to flee. They reassure them:

“Don’t be afraid. Bring the others who have run away...Svargadeu Isvar [the Ahom sovereign] is the son of Indra. Coming to earth, he has become the master of Men, God above human beings. You keep going there [to his territory, in the Plains].” [The Frontier people] said, “*Bāpāhot* [As. “fathers”], what are the customs in your country?”

Our people said, “As an honour to Svargadeu who rules the country, the king’s son becomes the king, the minister’s son becomes the minister, the saint’s son becomes the saint (*sādhu*), the village officer’s son becomes the village officer. And if you can afford it, there’s no fault in wearing golden ornaments.”<sup>15</sup>

[The Frontier people complained] “In our country, the king’s son can’t become the king, only his daughter’s son can become the king. The King’s son has to work as a servant.”

Our Barā [officers] said, “He’ll carry other’s luggage being the son of a king, what’s the good in that? Bad country. You go to our country. We’ll appoint your king’s son king after consulting our Svargadeu.”

Their King and others discussed this and said, “See Baruās. We also expect favour from Svargadeu.”

Saying this, 12 Mikir families and 12 Lālung families settled at Burhāgāon. A village was formed near Tihuliā beel with 12 Mikir families who came with the Govās.<sup>16</sup>

Finally, the Ahom sovereign appoints *rajas* to rule over these two communities; a “Mikir *rajā*, son of Rangkhāngpo” and three *rajās* for the Lalungs: two in Khola and a *buṛhī kūvarī* (eldest princess) in Tapākuchi.

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15 In a later part (Bhuyan 1990:231), the Dantiyals explain that “one can only wear gold when it is provided by the King, one can’t wear it unless the King gives it. If somebody wears [it otherwise], his hands or ears are severed”. This prohibition seems to have been a reality under the Jaintia, cf. (Ali 1954:68).

16 Translation by Pranjana Kalita, Dept. of Linguistics, Gauhati Un.



Within the same part of the Buranji shifts in the use of ethnonyms are noticeable. They may point to different chronological layers in the text. “Mikir” and “Lalung”, which all of a sudden appear instead of “Dantiyal” are not found elsewhere in this chronicle. Similarly, “Govas”, which also suddenly appears, may have referred to the Lalungs but also to any people under the authority of Gobhā rajā, a figure we will introduce later.

From the point of view of the chronicle, the Dantiyals’ descent into the plains is akin to taking refuge in civilisation by voluntarily submitting to the Svargadeo, the Ahom sovereign. The chronicle considers these people as true outsiders. In one of the following sections, the king congratulates his officer for having made these “foreigners” (*paradekhi*) his servants (*sevak*).<sup>17</sup> The People of the frontier are not described as having been forced into submission but as having voluntarily sought the sovereign’s protection: “We have come looking forward to the salt and rice from Svargadeu”.<sup>18</sup> And it is interesting the appointment of chiefs from their own stock is insisted upon.<sup>19</sup>

Some clues suggest fairly different circumstances of this migration out of the hills. According to narratives recorded by Sharma-Thakur among the Lalungs/Tiwas, when the Jaintia raja became vassal of the Svargadeo, he tried to capture Lalungs to provide the Ahoms with slaves. The Lalungs therefore fled to the plains.<sup>20</sup> It is not impossible that, more generally speaking, the Ahoms, like the British two centuries later, were attempting to attract farmers to the sparsely populated plains.

Whereas the discovery of the Dantiyals might have been a legitimising narrative to fulfil self-serving agendas, its terms nevertheless tell us about the Ahoms’ subjective perception of the social landscape of this area: in the hills, uncivilised innocent people, oppressed by the wicked Jaintia ruler and his evil matrilineal regime. And in the submontane plains, the same people, who had become patrilineal and were governed by their own *rajas* under the benevolent suzerainty of the Ahom sovereign.

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17 (Bhuyan 1990:232).

18 (Bhuyan 1990:230).

19 (Bhuyan 1990:232–233).

20 (Sharma Thakur 1985:91).

Despite its subjective and instrumental perspective, this particular episode of the History of the Frontier evokes, in a mythological manner, an anthropological feature of the submontane areas which is still perceptible today: the geographical, cultural and social dimorphism of Lalungs, or Tiwas as they call themselves, and their association with Gobhā rajā, the *raja* of Gobha—spelt “Gova” in the Buranji. The close similarity between the Dantiyals, Govas and Lalungs should not be taken for granted. Dantiyal, in its literal meaning, might have applied to any frontier people and the chronicle, whether accurately or not, seems to include both Lalungs and Mikirs in this category. Similarly, “Gova” might have referred to people who depended on the Gobha estate, irrespective of their origin or cultural features. Nevertheless, the present dimorphism of the Tiwas which, among others, is characterised by a contrast between the matrilineal hills and the patrilineal plains prompts us to focus our attention on the enduring dual or transitional social forms that have survived in the interface between the hills and the plains.



**Figure 5-8:** A submontane landscape in Morigaon district

### Frontier politics

The frontier *raja* proves to be a key figure in research on the hill-plain relationship. Among the *rajas* who, the Ahoms claimed to have established, is Gobha raja. Today Gobha raja is still a major figure in the ritual set-up of the submontane area of central Assam. He is representative of the numerous politico-ritual chiefs who controlled the duars (*dvār*), i.e. gateways between the hills and plains on both sides of the Brahmaputra.

For three centuries (17th-19th), two major powers competed with each other in central Assam: the Ahom rulers, dominant in the plains, and the Jaintias who controlled the eastern Meghalaya plateau. Until the advent of British Rule in 1826, the Ahom sovereigns almost entirely prevailed in the Brahmaputra Valley, yet hardly in any of the uplands. They sent some military expeditions into the hills (especially, in 1707, to the Jaintia hills) but never occupied them.<sup>21</sup> They nevertheless maintained multiple trade relationships with the hills and mountains, whether with Bhutan or Tibet, the far eastern Himalayas, the Naga, Khasi or Garo Hills.<sup>22</sup> As a matter of fact, the Ahoms adopted an exchange system which existed long before them. In this system, the duars that led to the hills were a critical component; strategic places greatly sought after.

The duars 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...<sup>23</sup> The Ahoms attempted to control the duars by winning the allegiance of local leaders to whom they granted or reaffirmed—few real clues exist—the status of *rajā*. In this venture, they competed with other States, namely Jaintia and Nongkrem, which also claimed suzerainty over the same chiefs.

On the southern side of the Brahmaputra Valley, although collectively referred to as Nauduar, i.e. “the Nine duars”, there may have been at least twelve duars in the seventeenth century,

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21 For an English summary of the narration of the 1707 Ahom expedition contained in the *Jaintia Buranji* (Bhuyan 1964), see (Shadap-Sen 1981:130ff).

22 (Baruah 1985:442; Blackburn 2004:33–35; Mackenzie 1884:9–10).

23 See for example (Pemberton 1979:215).

the time when their names appear in historical documents (Figure 5-9, Figure 5-10).<sup>24</sup> In addition to the duars, small *rajās* were also found on the right bank of the river Kolang, to the south of Nagaon. Hamilton, in the early nineteenth century, listed ten *rajās* in Kamrup, the province surrounding Guwahati. Of them all, ten controlled the submontane areas.<sup>25</sup> The 1853 Revenue Settlement lists thirteen *rajās* in Kamrup and thirty-six in Nowgong (Nagaon); half of them in the duars, all the others along the river Kolang, then a major waterway from Upper to Lower Assam.<sup>26</sup> The transition zone between the hills and plains obviously formed a privileged niche for this particular political figure. The realms of most *rajās* centred around the end of trails leading to the Uplands.



**Figure 5-9:** The main Frontier polities of the Southern bank (18-19th c.)  
*Frontier rajās are featured in italics*

24 Besides the chronicles, southern duars are mentioned in relation of the Moghul expedition in the seventeenth century, the *Baharistan-i-Ghaibi*. (Mīrzā Nathan 1936:412) For the southern duars before and during British Rule, cf. (Syiemlieh 2008) and (Syiemlieh 1989:9, 67).

25 (Hamilton 1940:31ss).

26 (Moffatt-Mills 1984:335–345).

Gobha rajas resided on one of the main trade routes between Assam and Bengal through Jaintia territory. They were associated with other neighbouring *rajas*, forming the “the Four brothers of the Margins” (As. *Dātir cāribhāi*).<sup>27</sup> According to his present entourage, Gobha is the eldest; the borders of his dominion extended to the north beyond the Brahmaputra and to the west beyond Guwahati. In the plains, the neighbouring *rajas* were dependent on him, and fell into two categories: firstly the twelve *kartoliyā rajā*, “tax-paying *rajas*” who made up the Seven *rajas* and the Five *rajas* and were situated along the river Kolang;<sup>28</sup> secondly the *dātiyali rajā*, “*rajas* of the frontiers”, former tax collectors to whom relative autonomy had been granted and who controlled the foothills.<sup>29</sup> This description, which constitutes the most recent indigenous history of Gobha, combines a number of patterns, some inherited from the Ahom administration, within an assemblage centred on Gobha.



Figure 5-10: Gobha and the neighbouring rajas (19-20th c.)

27 (Sharma Thakur 1985:3).

28 Khāighar, Topakuci, Sorā, Bārāpujiyā, Mikirgōyā; Teteliya, Khumui, Kocari gōyā, Ghoguā, Torāni, Bhogorā, Kukunāgug.

29 Neli, Kholā, Sahari, Dhomal, Dimoriā, Pascim Nagaon

The modest size of most *rajas*' domains perhaps wrongly suggests that they systematically depended on larger States and that the title "*rajā*" had been granted to them as a form of flattery in exchange for submission and fidelity. With regards the minor *rajas*, the Assamese chronicles do not use the common Indian term *sāmanta rājā* (feudatories), but *rajā povāli* (As. "child kings") instead, which referred both to the assumed fragility of these chiefs as well as to a representation of dependence based on a father-son relationship. When observed over the long term and from various points of view, the dependence of the *Rajas* of the Frontier on the Ahoms and the fact that they were appointed by the Ahoms are not at all obvious. A first logical reason is that it is impossible to confirm who "appointed" these *rajas* in the first instance and on whom they depended in the long term. Allegiances revealed extremely fluid, both in their degree and stability. In 1660, Jaintia was in the midst of serious internal conflicts. Evicted from his domain by one of his contenders, Gobha raja sought help from outside, first from the Kacharis and then from the Ahoms, to whom he formally turned:

Your Majesty placed my ancestors in the country I reign, fixing the boundary. Now Raja Jashamanik and his grandson Pramatharai are quarrelling for their country and the latter has driven me out of my country. I, your slave, pray your Majesty, humbly to be graciously pleased to help me and to place me to my father's dominion". (Barua 1985:157)

Forty years later, the relationship seems to have largely evolved, and although the power of the Ahoms has never been as strong in Middle Assam, Gobha proves to be much less deferential. One of the major Ahom officers, the Barbarua, played a decisive role in the simultaneous submission of the Jaintias and Kacharis and was entrusted, as a reward, with the supervision of the two forts (As. *cauki*) of Raha and Jagi, which Gobha raja depends on. A dispute broke out between the two men over Barbarua appointing one of his followers as the local *duar* officer (As. *duvariya*). Gobha raja was quick to refuse to allow the market to open until the previous officer had been reinstated. The matter was finally referred to the Ahom sovereign who ordered that this demand be satisfied.<sup>30</sup>

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30 (Bhuyan 1990:248).

In the two centuries that Gobha appears in the documents, its position with regards the Jaintias and the Ahoms constantly fluctuates. The first mention dates back to 1651, when the Jaintias asked the Ahoms to return “Dumoru, Kuphānoli and Kaoban” to them.<sup>31</sup> At certain times, particularly in the early eighteenth century, Gobha, Neli and Khola—often mentioned as a single entity—played the role of Jaintia ambassador to the Ahoms. The Jaintias consider them as *doloi*, i.e. provincial governors.<sup>32</sup> During the same period, however, they openly defied both the Jaintias and Ahoms: on several occasions Assamese ambassadors who had been sent to Jaintiapur were seized by Gobha.<sup>33</sup>

From 1769 to 1806, the Ahom State faced a rebellion led by the Morans, followers of the Moamoria vaishnava monastery. Some local chiefs offered help to the Ahoms, others made allies with the rebels, whilst others took the opportunity to emancipate and to extend their local influence. The Ahoms became suspicious that the Jaintias themselves were fuelling the unrest on their borders. In correspondence with the Jaintia dating back to 1803, they complain that the “Garos”, together with the Kacharis, “the Frontier people” (*dām̐tiyāl*) and “the Little *rajas*” (*rajā povāli*), support the Moamoria. The Jaintia raja responds by asserting his good faith: he promises to do his utmost to neutralise the “Narhang Garos” who are attacking the Assamese and are blocking all trade between the hill and the plains.<sup>34</sup>

Narhang, or Nartiang, refers to the northern division of Jaintia. Nartiang *doloi* was in charge of relations between the people of the foothills and Assam. As pointed out before, “Garo” seemed to have a wider meaning, so “Narhang Garos” might have referred to any uplanders depending on Nartiang.

While these “little *rajas*” regularly resisted them, the two powerful States in the region, Jaintia and Ahom, never tried to make the *rajas* submit to them completely. This policy corresponded to

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31 (Barua 1985:146) “Kuphānoli is obviously a wrong transcription of “Gobha-Neli”, the two neighbouring and related principalities. I am, however, still unable to identify “Kaoban”.

32 (Devi 1968:125, 132).

33 (Shadap-Sen 1981:130).

34 (Bhuyan 1933:160–165, 1933:156–157).

two permanent geopolitical features: first, the uncircumscribed nature of the political borders, which was a reality everywhere in this part of Asia; second, the delegation of authority according to personal networks, which permitted multiple simultaneous allegiances. The borderlands formed a strip of land where sovereignty was neither ensured nor sought after. This conception of territorial authority contrasts with instances where a powerful centre requests exclusive allegiance from the peripheral centres.<sup>35</sup> The economic value of these areas relied less on their agricultural potential than on the presence of markets and trade routes. The main concern of the Jaintia and Ahom States regarding the submontane and foothill zones was that the road links and markets remained safe and still operated. Thus their transactions with local *rajās* focused essentially on protecting markets and roads against part of the market revenue.

On occasion, especially when a menace proved imminent, the little *rajās* called on the Ahom sovereign, even though this undermined their large degree of independence. In 1745 an ambassador from Rani, who had been dispatched to the Ahom court, summarised in an ironical tone of voice the nature of his own State's relationship with Assam:

We Garomikir live in the interior of the hills. The Heavenly King used to give us the bones of cows looking upon us as insignificant as shrubs on the way or dogs on the road. But for many years we have not been blessed with the good grace of the Swargadeo. (Bhuyan 1933a:48)

The response from their interlocutor, quoting Ramayana, reveals that common mutual perceptions between the centre and the frontier were familiar enough to both parties:

The prayer of the wild monkeys even was granted by Lord Ramchandra.

The *raja* of Rani, who controlled a duar west of Guwahati, draws an interesting parallel with Gobha *raja*. He originated from the hills, where he resided and had a Khasi-sounding title: Syiem

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35 A parallel might be drawn with the Holy Roman Empire; see for instance (Mbembé and Rendall 2000:33–35).



Nongwah.<sup>36</sup> Hamilton describes him as a “Garo” who had adopted the cult of Vishnu. He maintained economic and military links with the Assamese, providing them on a permanent basis with 621 labourers and a tribute in cash, and he contributed to Assamese military campaigns. His main revenue came from Pamohi market where, as Hamilton writes, “he invited once a year 5,000 free men of his nation to a banquet”. Each of them handed over to him goods for a value of four rupees.<sup>37</sup> This “banquet” presided over by a *raja* on the site of a marketplace obviously seems similar to several annual fairs, especially Jonbil mela, which are still held in the submontane localities and centred around the figure of Gobha raja (see page 141).

Next to Rani was a similar *raja*, Baraduyar, who according to Hamilton was a “Garo” living in Bhogpur, a two-day walk away into the hills. He was regarded by the “Garos” as their king. He paid tribute to the Assamese only for his land in the plains. “In his territory is a market place named Kukuriya, to which the independent Garos bring salt that they purchase at Rajhat in Jaintiya, and at Laur (Laour) in the district of Srihatta (Sylhet)”.<sup>38</sup>

Evidencing their large degree of autonomy, these frontier *rajās* assumed an important role as regular middlemen between the plains States and hill people. Dimoria, today some twenty kilometres south east of Guwahati, played a similar role during negotiations between the Koches and the little *rajās* to the east, and between the Ahoms and Khyrim in the early eighteenth century.<sup>39</sup> This was possible even when Dimoria and Khyrim were seriously at odds over a quarrel involving traders from both sides.<sup>40</sup> In terms of trade, Dimoria occupied a strategic location, where the river Kolang, which leads to Upper Assam, passes close to the foothills. Since at least the sixteenth century, and well after the arrival of the British in 1823, Dimoria has been at the centre of

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36 (Bareh 1997:106–107) Hamlet Bareh has collected an invaluable number of British documents about what he calls the “Khasi dwaras”. The chiefs of these duaras were deprived of their domains by the British soon after the latter’s arrival.(Bareh 1997:477–489).

37 (Hamilton 1940:33).

38 (Hamilton 1940:31).

39 (Chowdhury 1996:116; Ghoshal 1942:142).

40 (Bhuyan 1964:269–274; Devi 1968:139–143).

several conflicts.<sup>41</sup> A literal reading of historical documents suggests that it successively fell under the control of the Kacharis, Koches, Ahoms, Jaintias, Myllem and Khyrim. Indeed, it is not easy to differentiate between actual dominations and self assertions, because the chronicles in fact provide much more information about negotiations and conflicts than about taxation and tributes. Several cases of multiple allegiances hint at the relations the little *rajahs* entertained with their more powerful neighbours. When trying to untangle the multiple claims over Dimoria in 1835, Francis Jenkins, the Commissioner of Assam at the time noted that “The petty Rajahs of the Dooar finding themselves placed between two powers each greater than themselves no doubt adopted a policy of propitiating both and probably refused payment to each as the estimates of either happened to predominate.”<sup>42</sup>

These situations were not limited to the duars. Records exist for other parts of the plains<sup>43</sup> as well as in the hills. In 1829, on account of preparing a map of the Khasi hills, David Scott, the first Commissioner of Assam, expressed one particular difficulty that surveyors faced: “throughout these mountains, peculiar spots are to be found belonging to one chief, although surrounded with the territory of another, and two or more of them are occasionally found exercising authority in the same village.”<sup>44</sup> This apparent versatility of the little *rajahs*’ allegiances may well be a clue to their actual autonomy.

The fact that diplomatic transactions between non-contiguous States had to pass through intermediary chiefs is particularly meaningful and suggests analogies—if not coincidences—between commercial and political connections. It seems to have been a permanent feature of pre-colonial Assam. Both Jaintia and Ahom emissaries (As. *kaṭaki*), on their way to visit each other’s mainland, had to report to Gobha authorities whose men then

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41 (Aitchison 1931:131; Bareh 1997:118; Baruah 1985:189; Syiemlieh 1989:67) According to the Koch chronicles, after the 1563 Koch invasion of Assam, Dimoria was appointed to administrate over eighteen small kingdoms situated on the outskirts of the Jaintia kingdom. (Ghoshal 1942:142).

42 (Bareh 1997:482).

43 (Devi 1968:125, 130).

44 (Phillimore 1954:52).

escorted them to their destination—possibly holding them hostage when need be.<sup>45</sup>

The few elements given above help to sketch a more accurate picture of these small polities that defended their autonomy by playing on clashes between their powerful neighbours and by forming an essential cog in the interactions between them. To what kind of more general set-up would the submontane *rajās* be linked? Two scales of observation have to be identified: on a broader scale, relatively major States, two or three depending on the period (Ahom, Jaintia and Kachari States), surrounded by more modest polities; on a smaller scale, a web of almost individual relationships within which people and goods travelled. In the first instance, submontane *rajās* acted as frontier chiefs, i.e. minor figures whose existence depended on their larger neighbours. In the second instance, they constituted strategic elements in the chain of communication between powerful States, their submission consequently being less certain.

Comparable situations have been described in other parts of India by using the “buffer” metaphor. Concerning Orissa, Suranjit Sinha considered that “Atabika Samanta rajās operated as buffers as well as mediators, between dwelling tribals and the larger kingdoms and state systems in the plains”.<sup>46</sup> B. Roy Burman applied this concept to entire communities: tribes from different regions of India played a role of “buffer” or “bridge” between neighbouring States.<sup>47</sup> Roy Burman went as far as attributing the mere survival of tribes not so much to geographical factors as to their intermediary position. The issues of buffer *rajās* and of buffer tribes are actually intimately linked. Politically dominant groups had no interest in the cultural integration of tribes but in the maintenance of contacts and trade across their territory. For this purpose, States sought particular individuals from within the bordering tribes, while tribal communities themselves needed

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45 (Ghoshal 1942:142; Shadap-Sen 1981:130).

46 (Sinha 1987:XIX).

47 (Roy Burman 1994:81–91) For our purpose, the “bridge” metaphor seems to be more accurate as “buffer” might give the impression that the chiefs and groups in question helped to prevent conflicts between their powerful neighbours, an impression which the historical data for Middle Assam do not confirm.

*People of the Margins*

someone to deal with the exterior. This role naturally fell upon prominent, although not necessarily powerful, figures: village heads, clan elders, or ritual chiefs.

To follow on from Roy Burman's model, we might suggest that the position of such individuals at the focal nodes of regional exchanges contributed to the crystallisation of their fellow villagers, both consanguines and affines, into a socially distinct group.<sup>48</sup> The following chapters will illustrate such a case.

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48 An alternative process described by Roy Burman is of "constituted tribes", like the Totos, living in the foothills between Bhutan and the Koch kingdom (Koch bihar) and who are thought to have been organised into two distinct sections, in charge of the conveyance of goods from Bhutan and to Koch bihar respectively. (Roy Burman 1994:84-85).

## Chapter 6: Webs of rajas, wandering symbols

### *Fish for roots*

Every winter, Jonbil Fair (*Jonbil melā*) is held 50 km east of Guwahati under the patronage of Gobha raja and, more recently, of various Tiwa institutions, such as the Tiwa Autonomous Council and the Tiwa Literary Society. The Fair is famous among the Assamese for being one of the last places where barter is done. The event takes place on the 10th of the Hindu month of Magh, and lasts three days, ending on Uruka, the first day of Magh Bihu, a key event in the Assamese ritual year.<sup>1</sup> Jonbil mela is relatively rich in anthropological meaning, although it seems to have recently lost part of its ritual complexity. It is one in a series of numerous fairs in the plains patronised by local *rajas*, some of which having kept traces of elaborate integrative rites.<sup>2</sup>

Our focus here will be mostly on the geographical and political context of Jonbil mela. At certain times of the day, the *melā* looks rather like a banal 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 on Uruka day, cockfights...), while others are more unusual, such as the famous barter. Hill-dwellers come to exchange edible roots (taro, turmeric, ginger...) for dried fish and sweet pancakes (As. *pīthā*), the typical delicacy eaten at Bihu. The motivation behind bartering is obviously ritual rather than economic, as most visitors would find the same products at a similar price on markets closer to home. What takes place at Jonbil mela might be the staging of a time when such goods were

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1 Magh Bihu corresponds in other parts of India to Makara Sankranti or Thai Pongal. For a short description, see (Sharma 1992:220–223).

2 In the area of the Five rajas, palanquins representing the five *rajas* are taken from five villages to the *melā* and back again every day for seven days. (Syamchaudhuri 1973:7). Numerous fairs are traditionally held on the duars throughout Assam, especially during Bihu festivals. Concerning the colonial period, (Hunter 1879:143–146) mentions several such fairs on the northern bank.

at the very heart of exchanges between the hill people and the plain people.



**Figure 6-1:** *Dry fish bartered against turmeric at Jonbil mela*  
*Each barterer adds a heap until an agreement is reached*  
*(Courtesy of Samiran Boruah).*

The political aspects of Jonbil mela are manifold and do not refer explicitly to a single territory or people. No position of authority is formally legitimated. To be sure, visitors present to Gobha raja with various free contributions which are regarded as “taxes” (*kar*). This is in keeping with his status of patron of the fair. However, how far does this represent a legitimisation of his authority over a particular territory or people? The Assamese press portrays him as the “King of the Tiwas”. He most certainly assumes the Tiwa identity; his historical domain corresponds to an area with a high concentration of Tiwas, but hosting other ethnicities and covering only part of all the villages that assume a Tiwa identity. Finally, in the eyes of Tiwa ethnic leaders, the *raja* symbolises the historical continuity and the political legitimacy of the Tiwa. A new layer of meanings has been added to the fair over the last thirty years with the rise of the Tiwa movement whose political and community bodies have become the true patrons of the event.<sup>3</sup> Yet, although the geographical setting assigns a prominent role to the hosts, the Tiwas and Gobha raja, the people bartering and paying taxes are not all Tiwas, nor do

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<sup>3</sup> 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.

they live in the traditional Gobha polity, and they certainly do not consider themselves “subjects” of the *rajā*. We may leave aside the stallholders in the “modern” section of the fair, who have no traditional link with the event. As for the barterers 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 considered, they are speakers of Khasi, Tiwa, Karbi, Assamese and Bengali. Announcements by the organising committee are made in the first three languages. As for ethnicity, their heterogeneity is all the more puzzling, including some cases of non-ethnicity as the one previously discussed page 31.

Today, the political figures who take part in Jonbil mela are Gobha raja, a number of his own subordinate *rajas* (Khola, Nellie and Sahari), and the heir to the Ahom dynasty (called *svargadeu*, like the former Assamese sovereigns). Everyone recalls that only a few years ago, the *rajas* of Khyrim and Jaintia, i.e. the two States controlling the neighbouring uplands, used to come and exchange



**Figure 6-2:** Kings meeting at the Jonbil mela  
Gobha raja (right) and Svargadeu (left)

presents with Gobha raja. Some narratives state that “Jayata and Khoiram”, i.e. Jaintia and Khyrim chiefs, used to come to Jonbil mela to procure Bihu delicacies (As. *pithā*) needed to celebrate their own corresponding festival, Rangsi. Disputes related to the separation of Meghalaya from Assam in 1972 may account for why the two upland chiefs have distanced themselves from this ceremony. Whatever it may be, the relations they maintained with Gobha do not seem to have been motivated by friendly diplomacy alone. As we will now see, local representations depict Gobha, Jaintia and Khyrim as much more than mere neighbours.

### *Water princesses and brother rajas*

Of the several accounts about the origin of Gobha raja, three will be presented here. The first appears as a sequel to the narrative found in the “Frontier History” (see *supra* page 127) about the People of the frontier descending into the plains.

When Tiwas came down from the hills they had no kings. They called upon Mahadev. Mahadev came and met Parvati on his way, so that his semen fell into a pond. A *mali* fish swallowed it. Out of its womb, a baby girl was born, Gobha Hari Kunwari [chief princess], the ancestor of Gobha’s royal lineage.<sup>4</sup>



**Figure 6-3:** *Mali fish*  
*Labeo calbasu* (Day 1889:260)

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<sup>4</sup> (Gogoi 1986). In another version recorded by Sharma Thakur, the Tiwas lose their *raja* during the war of succession in Tripura, and it is the first Gobha raja, instead of the princess, who is born of the fish.(1985:3).



Beyond the classical Hindu model of Siva's semen engendering a royal or divine figure, a particular pattern that needs to be borne in mind: Gobha rajas originate from a princess born from a pond in the plains.

The two other narratives situate the origin of Gobha's chiefs in the Uplands.

While hunting, Langbor finds the daughter of Jaintia raja bathing in a tank. They fall in love. The *raja* hears about it, has Langbor arrested and condemned to death. The princess and her mother faint and all women become deeply affected. Thus, the king changes his mind and decides to marry Langbor to his daughter, to have him made a general and to hand over to him the northern part of his territory [i.e. the foothills on the Assamese side].

As in the first story, everything starts with a body of water, although the tone is slightly more mundane: Gobha raja is depicted as a son-in-law and a dependent of Jaintia. The following narrative, the one that prevails today in Gobha raja's entourage, does not legitimate any divine or political submission, but bonds of brotherhood.

On a mountain called Tri Maselong [Tw. three males] three brothers were born from a stone. Two of them went towards the west and founded "Jata-Khoiram" and "Milliem". The third went to the north and founded Gobha.<sup>5</sup>

Similar narratives show the three characters jumping out of a pond situated at the top of the mountain and from where the river Killing (Umsiang) originates. Gobha is sometimes the eldest, sometimes the youngest brother. Very few people know the exact location of this place, sometimes reported as Timophlang or Thin Mākhlāng.<sup>6</sup> According to some Tiwas, it is situated in Meghalaya, on the ancient border between the three States: Tini Mawphlang would be a mountain with three peaks and three ponds on the bank of the river Killing. Interestingly enough, the designation

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5 Several variants of this narrative may be found with slightly different characters and details; cf (Sharma Thakur 1985:4)(Gogoi 1986:150).

One of those we recorded names "Gobhā, Jayatā and Khoirām" as the three brothers.

6 (Gogoi 1986).

Tini Mawphlang combines an Assamese term, *tini* (“three”), with a Khasi compound, *maw-phlang* (“stone of the grass”), reflecting the different cultural contexts with which the Three *rajas* are associated.

Accounts about the Three *rajas* are much more common in the foothills and the plains than further inside the hills. One particular spot is referred to as the location of the “three borders”, near Kutusi Mokoidharam (Karbi Anglong). Here, the borders are not materialised by a line of markers but by a set of twelve monoliths standing on the trail leading from Nartiang, the Jaintia capital, to the plains.<sup>7</sup> Some hill Tiwas explain that when Raja Khrem (Khyrim) came to pay a visit to Gobha raja, he used to stop at this place, where a market was held. The association between markets, monoliths and authority re-emerges here, not at the location of a polity centre though, but still at a meeting point, i.e. at a spot where different polities meet up.



**Figure 6-4:** *Megaliths at the Three borders market*

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<sup>7</sup> 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, polities are often organised on a duodecimal basis; cf. Izikowitz (1962) on the Tai.

Following the mythological patterns, we reach the next principality to the west of Gobha, Dimoria. Here, an almost identical myth of origin is to be found, involving four *rajas*: Dimorua (Dimoria), Gobha, Khoiram (Khyrim) and Milim (Mylliem). Dimoria raja set off from “Thimuflong” mountain together with Gobha raja in search of a kingdom. After parting company with his brother, he headed north and reached the plains at Hilchang (25 km east of Dimoria) and was adopted by the local people as their ruler.

Further west, the “Three rajas” pattern is found to be associated with the “water-borne princess” pattern. The genealogy of Rani, another submontane principality, stems down from Bhagadata, the first ruler of Kamrup, established by Krishna himself. One of his descendants set up his capital west of Pragjyotishpur (Guwahati). One day the city was flooded. From the water sprang three sisters: Dharmayanti “submits the Garo” and settles in Rani. Her daughter’s son would become the first Rani raja. Ayanti, the second sister, settles in Barduar, the next *duar* (gate) to the west. The third sister, Jayanti, goes to the east and founds, as her name suggests, the Jaintia kingdom.<sup>8</sup>

Thus, several founding myths recount how all along the submontane belt stretching north of the Plateau, a network of brothers links each local *raja* to their respective neighbour, the Jaintia sovereign, and often Khyrim, the second major hill State after Jaintia. Orders of precedence systematically favour the local chief, putting him in the position of the eldest brother, or the son of the eldest sister. Indeed, myths constantly evolve, especially those pertaining to relative political positions. One may therefore suspect that narratives reflect local views which tend to play down or even disqualify the supremacy of Jaintia and the Ahoms. The decades prior to the arrival of the British, and all the more so those following it, which saw the decline of the Ahoms and then of the Jaintias, represent the periods when their authority over the *rajas* of the frontier was certainly at its lowest. It is worth noting that these changes did not “produce” myths asserting the “independence” of the *rajas* but, on the contrary, either created or preserved metaphors in which large and small polities were depicted as brothers on a somewhat equal footing. The patterns of interconnected polities found in these stories seem to show

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8 (Goswāmī 1930:181).

that, whatever the fate of their actual power relations, they were in the long term bound by mutual interdependence. Actually, when the British arrived on the scene in 1824, Khyrim and Jaintia had been in mutual conflict for several years, a situation which seriously affected Gobha by hindering local exchanges between the hills and plains.<sup>9</sup>

Another important issue regarding these myths concerns their genesis and dissemination. The similarity between patterns found in various localities, like the brotherhood of *rajas*, could suggest that the foothill *rajas* have been, at similar or different times, subjected to the same supreme authority, and that these patterns may have been inherited from a same top-down legitimising model. An alternative hypothesis would be that such patterns were widespread over a broad area, taking the form of a common grammar of political relations. Be that as it may, the most striking resemblance is definitely borne between these stories and the Jaintia State's founding myth. This will take us for a while to the southern side of the plateau, away from the main area we are dealing with.

### *Fish girls and wandering boys*

*Jayantā janmakathā* (“the Story of Jayantā's birth”) is a sophisticated and very concise account about how matrilineal rule was set up, through a series of journeys between hills and plains, and with the divine intervention of goddesses at each stage. Two versions of the myth can be connected.<sup>10</sup>

The first version (Figure 6-5) describes Jayantapur's royal lineage as spreading out from a Brahman dynasty with its origins in the Mahābhārata.<sup>11</sup> The king finds himself childless. The God-

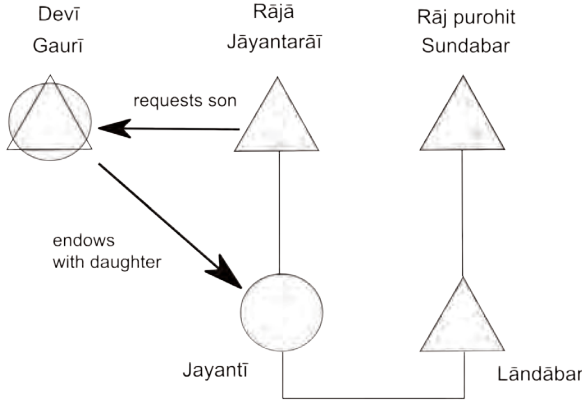
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9 (Pemberton 1979:221).

10 The two versions we refer to originate from manuscripts in the Assamese language published by S.K. Bhuyan in *Deodhai Buranji* (1990:134–140).

11 Jayantāpur, or Jaintiapur, designates the main capital of Jaintia State in the Bengal plains. It is now part of Sylhet district of Bangladesh.

dess offers to bring forth a girl, who will be his heir. Some years later, the royal princess, Jayantī, is married to Lāndābar, the son of the royal priest (rāj pūrohit).



**Figure 6-5:** *Jayantā janmakathā 1st episode*  
*Birth and marriage of Jāyanti*

The outrageous behaviour of Landabar towards both his wife and the Goddess causes him to be expelled from the capital. He is then adopted as a son by a “Garo” named Suttangā (Figure 6-7, page 151).

The myth’s reference to the hills and plains is implicit yet unambiguous. Sutnga, to which “Suttangā” undoubtedly refers, is situated in the hills—in some narratives it is the dynasty’s birthplace. According to Bareh, Sutnga and Jaintiapur chiefdoms merged to form the modern Jaintia State.<sup>12</sup> “Garo” is certainly to be understood in the ancient Assamese/Bengali meaning of “uplander” rather than in its more restricted modern sense, yet it nevertheless pertains to hill people. Thus Landabar shifts from one world to another, i.e. from the (civilised) plains to the (wild) hills. At this stage of the story, plains and hills, i.e. the capital and the land of the “Garos” are still symbolically separated.

12 (Bareh 1997:43–44).

The second version starts at this point, with the hero being merely qualified as a “Garo bachelor of Nartiang”. Nartiang is situated in the heart of the hills. Until the nineteenth century it was alternatively an autonomous principality and the Jaintias’ summer capital. Its Devi sanctuary was of major importance to all the communities on the eastern Meghalaya plateau. The following events are almost the same in both versions: a fish-girl, Matsyodarī, is captured by the Garo bachelor (Figure 6-7). She reveals her divine origin and becomes his mate. In the first version, Jayantī deplures having expelled her husband. The Goddess consoles her by sending a shadow in the water during Jayanti’s menstruation. It is this shadow that enters the womb of a *barali* fish (freshwater shark, *Wallago attu*) to give birth to Matsyodari. Matsyodari predicts that wealth will come for the bachelor and that he will no longer need to work in the fields.<sup>13</sup> They conceive a son, Borgohain, endowed with skills and fortune.



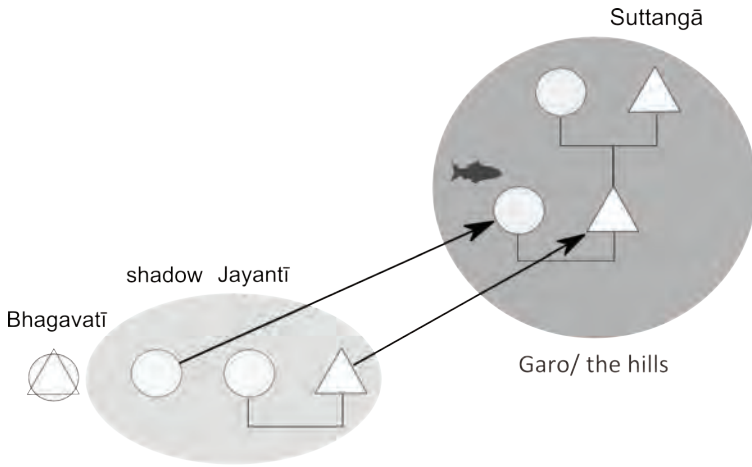
**Figure 6-6:** *The Freshwater Shark*  
*Wallago attu, As. barali* (Wikimedia commons)

Borgohain becomes the head of the group of Garo villages which clashes with the neighbouring Jayantiya kingdom. Borgohain is summoned by Jayanti, who reveals that he is the son of her own sister. She asks him to become the new *raja*, while she herself disappears to be worshipped as a goddess, Jayanti Devi, who is actually the dynasty’s tutelary deity (Figure 6-8).

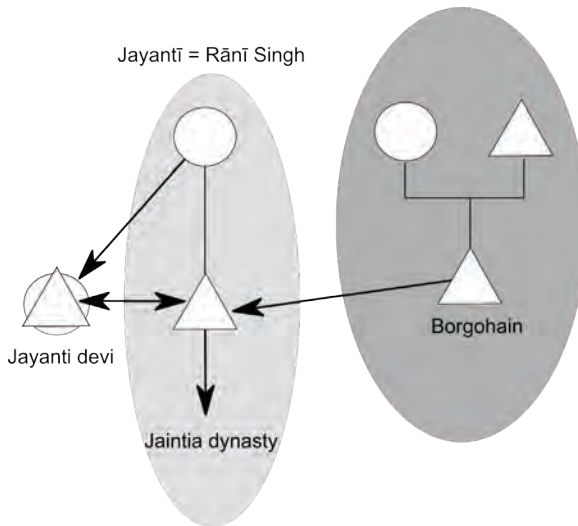
When taken as a whole, this story recounts the advent of the matrilineal regime, not owing to divine imposition but to an encounter between the Brahmanical world and the “Garo” world, with the Goddess as mediator. Three distinct stages should

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<sup>13</sup> The exact sentence is “you won’t need to go to the *ārā* any more”. I suppose *ārā* is a form of *erā*, the castor oil plant (*Ricinus communis*), cultivated in the region for breeding the *eri* silkworm.



**Figure 6-7:** *Jayantā janmakathā 2nd episode*  
*Flight to the hills*



**Figure 6-8:** *Jayantā janmakathā 3d episode*  
*Back to the plains*

be distinguished. The first episode takes place during a gloomy period, when the Brahmanical and patrilineal order seems to be about to crumble: with no male offspring, the *raja* must content himself with an heiress, and his Brahman son-in-law behaves like a shudra (low caste); conception seems impossible, and regeneration becomes necessary. In the second episode, the Brahman son-in-law turns into an uplander. He finally copulates with the projection, i.e. the “sister”, of his former spouse and successfully creates a chief—who is not yet a *raja*. The third episode starts with an open conflict between highlanders and the plains kingdom, ending in reconciliation: the hill chief comes down to the plains, is enthroned by his (true) mother, and matrilineal inheritance is therefore finally established.

How does Jayanta janmakatha relate to the myths we described for the northern Meghalaya slope? When taken together, what do they tell us about mutual perceptions between hill and plain dwellers? To start with, how did these stories appear in the first place? As Manichean constructions with a political aim, or as a spontaneous aggregation of patterns? In a brilliant and well-informed discussion about Jayanta janmakatha, Soumen Sen considers it to be a Brahmanised version of a pre-existing myth that originated in the hills. The plains version is thought to have been addressed to the inhabitants of the plain tracts in Jaintiapur, its aim being to sanctify the royal order from a Hindu perspective.<sup>14</sup> This is in keeping with a long described phenomenon: the Brahman “invents” Hinduised genealogies for tribal chiefs in order to bring them into the fold of Hinduism, eventually enforcing his own spiritual authority over the new State apparatus.<sup>15</sup> The Hinduisation theory of “tribal” narratives is indeed acceptable within a classical (Weberian) sociological paradigm: myths aim at “legitimising” social order. Hence they may be purposively constructed, just as political texts are. From a structural and historical point of view, however, one may wonder if invented myths really have such a purpose—or any purpose at all—, if they succeed in imposing any particular order, and if so, what happens to their efficacy once they naturally evolve? Finally, how can we exclude the fact that “Hindu” patterns may have been imported into the

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14 (Sen 2001:9).

15 (Fattori 2011:134; Risley and Crooke 1999).



“Tribal world” well before any intentional attempts to do so? I suggest that another dynamic, other than instrumentalisation, is at play, that of the unintentional dissemination of mythemes and patterns. While we try to account for the similarity between narratives found in different contexts, agency should not exclude contingency. Instead of a corruption of original “Hindu” or “Tribal” myths, there would be largely fortuitous encounters between patterns, leading to relatively stable assemblages, which may possibly be reshaped thereafter to accommodate practical aims. This vision contrasts with that of demographically or politically dominant “cultures” that impose on minor ones. The connections between the hills and plains date sufficiently far back in time for us to assume that large parts of their respective mythscapes had been shared well before the historical period.

Princesses emerging from water are neither typical of the Brahmanical world nor of the tribal world.<sup>16</sup> They are common to an area much vaster than North-East India and appear in numerous instances when two spaces are first differentiated only to be connected to each other afterwards. In the cases we are dealing with, these two spaces are the hills and the plains. Communication between the hills and the plains seems to constitute a condition for global fertility, as well as for the foundation of authority. These scenarios rely on an opposition between two series of categories: on the one hand, hills, forest and males; on the other hand, plains, cultivated spaces and females. The structural opposition between the forest, as a wild space, and the village, as a civilised space is a major one in many parts of South Asia.<sup>17</sup> In the Himalayas, it may assume an orographic dimension, when in matrimonial and domestic rituals uncontrolled female forces (the brides/wild goddesses) from plains forests plains meet patrician’s ancestors residing in the highlands.<sup>18</sup> The Jayanta janmakatha reveals an assemblage of the same oppositions, but in an opposite configuration, with the “wild” boys from the wooded hills coming down to marry royal girls from the plains.

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16 On outsiders marrying daughters of Naga-snakes kings in the foundation myths of South-East Asian Hinduised States, cf. Coedes (1968:37–38).

17 (Malamoud 1976; Zimmermann 1999:12ff.).

18 (Krauskopff 1989:222).

The other dichotomy that prevails in our myths—and which may have caused many a headache for royal genealogists—is between matrilineal and patrilineal modes of descent and heritage. Their apparent antinomy is resolved most brilliantly, whether the result of an intentional invention or of a spontaneous emergence. While the Assamese chronicle showed the hill people fleeing the wicked matrilineal regime, here successive shifts between patrilineality and matrilineality that correspond to the journeys between the hills and the plains, are portrayed as necessary for maintaining social order. And neither in the myth nor in history did patrilineality prevail in Jaintia. The narrative depicts the linking up, and thus the maintenance, of two social regimes, and this indeed reflects the actual situation of the Jaintia polity as we know it in the nineteenth century: a dichotomy between the patrilineal Hindu plains and the matrilineal Pnar hills. This dichotomy was perceptible in the social features of the State and of the *rajas* themselves. The *rajas* maintained two residences, one in the hills the other in the plains. With regards their domains in the plains, Jaintia *pargana*, Jaintia rulers complied with caste hierarchy and admitted the Brahmins' superiority. For the sake of their own dynasty, however, they respected the inheritance principles typical of Pnar society: kingship was handed down to the sister's son. And perhaps as an adaptation of the Pnar mode of residence in which married men do not live with their wives, most Jaintia *rajas* did not marry at all; an unthinkable practice in Brahmanical society.<sup>19</sup> This questions the vision of Jayanta janmakatha as a symbolic device aimed at subjecting Jaintia rulers' original descent mode to the dominant Hindu orthodoxy. As we will now see in narratives found in other social and geographical contexts, what might well be at stake in such stories is establishing an acceptable symbolic link between communities that follow different social laws and in particular different descent modes.

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19 (Ali 1954:85).

*Bisokoida: opposing descent modes and political arrangements*

Bisokoida's story recounts the foundation of Rongkhang, the eldest of the traditional polities recognized by Karbi-speaking communities.<sup>20</sup> Although no historical documents fully confirm it, Rongkhang, in the north east of the Meghalaya plateau, fell most probably within the political realm of the Jaintia State until the mid-nineteenth century. To put the Rongkhang foundation myth into better perspective with regards the Jaintia myth, let us bear in mind that there is no evidence that Rongkhang was exposed to direct Brahmanical influence as Jaintia was, albeit moderately. Of the rich text that constitutes Bisokoida's story, we will only discuss the main sequence.

Bisokoida, from the Rongphar clan, rules over a domain—the location of which is not given (Figure 6-9). He has married the daughter of the Jaintia raja and has a son and two daughters (Kareng and Kahan). His son is killed by Khorsieng Inglang, the husband of Kareng, his elder daughter, who makes him fall from his white elephant. Fearing the reaction of his father-in-law, Khorsieng calls for the help of a Khasi chief and asks him to destroy Bisokoida's village. Sar Ronghang, the younger daughter's husband, succeeds by a trick in foiling his plan and sends mercenaries to demolish Khorsieng's village. Khorsieng commits suicide. Distressed by these events, Bisokoida gives his domain to "the Ronghangs" (i.e. Sar Ronghang's clan) and goes to settle among the Jaintias. Having lost their *raja*, the Jaintias adopt him as their ruler.

Sar Ronghang marries Khorsieng's widow, i.e. his widowed wife's sister. However, Khorsieng's son, Vodeng Siri, has not been adopted by the Ronghang clan, contrary to what often happens in present-day Karbi society (see page 70). In the following generation, Sar Ronghang's son, Harpokang, has to face the violent hostility of Vodeng Siri. Harpokang falls seriously ill. Bisokoida has him brought to him so that he can look after his health. Vodeng Siri nevertheless conspires to kill Harpokang, who is finally saved by Cheprong Pura, his sister's husband. As a reward, Bisokoida appoints Cheprong Pura *habe* (village cluster chief). He then sends

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20 The version presented here was narrated by Ramsingh Phangcho and translated by Morningkeey Phangcho.

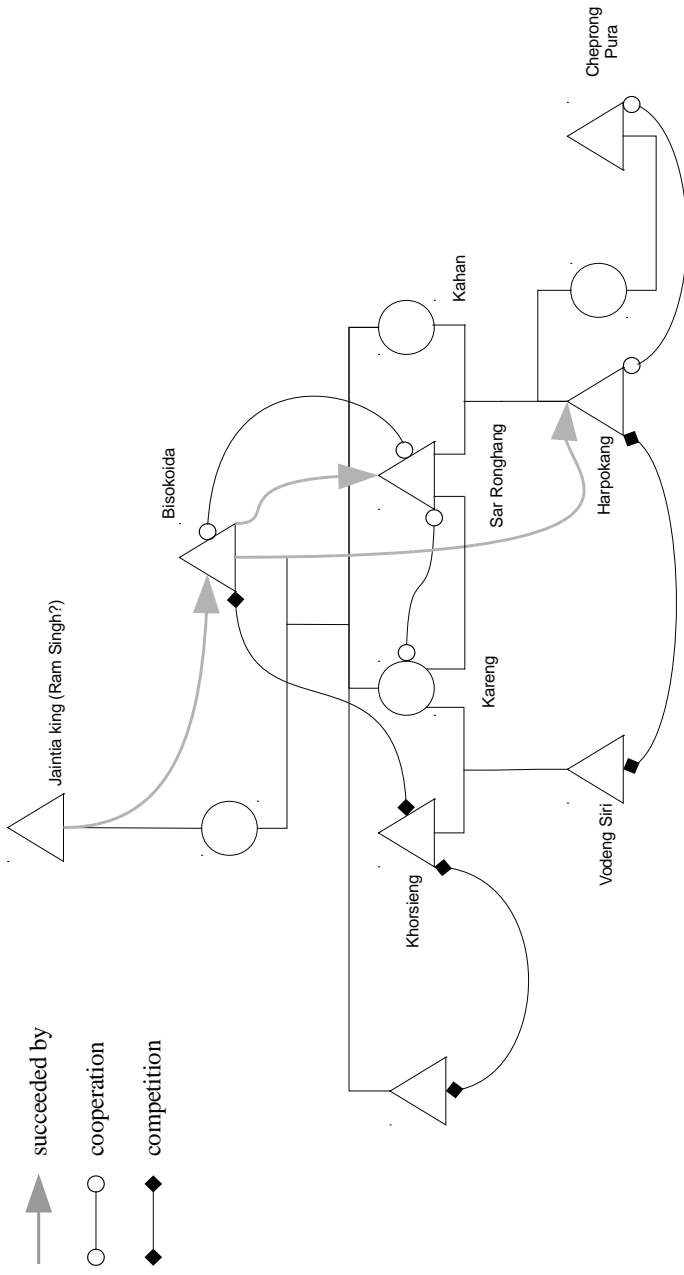


Figure 6-9: The story of Bisokoida

Harpokang to found a capital in Socheng and names him the first *recho* (*raja*), or *lindok*. Two priests are appointed to assist him, a *thlen kirim abang* and a *teke amen*, who are respectively in charge of worshipping the snake and the tiger. Vodeng Siri is appointed *bor miji* (head minister) in charge of Jiroi, i.e. remote possessions. Seventy-three houses are then built in Socheng and the Tiger assigns duties “by putting a mortar and pestle in front of houses”. Socheng then becomes Ronghang Rongbong, the present-day Karbi capital (see page 108).

Two indissociable facts are described here: firstly, the initiation of a specific Karbi political entity above village level; secondly, its link to the Jaintia State. We have no documents detailing the exact nature of Rongkhang’s relations with Jaintia. We can nevertheless presume that Jaintia handed down authority over a large part of the plateau to Rongkhang’s chiefs. The framework of politico-ritual institutions in Rongkhang, as well as those of its associated polities in Chinthong and Amri, is very similar to the one found in the Jaintia hills or Khasi hills. As seen in the previous chapter, Rongkhang is a central landmark in the contemporary Karbi identity, embodying its ancientness and centrality.

In the story, the origin of Rongkhang’s legitimacy is explicitly attributed to a Jaintia raja from the Rongphar clan. Although this pattern may have been perceived differently in the past, in the contemporary context, a person from the Rongphar clan is assumed to be a Karbi. The consequences are patently obvious: while Jaintia rajas are commonly believed today, even by Karbis, to have been Pnars, the story reveals that one of them was actually a Karbi. Through a classic inversion the subordinate is revealed to be the “true” superordinate. The political processes described here closely follow the thread of individual kinship relationships which establish several connections between the patrilineal law of inheritance and the matrilineal one (Figure 6-9). Political offices in Karbi polities are handed down within patrilineages. On the contrary, offices in Khasi and Pnar polities are held by matrilineages: in the Jaintia kingdom, the sovereign was succeeded by his sister’s son.

A major shift occurs in the transmission of legitimate authority from the original Jaintia sovereign (Bisokoida’s father-in-law) to

Harpokang, the first chief of Rongkhang. Bisokoida succeeds his father-in-law. In the same manner, his son-in-law, Sar Ronghang, then becomes king. In the third generation however, patrilineal transmission prevails: Sar Ronghang is succeeded by his own son. One wonders whether the main issue of the myth is not about creating a link between Jaintia and Karbi's assumed transmission rules. In this respect, Bisokoida's only son's death is very timely: Bisokoida's domain, which according to present-day Karbi laws should have been handed down to his son, finally comes to his son-in-law. Matrilineal principles are followed for a while out of necessity, until patrilineal principles are finally restored with the foundation of Rongkhang. Sar Ronghang's marriage to his wife's elder sister, which reinforces the takeover of the Ronghang clan, is also another feature of the shift from Khasi-Pnar social rules that ban this form of sororate to Karbi rules which allow it.<sup>21</sup> As in Jaintia's myth of origin and in Gobha's situation today (cf. *infra*), the transition from one descent principle to another requires a certain adaptation but preserves its continuity—which does not rule out some familial, i.e. familiar conflicts. This is what Bisokoida's story recounts, and this contrasts distinctly with the radical rupture described in the Assamese chronicle, where people from the borderlands have to flee the matrilineal tyranny in the hills to enable their “*raja's* son to become *raja*”.

In the final part of Bisokoida's story, two characters previously evoked reappear: the Thlen snake and the Tiger. They represent close links between the Khasi-Pnar and Karbi social and cultural spaces. The Tiger, as we recall, was the priest of the animal's market story (page 99). In Ri Bhoi, he is the master of numerous village territories. In the new capital founded by Harpokang, he assigns “duties”: this must be understood as the duties which, as in any hill locality, fall to the members of each lineage. As for the *thlen*, he is a common figure, particularly on the south and south-eastern fringes of Meghalaya, although he is not the object of regular collective worship everywhere. In the Khasi hills, *thlens* used to find shelter in private houses. To be more precise, they were associated with a property that they protected in exchange for being fed regularly with human blood. Gurdon notes that a *thlen* never enters a *syiem's* (chief) house and

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21 (Nakane 1968:132; Zaman 2008:94).

that this allows families to get rid of this cumbersome guest by giving away their property to a *syiem*.<sup>22</sup> Today in the Jaintia hills, Ronghang Rongbong remains the only permanent place where a *thlen* is worshipped collectively.<sup>23</sup> In Ronghang Rongbong's central sanctuary, Thlen sarpo (Kb. "respected thlen") appears as a mound, surrounded by three mounds of similar shape identified as the Thlen's assistants: Longdangpi-Longdangso ("Large stone-little stone"), Rong anglong ("the village hill"), and Mindar, the master spirit of Socheng.

Strangely enough, the centre of a politico-ritual complex which became emblematic of the Karbi identity is not constituted of religious forms typical of that particular ethnicity. Indeed, the historical political links between Rongkhang and Jaintia account for their similar religious forms. When questioned about relations with Nartiang, the hill capital of Jaintia, a local priest stated unambiguously: "we used to send a male goat each year to Nartiang [for it to be sacrificed to the Goddess]. And the Chomang [Kb. Khasi and Pnar] used to come here to offer *pinda* [offerings for the ancestors] to Tong Nokbe [the main Karbi hero]. This is no longer done now. Yet we have the same religion, we are the same people, so we should not fight any more".

*Gobha's buffalo: clans and States*

To enrich our description of the mythological representations of political ties in the region, let us mention a last narrative that illustrates an idea evoked by historical documents (page 138): the

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22 (Gurdon 1914:98–101).

23 We are dealing here only with the role of snakes in political centres not with their numerous religious occurrences in the region. It would, for that matter, be more appropriate to talk about a plurality of "snakes" instead of a unique form. For instance, the link between the *thlen* and plains' *nagas* is not obvious, with the latter being worshipped generically all over India. Similarly, the cult to the snake goddess Manasa, which is very common in Assam and Bengal, seems to be of a different order. (Baruah 2010; Mahapatra 1972:137–149; Sharma 1992:113) Some similarities may be found, however, with the tutelary goddess of Kachari rulers, the snake-sword Ranachandi. (Damant 1875; Gohain 1977:11–16).

importance of intermediaries in communication links between spatially non-contiguous partners.

In the Tiwa hills, B.K. Gohain collected a truly invaluable story about the Lalung (Tiwa)-Jaintia relationships:

When the Khorang clan 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.<sup>24</sup>

By collecting and translating this story from Assamese into English—and possibly from Tiwa into Assamese in the first instance—the identity of characters has been altered. Yet this in itself is very meaningful indeed. Today there is no Jaintia (i.e. Pnar) clan title that resembles “Khorang”. However, Tiwas frequently evoke *Jayata-Khoiram*, a term which—as its etymology suggests—refers to the Uplands which were previously dominated by both the States of Jaintia and Khyrim. It is therefore very likely that “Khorang” is a distortion of “Khyrim”. As for “the Magro clan of the Lalungs living in the Jaintia habitat”, it is less easy to explain the confusion. There is no Tiwa clan of such name, although the title is quite common further up on the plateau among people who nowadays assume a Khasi ethnicity. Let us consider a second possibility; that Makro refers to Magro, a Tiwa village situated on the very first foothill above Assam and, to be more precise, just above Gobha. Today Magro is dependent on Khyrim syiem. As in the first instance, “Jaintia habitat” would be a truncated translation of *Jayata-Khoiram*, thus meaning any place within a Khasi-Pnar polity.

The confusion, both by the narrator and translator, between clans, villages and polities opens up the possibility that, in their minds, these different social entities could be on the same footing, e.g. that clans or villages could act as suitable mediators between polities. Nevertheless, it does not conceal the story's central meaning, i.e. the existence of a ritual link between the

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24 (Gohain 1993:3).



Uplands and the Lowlands through an intermediary entity. It is particularly worthwhile considering that the ritual link is instantiated through a third actor. Uplanders were not able to come down directly to meet Gobha raja. They had to call on Magro, who notably maintained direct relations with both Khorang/Khyrim and Gobha. Here we are provided with a valuable illustration of the role people of the margins could play in the step-by-step interactions between the hills and plains, whether in ritual or commercial realms.



**Figure 6-10:** Kido, used by Karbi dignitaries to communicate

*Particular shapes indicate the origin and the relative urgency of the order the kido authenticates. Cf. Teron (2004).*

*Topography and descent rules*

I have understood that a continual cause of strife arose between the hill and the plain Rajahs on conversion of the latter from the different laws of succession which were then introduced, the nephews succeeding among the Khasis and the sons amongst the Hindoo branch of the family. (Jenkins, commissioner of Assam, 1836)<sup>25</sup>

Today, the Khasi-speaking “syiems” of the plateau are clearly distinct from the “*rajas*” who live in the plains and display a relatively more Assamese culture, if this is to be understood in the broadest sense. This relatively recent distinction may have appeared after the late nineteenth century. It must be placed alongside the colonial imposition of “excluded areas”—whose boundaries followed the dividing line between the plains and the hills—the Assam-Meghalaya separation and the contemporary ethnicisation process.

In 1836, Jenkins estimated that “the inhabitants of the dooars [duars] are with a few exceptions all of Khasiah origin and more Khasiah in their manners than Hindoos”, adding that only four duars (Bholaganj, Pantan, Chugong and Bungong) were not held by “chowdries [landholders] of Khasiah race”.<sup>26</sup> The criteria Jenkins took into account in recognizing “Khasiah origin” or “race” remain unknown. It may nevertheless be suggested that the inhabitants and chiefs of many duars displayed enough Khasi-reputed cultural traits to be classified as such. What is of interest to us here is that the dividing line between the hills and the plains was not the cultural and ethnic dividing line it has become today. It would be overly simple to state that the former chiefs gradually left their double residence and culture to live either exclusively in the hills as Khasis or exclusively in the plains as Assamised Tiwas or Karbis. The example of Gobha illustrates the fact that even though a process of differentiation definitely occurred, and still occurs in certain cases, its terms are less dichotomous.

Gobha, from which Gobha rajas took their name, is a rice-growing plain situated in the first submontane belt. According to the 1851 Statement of Land, “Naraunsing” and “Baugulsing

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25 quoted by (Bareh 1997:482).

26 Quoted by (Bareh 1997:483).

Rajah” are registered as respective “officers” (i.e. land holders) of the two revenue circles of Ootir Gobah (northern Gobha) and Dokin Gobha (southern Gobha), covering over 11,000 bighas (1,500 hectares) with a population of 3,800.<sup>27</sup> The current Gobha raja family, which describes itself as Tiwa, says that it originated from the Tiwa-speaking villages of Umswai valley, 20 km to the South. The *raja* came down to the plain numerous generations ago when his entourage decided that a *raja* could not decently live in a remote village. The mother of the present *raja*, Deepsingh Deoraja (born 1993), stresses that the tradition forbids the *raja* and his spouse from living in the same locality. According to her, the “Khasis” follow the same rule.<sup>28</sup> She herself was born in Dharamtul, a few kilometres inside the plains. After her marriage to Konsingh Deoraja, the former Gobha raja, she settled in Gobha, in the rice



**Figure 6-11:** *The dormitory’s main pillar at Bormarjong  
Bormarjong is one of the root villages of Tiwa hills*

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27 (Moffatt-Mills 1984:485–486).

28 Here “Khasis” might actually only refer to the Pnars, among whom the husband stays at their mother’s house and only visits his wife in the evening.(Barooah 2007:16–18; Gurdon 1914:76).

lands cultivated by the *rajas'* lineage. Her husband settled in Nakhola (Jagiroad), 5 km from Gobha. The *raja* seldom visits the hills. Once a year, he confirms three of the six politico-ritual chiefs of the hills (*loro*) in their functions by offering them turbans (Tw. *phaga*), ceremonial jackets (*rai chang ar*) and purification water (*ti khumur*). In exchange, these *loro* undertake the ritual investiture of a new *raja*. In the plains, Gobha *raja's* main ritual attributions include hosting the Jonbil fair and presiding over the annual Sivaratri cult to Cāribhāi Mahādeo at the large Cāribhai Deosal temple, which attracts devotees from all ethnicities.

The ritual centre of Gobha, where the *raja's* lineage deity sanctuary is build, is actually the residence of the *khungri*, the “princess” (cf. infra). Gobha *raja's* lineage deity (*khul mindei*) bears the name of one of the major deities found among hill Tiwas, Badal majhi. However, it assumes a typical “Hindu” form, that of a *linga*. The sanctuary facing the *khungri's* house resembles ordinary Assamese *nāmghars* and is organised around both the *linga* and the pillar (Tw. *thunda*) (Figure 6-12). Among hill Tiwas the pillar accommodates the domestic god in each and every house and most collective rituals are performed facing the main pillar of the dormitory (Figure 6-11).

In Gobha, worship is performed by the *raja's* paternal uncle, known as *jela*, and the *raja's* mother, the *rani*, who plays the ritual role of the *khungri*, i.e. princess, although this title is actually borne by the *raja's* patrilineal cousin (FBD), a teenage girl. This unique arrangement results from a change in succession rules and descent mode over the previous generation (Figure 6-13, page 166). In the Gobha *rajas'* foundation myth, Khungri, or Hari Kunwari, was the apical ancestress of the Maloi, the *rajas'* matriline. Successions followed the female line. The position of *khungri* was inherited by her eldest daughter or by the eldest among her sisters' daughters. The *raja* was chosen among the previous *raja's* sisters' sons according to their abilities. In other words, *khungri* and *raja* were either mother and son or sister and brother. Rituals were headed by the eldest male in the matrilineage, generally a maternal uncle (Tw. *jela*). He was assisted by the *khungri*, who was therefore either the mother or the sister of the *raja*. This set-up corresponded to what is still found among hill Tiwas and Khasis, where domestic or lineage cults are performed by the maternal uncle (Tw. *jela*, Kh. *u kni*), assisted, among the hill Tiwas, by a woman from the



Figure 6-12: The Pillar in Gobha raja's nāmghar

matrilineage, *hari khungri* (Figure 6-14, page 166).<sup>29</sup> In Khasi principalities, the *syiem's* function is similarly handed down to the sister's son, and the two main ritual office holders are the *syiem sad*, either the *syiem's* sister or mother, and the territorial priest (Kh. *lyngdoh*). In Gobha raja's family, descent has become patrilineal, which may initially appear to be a considerable shift. However, surprisingly enough, the distribution of functions has not radically changed: the male priest is still an elderly male from the *raja's* lineage, thus a paternal uncle, and the female priest is still the *raja's* (classificatory) sister. Similarly, the rule prohibiting co-residence of *khungri* and *raja* is still abided to, but formulated in different terms: in the 1990's Gohain (1993:20) was told that the *raja* didn't live in the house of the *khungri* (at that time his

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29 Among hill Tiwas, *jela* actually means any male in the matrilineage, the lineage priest being called *borjela*. Similarly, females in the lineage are called *hari*, and the priestess in charge *hari khungri*.

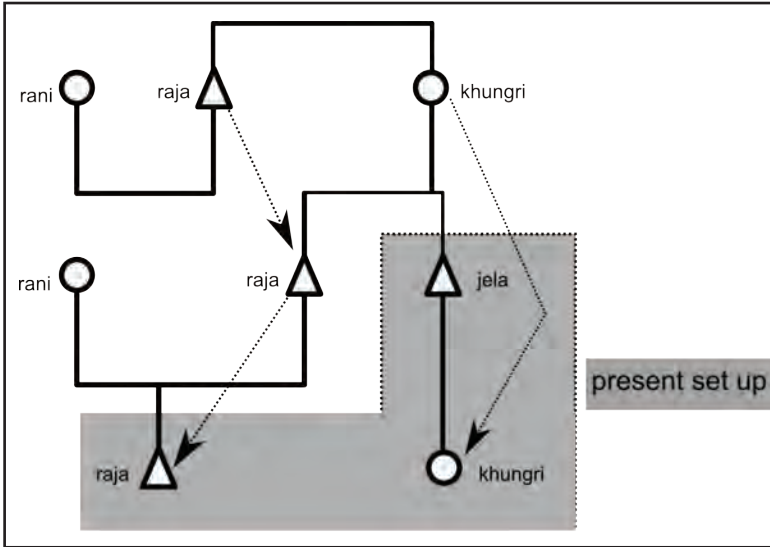


Figure 6-13: From matrilineality to patrilineality in Gobha's succession

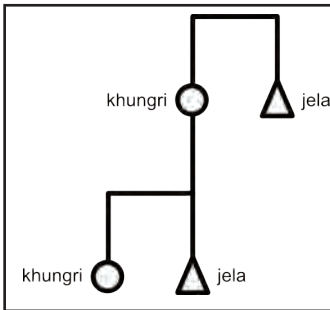


Figure 6-14: Hill Tiwas ritual roles

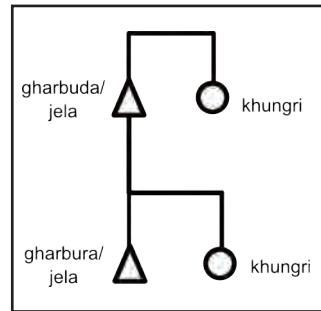


Figure 6-15: Plains Tiwas ritual roles

sister) “as he would go to stay in his mother-in-law’s house after his marriage and will not stay with his parents”. The justification was in tune with matrilineal principles. Today’s rule, reported to me by the present *raja*’s mother as an old tradition, is that “the *raja* and his spouse may not live together”. It will be interesting to see whether the present distribution of ritual functions stays the same over the next generation(s). Nevertheless, the flexibility of kinship-based roles illustrated in such instances, prompts us to envisage the seemingly fixity of social configurations and rules over long periods with modesty.

The move from matrilineal to patrilineal succession actually emanated from a deliberate decision by the *raja*’s council in 1995. The official justification was that under the matrilineal succession rules, a late *raja*’s son loses all his rights over the land domain, “thus becoming landless” as put to me by one of the dignitaries. The argument is obviously the sign that patrilineal values have definitely become dominant among the Tiwa elite. The evolution experienced by Gobha *raja*’s family is indeed emblematic of a general movement that concerns hundreds of commoners’ households. As we have seen, Tiwa ethnicity covers two geographical spaces (hills/plains), and two socio-cultural aggregates (Tiwa language, matrilineality/Assamese language, patrilineality). Among the plains Tiwas, domestic ritual arrangements may vary. According to a widespread situation, similar to that of the Gobha *rajas*’ family, the domestic priests are an elderly male from the patrilineage (As. *bangsha*), called *gharbura* (As. “house elder”), and a girl or woman of the same patrilineage, the *hari khungri* or *harikūwari* (As. “divine”+”princess”)(Figure 6-15).<sup>30</sup> In some localities, the preferred *hari khungri* will be the daughter’s virgin daughter, thus not a girl borne into the patrilian. Furthermore, if a lineage has no unmarried girl, it adopts one from another lineage to fulfil this role. These adaptations testify to the fact that, at least as far as *hari khungri* is concerned, opposite principles of succession or a combination of both may be applied within the

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30 Describing such arrangements among patrilineal and patrilocal Tiwas, Gohain (1993:98–100) noted that the *harikūwari* had to stay at her parents’ house on getting married, and her husband came to live with her (*gobhia*). Thus, in this case matrilocality was applied within an otherwise patrilocality family.

same cultural area. And they confirm that ambilineality, rather than adulterate matrilineality is the accurate concept to account for descent principles at play among the Tiwas.

There seem to have been continual downward movements associated with a process of Assamisation over the last three centuries. They have been neither monolithic nor definitive, and we actually have several clues about upwards migrations, even for the twentieth century. Thus, the recent kinship and ritual arrangements surrounding Gobha raja were much less related to his particular political and ritual status than to a general feature of Tiwa society—in the broad sense—to accommodate the coexistence of patrilineality and matrilineality and the shifts between these two modes. And although I am unable to attest to it, I suspect that Gobha's lineage may have experienced similar shifts in the past when the *raja's* main residence moved upwards and downwards.

A parallel should certainly be drawn between the position of ancient Gobha rajas as keepers of the duar and the local frontier, and the Tiwas cultural dichotomy. This is not to say that the advent of the frontier *raja* is the unique cause behind the emergence of the Tiwas as a frontier society, and neither that the dimorphism of the Tiwas has “produced” the very typical figure of Gobha raja. A more likely scenario would be that both emerged simultaneously.

### *The power of purification*

A particular function currently assumed by Gobha raja helps us to imagine the role his ancestors might have played with regards the local communities. This function is associated with his special faculties of dealing with extraordinary situations, and was revealed rather spectacularly when Gobha raja was called upon in 2009 to arrange the marriage between a Tiwa boy and a Muslim girl. As was seen (Cf. *supra* page 74, page 82) matrimonial alliances between Tiwas and other “tribals” or even Hindu Assamese are dealt with by the lineage concerned using rather simple procedures. However, the marriage in question involved a Muslim. Although the girl was part of the local Assamese Muslims (*Gariyā*), who contrary to the Bangladeshi Muslims are relatively well respected, and although the marriage was not opposed by principle by the family, from the boy's community's point of view, this was still a very delicate affair. The Tiwa boy's



village comes under Nellie raja, a subordinate of Gobha raja who lives in a nearby locality. Nellie's dignitaries admitted they were unable to deal with such a sensitive issue, so they referred the case to Gobha raja's house.<sup>31</sup> A sophisticated purification ceremony (Tw. *shud riwa*) was organised on the bank of a pond called Gariyā phigur and was attended by all Gobha's dignitaries (*bikhoya*) as well as several territorial ritual heads from the hills (*loro*). The main priest was not ethnically a Tiwa, but a Karbi, from the Kathar (i.e. priestly) lineage of Gobha's Karbis. Long prayers were chanted to the "33 crores gods and goddesses"<sup>32</sup> and especially to Cāribhai Mahādeo, the supreme territorial deity and tutelary deity of all rajas related to Gobha (the *Dātir cāribhāi*). The boy and girl were repeatedly sprinkled with water and coated with mud. Finally, the girl was formally adopted within a Tiwa clan.

The purpose and details of the ritual highlights the central position of Gobha raja at the centre of a web of relations across communities asserting different ethnicities. Less explicit elements need to be briefly underlined. The pond where the ritual was performed takes its name from the Gariyā, the main component of "Assamese Muslims". Many local Tiwas claim that the conversion of the Gariyā girl was not such a big deal because Gariyās descend from tribals who converted to Islam. Thus, in a sense, the girl simply converted back. At the beginning of the twentieth century, the Gariyas of Nellie used to come and make offerings once a year at Gobha's *nām ghar* (prayer hall). They were provided with a black bull and various types of food by the *raja*. The bull was then taken to Gariyā pond where it was beheaded and eaten. Muslims worshipping at a "Hindu" shrine and a "Hindu king" offering cattle for slaughter speaks for itself.

Another remarkable feature is the complementarity between Gobha raja and a Karbi priest, the *kathar*, in settling the Tiwa-Muslim marriage. An informant suggested that it was the presence of that particular priest in Gobha that actually made the conversion

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31 Nellie has been the scene of the worst massacre in Assam recent history, when against the backdrop of the Assam 1983 agitation movement, more than 2000 Bangladeshi immigrants were killed in February 1983; see e.g. (Kimura 2003).

32 "33 crores", i.e. 330 million, is a common expression in modern Hinduism to mean the entire assembly of deities.

possible: Nellie raja was not able to deal with the matter because no priest in his entourage was competent in that particular field. The *kathar* is regularly called upon for similar purposes by Tiwa villagers from the Gobha area. For instance, when a Tiwa boy wishes to bring in a girl from one of the Assamese low castes (*dum*), special arrangements have to be made, although unlike in the case above, the matter is dealt by the villagers without referring to the *raja*. After the marriage is approved by a meeting of the village elders, the *kathar* comes to perform the purification. He uses an essential item for this: sacred water, *ti khumur* (Tw. “water”+ “pure, sacred, clean”), provided by the Gobha *khungri* princess, and sprinkled over the village houses.<sup>33</sup> It is the *khungri* herself who both prepares the water and distributes it. Once a year the Radha and Krishna idols are washed on the eve of the Kosai nawa mela, part of the Bohag Bihu celebrations at *khungri*’s house. The water poured over the idols is carefully conserved by the *khungri*. Whenever sacred water is requested, early in the morning the *khungri* dilutes the idol water with ordinary water from the well, then adds a flower and a basil (*tulsi*) leaf. Besides purification rituals performed to convert an alien, sacred water is used to remove various calamities, such as epidemics or a series of fires. Although not commonly expressed as such, “purification” (Tw. *shud riwa*) is the very concept to describe the effect of sacred water, as it removes *shuwa* which, both in Tiwa and Assamese languages, refers to food or bodily leftovers, waste or menses.

Gobha raja’s next-door neighbour to the west, Dimoria raja, is the only other figure I have recorded as a provider of sacred water. Sacred water has been mentioned regarding other parts of South Asia. The closest parallels may be found in central India: several tribes and low castes (Bhaina, Bharia, Dhanuwar, Agari...) comprise a particular clan called Sonwani whose members are called on for the readmission of excommunicated persons by using “gold-water” (*sona pani*)—a term very similar to *sonane ti*, a Tiwa synonym for *ti khumur*.<sup>34</sup> Nevertheless, what is of particularly note

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33 Two other names may be found for sacred water: *sonane ti* (As. “golden”+ Tw “water”), *shudpāni* (As. “pure water”).

34 (Elwin 1942:83–84; Russell 1916:II 4, 233, 245, 290, 326, 490, 517). For the Dhoba caste, Russell (1916:II 517) reports that: “The head of the caste is always a member of the Sonwani sept and is known as Raja.

here is that the distribution of water sets Gobha raja at the centre of a network dealing with extraordinary situations. The territory that has recourse to Gobha's water spans the neighbouring hills and submontane area. It broadly corresponds to the domains of Gobha and its related *rajas*. While inhabitants of Gobha and the surrounding areas come to fetch *ti khumur* directly from *khungri*'s house, people living far away can obtain it from local ritual officers. For instance, the *doloi* of Bangthe Gaon, near Jonbil, is provided with *ti khumur* at each Kosai nawa mela and makes it available to all northern localities near the bank of the Brahmaputra.

The plurality of individual attempts to find practical remedies to calamities has a tendency at certain periods in time to focus on some particular human figures, as it does on remarkable elements of the natural landscape. The resulting networks possibly overlay chains of political authority, but as in the case of Gobha rajas, might acquire enough autonomy to survive the disappearance of more mundane political forms.

According to the given roles, Gobha raja sits at the centre of different shaped social groups. Users of the sacred water are a different population from visitors to Jonbil mela and neither are they exclusively the Tiwas he is reputed to be the king of. One last public aspect of Gobha raja needs to be evoked which, in the same manner, concerns yet another set of individuals. The *raja* is the main patron of Deosāl temple, which houses Cāribhai Mahādeo, the tutelary deity of the "Four Brother Rajas", Gobha, Nellie, Khola and Sahari. The deity is considered to be one of the most powerful in central Assam and his temple attracts devotees with very different ethnic identities and religious profiles—even though they are Hindu in the broadest sense of the term—, from throughout the districts of Morigaon, Nagaon and Karbi Anglong, notwithstanding travellers on National Highway 37 on which the temple stands. The architecture, most of the visible aspects of the sanctuary, the *linga* featuring Cāribhai Mahādeo and the forms of worship hardly show that the cult is the responsibility of hill Tiwa "tribal" priests. It was only a few years ago that the temple authorities decided to adorn the main gate with the Tiwa ethnic

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It is his business to administer water in which gold has been dipped (*sona-pāni*) to offenders as a means of purification; from this and the name of the sept is derived."

insignia made of crossed swords and a shield. Finally, all annual rites conducted in Deosal correspond to pan-Hindu festivals. The temple nevertheless forms a major piece of the Tiwa ritual apparatus and is under the direct authority of Gobha, with the *raja*'s secretariat officially assuming its management. The foundation myth narrates how Langbor and Longbor, the Four Brothers' two ancestors, dreamt about the linga and how Gobha raja ordered the *loro* dignitaries of Rongkhoi and Marjong (in the Tiwa hills) to appoint a *tiuri* and a *hadari* as the deity's attendants. Whether a Hinduisation process might have affected a putative original tribal sanctuary is not central to the understanding of its present systemic properties. As Pfeffer and Hardenberg have argued for Orissa, these types of religious forms cannot be fully described as being typical of particular stages in the Hinduisation process since they result from continuous multilateral borrowings and reinterpretations.<sup>35</sup> From a practical point of view, Deosal is obviously a major point of junction between hill Tiwa institutions and the society in the plains. And its patron, Gobha raja, occupies the same strategic position.

The patronage of Deosal on the one hand and of Jonbil mela on the other, together with the distribution of sacred water, remains the last tangible aspects of Gobha raja as a public persona. Obviously, following the centralisation policies imposed under the colonial and later independent Assam, not much remained of the temporal powers of the *raja*. However, one wonders if his ritual attributions were not historically just as important with regards his pre-eminence as his economic and administrative roles.<sup>36</sup>

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35 (Hardenberg 2010; Pfeffer 1997).

36 We do not mean, as Frazer's famously thesis postulated, that Gobha and similar *rajās* are kings who descended from magicians, or from priests. (Frazer 1920:332–372) This would overlook the fact that all traditional political chiefs in the region are indistinctly ritual functionaries as well, who, like Tiwa *loros*, are endowed with the power to protect or to re-establish order within society. And this would also disregard the fact that political power itself is well known to have universally engendered magical phenomena around the body of its holders; see for instance about Europe (Bloch 1989) or Africa (Beattie 1960).

The material concerning Gobha raja corroborates our intuitions about the importance of the margins in structuring the regional complexity. Whether spatial or cultural, margins should not be conceived as fronts, as linear interfaces between compact and tight masses whose distribution would result from competing forces. A form like Gobha raja is sustained by networks of actors, of institutions and of symbolic patterns. The connections forming these networks are not woven together by a culture or an ethnicity, and seldom by any collective agent, but by the assemblage of individual needs and potentialities.





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