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Rethinking ethnographies on Garo Hills

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ROUTLEDGE HANDBOOK OF HIGHLAND ASIA

The *Routledge Handbook of Highland Asia* is the first comprehensive and critical overview of the ethnographic and anthropological work in Highland Asia over the past half a century. Opening up a grand new space for critical engagement, the handbook presents Highland Asia as a world region that cuts across the traditional divides inherited from colonial and Cold War area divisions – the Indian subcontinent/South Asia, Southeast Asia, China/East Asia, and Central Asia.

Thirty-two chapters assess the history of research, identify ethnographic trends, and evaluate a range of analytical themes that developed in particular settings of Highland Asia. They cover varied landscapes and communities, from Kyrgyzstan to India, from Bhutan to Vietnam, and bring local voices and narratives relating to trade and tribute, ritual and resistance, pilgrimage and prophecy, modernity and marginalisation, and capital and cosmos to the fore. The handbook shows that for millennia, Highland Asians have connected far-flung regions through movements of peoples, goods, and ideas, and at all times have been the enactors, repositories, and mediators of world-historical processes. Taken together, the contributors and chapters subvert dominant lowland narratives by privileging primarily highland vantages that reveal Highland Asia as an ecumene and prism that refracts and generates global history, social theory, and human imagination. In the currently unfolding Asian Century, this compels us to reorient and re-envision Highland Asia in ethnography, in theory, and in the connections between this world region, made of hills, highlands, and mountains, and a planetary context.

The handbook reveals both regional commonalities and diversities, generalities and specificities, and a broad orientation to key themes in the region. An indispensable reference work, this handbook fills a significant gap in the literature and will be of interest to academics, researchers, and students interested in Highland Asia, Zomia studies, anthropology, comparative politics, conceptual history and sociology, Southeast Asian studies, Central Asian studies, and South Asian studies as well as Asian studies in general.

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ROUTLEDGE HANDBOOK OF HIGHLAND ASIA

Edited by Jelle J.P. Wouters and Michael T. Heneise



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Cover image: Zhaoxing, a village of the Dong ethnicity in Liping County, Southern Guizhou, China. Photo by Jean Michaud, 2011

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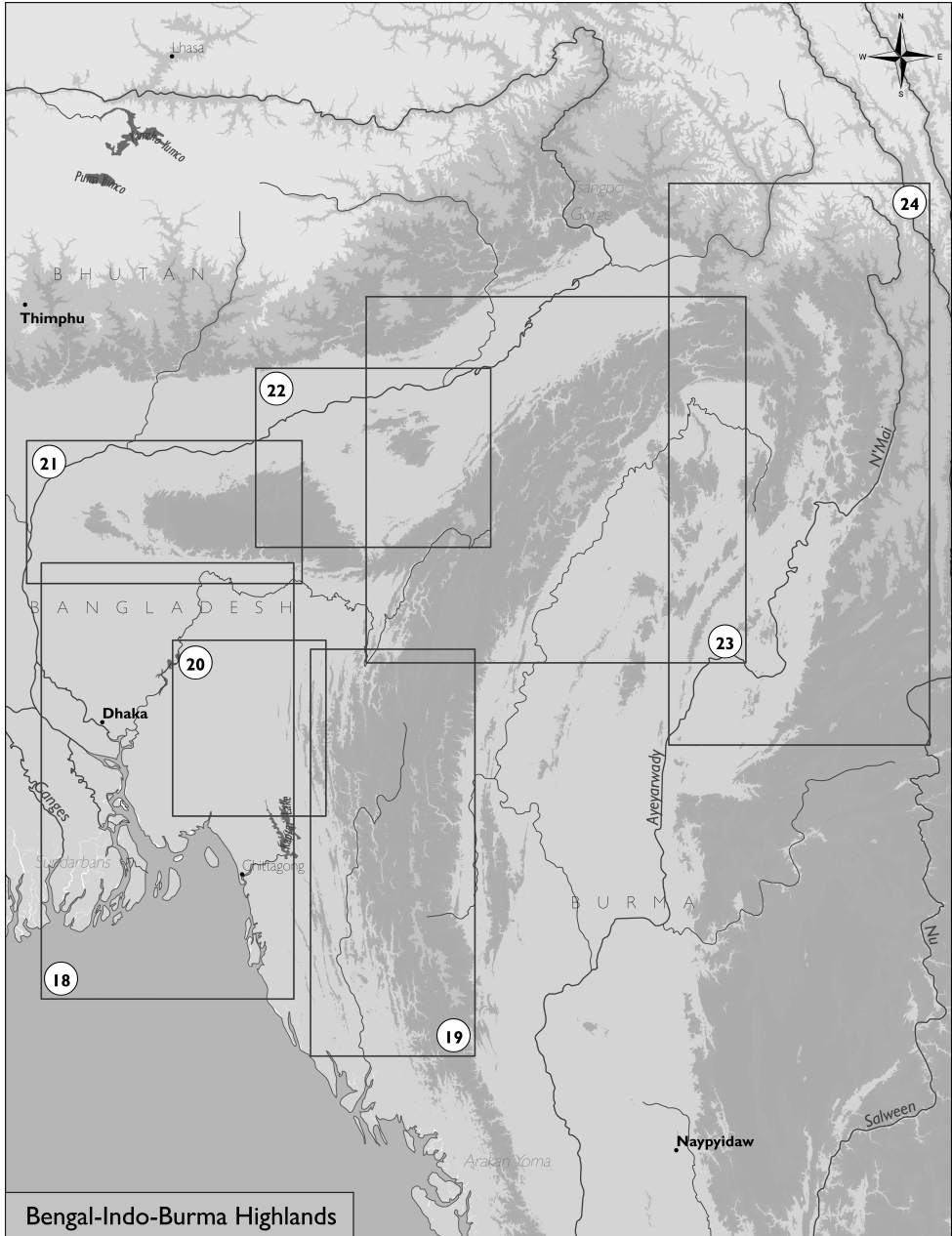
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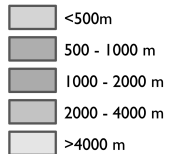
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Map 18.1 A map of ethnographic areas in the Bengal-Indo-Burma Mountains in this volume, namely Chapters 18, 19, 20, 21, 22, 23, and 24. Credit: Johan Eilertsen Arntzen.

RETHINKING ETHNOGRAPHIES ON GARO HILLS

Erik de Maaker

Introduction: the borders of ethnicity

The Brahmaputra, one of the longest rivers in Asia, winds its way from the Himalayan Massif to the sea. For thousands of years, the river has shaped the land surrounding it, etching out broad floodplains in between uplands and mountains (Saikia 2019). Upon entering India, the river moves west for several hundreds of kilometres before taking a 90-degree turn to the south to head down to the Bay of Bengal. On the inside of this sharp bend, the river touches upon a range of low hills. These forested hills, characterised by steep inclines with very few level patches in between, measure a little over 100 kilometres across and are thinly populated. This is in contrast to the surrounding plains, whose fertile clay supports a dense population.

The residents of the hills, in the majority, are Garo. According to legend, the forefathers of the Garo originated from Tibet. They would have migrated, over many generations, via the plains of Assam, to the area currently known as Garo Hills (Playfair 1909: 7). Sanskrit sources suggest that Garo at one time had a significant presence in the plains. The ‘tantric goddess’ they worshipped at Kamakhya (near Guwahati, in the Assam Plains) would, in precolonial times, have merged with the mother goddess Durga, giving rise to what is today arguably one of the prime Hindu temples of the northeastern region (Zou and Kumar 2011: 148). Epic chants, included in a body of oral literature, make reference to places and events relevant to this history of migration (Sangma 1967b). Local historians have retold these, promulgating and invigorating the ethnic claims these encompass (Chimik 2006: 6). Whereas linguists do not necessarily subscribe to the rigid interpretations of ethnicity such claims may encompass, they do locate Garo within the Tibeto-Burman family of languages, as holds for quite a few of the languages spoken in the Brahmaputra Basin and its adjacent uplands (Burling 2003: 61; Post and Burling 2016: 218). The Khasi/Jaintia language, belonging to the Mon-Khmer family of languages and spoken in the uplands east of Garo Hills, is a notable exception, which is in tune with more eastwards migratory routes claimed by these latter groups (Gurdon 1907: 11).

In the above, I have attempted to introduce a region without referring to the political borders that define places and areas in everyday life. Approaches to area, region, people, and landscape typically take the international borders delineating countries for granted, and the same goes for ‘internal’ political boundaries defining states, provinces, or districts. This results in a ‘pervasive naturalization’ (Ludden 2003: 3) of such borders, suggesting that these are

integral to place rather than man-made. The methodological nationalism this translates into easily overlooks the complex political processes that result in borders emerging, transforming, or being removed. As I have argued elsewhere, borders typically have the agency to influence the people who live with them and can be adopted by political movements in unexpected capacities (Van Schendel and de Maaker 2014: 3). How have people living in Garó Hills been influenced by, and engaged with, the borders and boundaries that crisscross their region? And how does this reflect in the ethnographic knowledge that has been produced in relation to this area and its people?

The broad plains of Bangladesh give way, to the northeast, to the uplands of the India-China corridor. Garó Hills constitutes the southern and westernmost extension of these uplands, which is also the western one-third of the Indian state of Meghalaya. For over three centuries, Garó Hills, as well as the lowlands adjacent to it, have acquired new political and administrative borders, which have shaped the people living there. Below, I explore how these changes reflect in the ethnography that has been produced over time. I conclude that the ethnographic lenses through which authors have looked at Garó Hills and surrounding areas have been considerably influenced by the political context prevailing, which is of relevance for our assessment of the ethnographic knowledge existing.

Naming and locating

The earliest ethnographic sources for Eastern India derive from travellers, explorers, administrators, and the military. British colonial expansion in Eastern India proceeded from Bengal following the battle of Palashi (Plassey) in 1757. In 1788, Eliot (1799: 17), at the time the commissioner of Dacca for the British East India Company (EIC) 'was deputed by the government to investigate the duties collected on the Garrow hills, which bound the north-eastern parts of Bengal' to meet with people 'who had hitherto known no intercourse with Europeans'. At the time, British rule did not encompass Garó Hills, but it did involve landlords in Northern Bengal who claimed some sort of control over the people living in these hills, which translated itself into taxing them at the markets (*haats*) that were regularly held close to the plains. Eliot describes the land he encountered to the north of the plains of Bengal as an approach displaying 'a beautiful sight of three ranges of mountains, rising one above the other'. The people he encountered near Ghosegong (what is currently Goshgaon in Bangladesh's Mymensingh District) called themselves 'Garrows', and the article provides what would become recurring indicators of their cultural traits. The Garrow stood out for Eliot in their dress, their food habits, and their religious practices, to name but a few. In the decades that followed, Eliot's 'observations' would be echoed in numerous publications, and the same seems to hold to a lesser degree for the etching he published with it (Figures 22.1 and 22.2).

The EIC continued to consolidate its control over India in a process that would only be completed by the end of the 19th century. In the course of this gradual expansion, by the middle of the 18th century, the town of Goalpara, located on the Brahmaputra River, became included in British controlled territory (Wary 2019). Located at what was at the time its furthest northeastern extension, it was a contact point for them to make connections with the inhabitants of the surrounding uplands. It also allowed them to trade with the rulers of Assam (Johnstone 1877: 13). At the time, the EIC controlled the plains of Mymensingh in Bengal, as well as the flat land bordering the Brahmaputra River, thus on three sides surrounding Garó Hills. The delineation of the area standing out was roughly based on the outer limits of the claims extended by landlords (*zamindars*), who had been empowered by the British (Barman 1994).



Figure 22.1 A Garrow man in his war dress (Eliot 1799: 16).

When Dr Francis Buchanan (later known as Francis Hamilton¹) undertook a survey for the EIC of all ‘the territories, subject to the immediate authority of the Presidency of Fort William’ (the seat of power of the British), he was also requested ‘to extend ... enquiries to the adjacent countries’ (Hamilton 1940 [cf. 1807–1814]: v). The journey brought Buchanan to Goalpara, where he also made enquiries about the ‘mountainous region’, in which people live ‘whom the Bengalese call Garo’ (Hamilton 1940 [cf. 1807–1814]: 85). Whereas the ‘mountains’ were the domain of the Garo, ‘Garo [also] seem formerly to have occupied much of the adjacent low country’ but had more recently lost that control. The EIC maintained alliances with Bengali landlords who continued to levy ‘exorbitant extractions’ from Garo, thus pushing them from the plains into the hills. Hamilton describes the Garo as ‘an aboriginal tribe of the mountains’, yet notes that ‘they [do not] 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’ (Hamilton 1940 [cf. 1807–1814]: 89).²

As had been the subject of enquiry by Eliot, the landlords did not exert direct control over the inhabitants of the hills but demanded revenue from them in the form of cotton. This cotton was traded at the markets in the foothills.³ Garo also depended on these markets to buy certain goods, one of the most important of which was salt (Barooah 1970: 44). As the measures imposed by the landlords on Garo became more coercive, the latter increasingly reacted with



Figure 22.2 What appears to be a copy of the first drawing (Miss Blunt, collection Horniman, c. 1800, <https://www.horniman.ac.uk/object/10.10.53/2>).

violence towards the plains dwellers: they took livestock, but at times also men, presumably for human sacrifice (Barooh 1970: 45), and perhaps even to use as slaves. Ending these conflicts was meant to establish and extend the sovereignty of the British, who could then gain access to revenue across all cultivable land (Cederlöf 2014: 54). Early in the 19th century, Rangpur magistrate David Scott conducted an enquiry into the conflictual situation and suggested to formalise the separation between the plains and the hills that the EIC had created. This regime was formalised in Regulation X of 1822, which created an exclusionary legal and administrative context for Garo Hills, setting it apart as a territory from the surrounding plains of Bengal.⁴ The adoption of Regulation X provided the basis for the relative administrative autonomy that Garo Hills enjoys to today (Barooh 1970: 57).

Categorising and compartmentalising

In the 19th century, British India began to develop as an ‘ethnographic state’ (Dirks 2001: 48), creating gazetteers and compendia that charted and catalogued the diversity of its people (such as Allen 1980 [1906]; Allen et al. 1993 [1909], and much more recently Simon 1996). Following

the conquest of the Brahmaputra Valley in 1826, ethnographic compendia were published by Robinson (1841 [1975]), Dalton (1872), Rowney (1882), and Wadell (1901). Almost without exception, these compendia drew heavily on Eliot, Buchanan, and Scott, with many of their observations verbatim being carried forward.

Assam quickly gained great economic importance for the British, notably for the cultivation of tea. Throughout the first half of the 19th century, British administrators time and again recorded 'raids' conducted by Garo into the plain, noting that notwithstanding Scott's efforts, these continued to be the result of their being pestered by the landlords. In 1866, the British occupied Garo Hills (Mackenzie 1995 [1884], 261; Sangma 1981: 18–26). The colonisers had superior arms, and while Garo did resist, they stood no chance. In late 20th-century historiography, the Garo defeat has been treated at length, which also allowed for the identification of particularly brave war leaders who fought the British until death (Bhattacharjee 1978; Kar 1970; Sangma 1994). The most famous of these is no doubt Pa Togan Nengminza Sangma, who is commemorated as a freedom fighter, martial, muscular, and larger than life with a statue at Chisobibra (see also Sangma 1990a: 436).⁵ Garo sources with respect to this history do not exist, and all accounts are based, without exception, on the records which the British created (Mackenzie 1995 [1884]: 255–268).

From 1869 onwards, Garo Hills was given an exclusionary status within the colonial state. A district administration was created that centred on indirect rule, incorporating what the British understood to be local 'headmen' (*nokmas*). This rendered it all the more important, from the perspective of the ones in charge, to gain an understanding of local political processes and how these were embedded in social relationships as well as validated by religious beliefs. Christian missionaries began work among Garo in the late 19th century, and reflecting their attempts to fathom people's mindset, began to produce and publish ethnographic insights as well (Ayerst 1880; Stoddard 1873; Avery 1885; Carey 1919; Pianazzi 1934). At this point in time, no single term had emerged by way of which reference was made to the Garo. Thus far, Garo had been referred to as 'a collection of castes' (Eliot 1799: 19), 'a nation encompassing several tribes' (Hamilton 1940 [cf. 1807–1814]: 89), 'a collection of clans' (Ayerst 1880: 103), 'numerous petty tribes' (Robinson 1841 [1975]: 415), or simply 'the Garo tribes' (in plural), who 'consider themselves forming three or four nationalities with different names' (Dalton 1872: 58).

Following India's first war of independence (in colonial parlance referred to as 'the sepoy mutiny'), which lasted from 1857 to 1859, the British crown assumed suzerainty over what became British India. The reorganisation of the colonial government this brought about created an even greater emphasis than before on the systematic collection of sociological and ethnographic data with respect to people being ruled over (Dirks 2001: 48). This resulted, among others, in the creation of the Census of India, which has, from the 1870s onwards, been conducted every ten years. Conducting the census made it necessary to adopt more or less unequivocal sociological categories through which to count and calculate the population. In addition to caste, or caste-like groups (for Hindus and Muslims), 'tribe' was adopted as the category that applied, loosely, to ethnic communities that did not seem to be located with either of these religions and that were considered – for India's northeast – of Mongolian descent (Bates 1995b: 19). Garo explicitly traced their origin to Tibet, which according to this categorisation rendered them tribals. Yet these myths of migration did not keep authors from perceiving them as first settlers. Avery writes with reference to (among others) Garo that 'these tribes probably represent the true aborigines of Assam' (Avery 1885: cxvii). And in his catalogic work *The Tribes of the Brahmaputra Valley*, Wadell (1901: 54) refers to Garo as 'a large tribe', 'autochthones of this area'.

Querying origin and linking that to phenotype and language all contributed to a conceptualisation of the upland communities as different from those of the surrounding plains. In the introduction to the section on 'tribes', Wadell wrote:

Few of the wilder parts of the world, still left, preserve such a vast variety of savage tribes ... Driven into these glens by the advance of civilisation up the plains and lower valleys these people have become hemmed in among the mountains, where ... they have developed into innumerable isolated tribes ... engaged in blood-thirsty feuds, head-hunting and murderous raids on their defenceless neighbours.

(Wadell 1901: 1)

In addition, tribes were regarded as 'primitive' as they were external to the early states of the subcontinent (Bates 1995a: 112). While ethnographic accounts emphasised seclusion, the political and administrative reports of the time emphasised how the trade which uplanders and lowlanders conducted at the markets was evidence of firm interdependencies (Misra 2011: 27). Rather than isolation and thus the absence of upland-plains relationships, it was the unjust and one-sided adjustment of the existing arrangements by the landlords that brought Garo to retaliative 'raiding' (Mackenzie 1995 [1884]: 245–261). But, rather than acknowledging the importance of these historical alliances, the colonial state devised policies that honoured the presumed isolation of the Garo.

The exclusionary status given to Garo Hills resulted in 'isolating the area politically, economically and socially through a series of excluding reservations' (Bhattacharjee 1973: 519). The government prohibited 'outsiders' from entering the hills unless they had a special permit, while rules prevented them from buying land. This resulted in 'Garo, like other tribes, [becoming] geographically secluded and socio-economically shut to their hills' (Bhattacharjee 1973: 518).⁶ Moreover, it allowed the British to gain 'monopolistic control over the brisk trade in pottery, salt and rubber between highlanders and lowlanders' (Zou and Kumar 2011: 160). According to Kar, the intention to isolate the Garo from the plains' dwellers was manifest in many other dimensions of life as well. He claims that until independence, the development of the road system was purposefully neglected. As a consequence, trade and commerce hardly developed. 'This negligence, one may guess, was an inherent part of their segregation policy' (Kar 1975: xii–xiii). Kar argues that the motives were ultimately political, and notably, with the rise of the Swadeshi movement ('non-cooperation') after 1905, the British made an effort to 'close all avenues of communication between Garo and the people of the plain areas'. Education had in Garo Hills from the outset been arranged by Christian missionaries (mostly Americans and Australians of European descent), and in the early 20th century, the Bengali language was taken from the regular curriculum to be replaced by English as a medium. Even more importantly, rather than using the Bengali script to write Garo, the roman script was adopted (Kar 1975: xvi). Language, script, and the Christian religion thus all worked towards tying the Garo to the British and widening, if not creating, a cultural and political gap with the people from the surrounding plains.

Establishing and institutionalising

Given that Garo Hills was governed by indirect rule, ethnographic knowledge was essential. In order to once again compile earlier ethnographic knowledge while adding new insights, then Garo Hills District Commissioner Playfair wrote *The Garos* (1909). This unequivocally established the Garo as one of the major tribes of the northeastern region, linked to an ethnoterritory of their own. This, even though certainly at the beginning of the 20th century, roughly one out every three Garo lived outside the district, in the areas bordering it to either the north or the south (Playfair 1909: 1). *The Garos* was part of a larger series of monographs produced at the time, written by administrators, each of which was dedicated to a specific tribe. Gurdon wrote

The Khasis (1907), Hutton *The Angami Nagas* (1921), and so on. *The Garos* became an iconic book, which is likely to have served the civil servants it was meant to inform. In addition, and over the years far more significantly, it has helped Garo to imagine their cultural past, a role that the book continues to fulfil, also since photographic reprints are brought out regularly (Marak 2012: 522).

The end of colonial rule (in 1947) brought the partition of British India, which located Garo Hills to the north of the new international border between India and East Pakistan. Although the border itself had in the first couple of decades not much of a presence, and certainly 'local' people could rather easily move across, its creation did have a huge impact on the political situation in which people found themselves. The Garo Hills District in its entirety became part of India, where it was included with the state of Assam. It was listed under the Sixth Schedule of the Indian Constitution and became governed by a democratically elected body, the Garo Hills Autonomous District Council (GHADC). Within the GHADC, the democratic franchise empowered Garo since they constituted the majority within Garo Hills. This was very different for Garo living across the boundary of Garo Hills in the plains of Assam, where they constituted a minority. Even Garo living across the southern border of Garo Hills in East Pakistan became a minority among a Bengali Muslim majority. As a result of the partition-induced migration of Bengali Muslims, as well as the 1971 Bangladesh War of Liberation, many Garo of East Pakistan/Bangladesh were driven from their land, resulting in at least two big waves of refugees seeking safety across the border in Garo Hills (Bal 2007: 450–453). There, they certainly, in the early years of independence, received support to be resettled by the Indian government (Sangma 2005). The refugees, traumatised by the violence they had experienced, were not seldom more astute and assertive than the people among whom they sought refuge, translating to today, at times, distrust and discrimination. Bal (2007: 439) has shown how over time, the emergence of the international border resulted in a differentiation between Garo of India and Bangladesh in terms of political trajectories and imaginations.

In Garo Hills District, the creation of the GHADC did initially not really affect the status quo. The ethnographic and linguistic research that Robbins Burling conducted in Garo Hills from 1954 to 1956 created important new insights into the adaptive interpretation of kin relations among the Garo. Focusing on Garo matrilineity, Burling's seminal monograph *Rengsanggrī* analysed how kinship shaped people's worlds (1997 [1963]). In the years that followed, Burling would produce a large number of contributions. But due to the quickly deteriorating political situation in Assam, he was not allowed to return to Garo Hills until 1997 (Burling 1997: 323–354). More or less a contemporary of Burling, in the mid-1950s anthropological research was also conducted by Chie Nakane. Based on just three months of fieldwork, she wrote an incisive though not uncontested structuralist analysis that compares Garo and Khasi kinship 'systems' (Nakane 1967).

In the first decades after independence, road connectivity gradually started to improve, creating new opportunities for trade, and for the cultivation of new cash crops, in a departure from the shifting cultivation (*jhum*), which had continued to dominate. Garo Hills came to witness large-scale deforestation, as most of its valuable hardwood was logged for timber and sold for use to either traders in Assam or Bangladesh, as recent work in political ecology reveals (Karlsson 2011: 81). Increasingly large numbers of Garo converted to Christianity, creating challenges to collective practices of land management, in which religious and political responsibilities had, at least at the local level to a large extent, coincided (Majumdar 1966; 1980b). As new sources of wealth became available and earlier mechanisms of redistribution became less compelling, class differentiation among Garo increased (Majumdar 1983). As one of its outcomes, new nuclearised patterns of settlement emerged, notably in urban contexts,

that had hitherto not existed (Majumdar 1980a). This also inspires a continuing reinterpretation of customary practices and their associated normativities, albeit the latter often prove to be surprisingly resilient (de Maaker 2022).

Political conflict had run high in large parts of Assam from the time of independence onwards. Among Naga, Manipuri, and later also Mizo in the eastern uplands bordering Burma, secessionist movements emerged which the Indian state attempted to violently repress. In the 1950s and 1960s, Garó Hills was not so much a theatre of violent political conflict, but Garó politicians did campaign hard for the creation of a separate hill state. As a result, in 1972, Garó Hills became included in the newly formed state of Meghalaya, which also encompassed the neighbouring Khasi and Jaintia Hills (Chaube 1973; Lyngdoh 1996). Meghalaya was a state with a tribal majority and preferential treatment of select tribes (hence ‘Scheduled Tribes’ or ST), a preferential treatment which had been instituted after independence to redress the historically grown inequalities that marred Indian society. In Meghalaya, extensive measures came to favour Garó, Khasi, and the other STs, while non-Garó residents faced restrictions regarding, for example, access to higher education, the purchase of land, or even political representation (Karlsson 2013: 35).

Fitting the ethnoterritorial mould?

The GHADC governs the area encompassed by the former Garó Hills District.⁷ Several authors make the point that although its residents were always in the majority Garó-speaking, it seems unlikely that these from the outset identified with a common sense of Garó-ness. Rather, in line with the references made in the early 19th-century ethnography cited earlier, which did not mention a unified community, it seems likely that people identified with distinct regional groups that shared some common cultural practices (Majumdar 1977: 40). The creation of Garó Hills District in 1866, governed by indirect rule, brought these distinct groups under a common denominator. The process of ethnogenesis was further accelerated with the creation of the GHADC. Given the Garó majority, its delegates came to represent an ethnic vote, resulting in the electoral system contributing to the creation of a Garó political community (Majumdar 1982: 209). Similar mechanisms operated at the state level where the delegates for the Meghalaya Legislative Assembly from Garó Hills were primarily Garó. The emphasis on ethnicity in electoral politics has reverberated in local governance, thus strengthening the idea that an ethnic community can have shared political interests (Baruah 2005: 12).

The majority of the people living in Garó Hills are Garó, but in addition, it has many residents who identify with other ethnicities. In the plains and low hills along its northern and western border, the population includes people who identify as members of ethnicities such as Hajong, Rabha, and Koch, whose mixed residential arrangements in certain respects resemble those of the ‘foothills’ elsewhere in Northeast India (Ramirez 2014; Kikon 2019). Each of these has a language of its own, and all qualify for ST status (Karlsson 2013: 34). In addition, the western edge of Garó Hills has large numbers of Bengali Muslims. Lastly, small towns, as well as the city of Tura, have relatively large groups of people who are the descendants of migrants who have settled either recently or many generations ago in Garó Hills and identify themselves as, e.g., Marwari, Bihari, Assamese, Punjabi, and so on. The GHADC, in its governance, takes this ethnic diversity into account. And yet, given the numerical predominance of Garó voters (and politicians), it is almost unavoidable that Garó interests are foregrounded. This is also reflected in the production of social scientific knowledge, which has at least historically given little attention to the position of non-Garó. For example, inspired – at least in part – by the need to codify Garó customs for the courts of the GHADC, academics have published extensively on Garó

customs (see, among others, Costa 1954; Chattopadhyay and Sangma 1989; Marak 1997; Marak 2000 [1986]). Yet, regarding the minority communities to date very little work in this respect has been done.

D.N. Majumdar, in approaching what he calls a ‘multi-ethnic setting’, notes how the ‘habitats’ of ethnic communities extend beyond administrative borders, resulting in ‘overflows’, while ethnicities that are not included in contiguous territories are located in ‘pockets’ (1977: 39). In towns and villages, people live mixed, albeit people with a similar ethnic background typically share a single ward, creating clusters based on ethnicity and language. Writing in 1977, Majumdar maintains that among the minority communities at that time, ‘the identity situation’ had not ‘as much crystallized as among Garo’ (Majumdar 1977: 42). However, from the 1990s onwards, ethnonationalism became an increasingly important factor in Garo politics, also due to the emergence of a Garo underground that engaged in violent action to enforce the creation of a separate Garo state (advocating the break-up of Meghalaya) (Marak 2005). The creation of such a separate state had, in fact, been a long-standing demand of Garo Hill’s oldest political party, the Garo National Council (GNC) (Majumdar 1982: 209). From the early 2000s onwards, the ‘separate state’ demand also gained the support of influential political groups such as the Garo Students Union, as well as from political parties that are among the largest in Meghalaya’s state parliament (Das 2014). The foregrounding of ethnonationalist agendas stresses the need for ethnographies of the minority communities since ethnographic representation is essential in a context in which ethnicity creates the basis on which politics operate. Examples of such ethnographic texts are Hajong’s collection of essays, *The Hajongs and their Struggle* (2002) or Koch’s book chapter, ‘The Koches of Garo Hills’ (1984).

The territorial approach to ethnicity resulted in differentiation of the citizenship rights of the people living within the area being governed by the GHADC, those living in adjacent parts of Assam, and those living in Bangladesh. In Garo Hills, codified interpretations of Garo custom were leading in relation to land rights, personal law, and so on. This was not similarly the case for Garo living in Goalpara, to whom applied common Indian law, while there the use of the Garo language in schools is subject to restrictions (Sangma 2012: 28). In Bangladesh, Garo are recognised as an *adivasi* minority but cannot fall back on an exclusionary legal regime as in Garo Hills (Bal 2007). Political groups such as the GNC have long argued for the inclusion of what they call ‘Garo speaking parts of Assam’ into the area governed by the GHADC, reiterating the link between ethnicity and territory. At the backdrop of such demands is the desire to gain (ethnic) control of local structures of governance and the benefits which these might entail.

For Garo Hills, no written documents exist of any substance that precede the colonial period. This has created the need for a Garo history writing, which expands on, but also in certain respects critically reflects on, colonial-era discourse. Historian Milton Sangma has no doubt been prolific in his attempts to fill this void and created a large number of contributions that can explain the radical transformations that have taken place in the Garo Hills region over the past 150 years (see, e.g., Sangma 1981). More recently, various important contributions have been made by anthropologist Queenbala Marak, whose publications throw new light on themes as varied as food, religion, and material culture. She has also written a valuable overview of anthropological research done in and on Meghalaya (Marak 2017).

In an attempt to explore interpretations of ethnicity, several scholars have adopted a processual approach, foregrounding historical and political developments. Here, the work of historian Van Schendel serves as one of the sources of inspiration (Van Schendel 2011). Belonging and identity formation among the Garo of Bangladesh are at the core of an important study by Bal (2007). Beyond ethnic politics, in a more kinship-oriented approach, Ramirez has shown how ethnic loyalties can be subject to reinterpretation. Foregrounding the dynamic interpretation of

kin ties, he documented situations in which people had shifted ethnic allegiance if it was appropriate to do so (Ramirez 2013). I myself have, along the same lines, focused on the challenges created by accessing communal resources such as land and shown how social relationships are both a given as well as subject to continuous reinterpretation (de Maaker 2018; 2022).

Engaging the local?

The early ethnographies relating to Garó Hills were written to ‘explain’ the region and, even more so, its residents to external audiences. That is, colonial ethnography was written by British travellers and civil servants to create insights that would be of relevance to the governance of the region. Social scientists doing research in post-independence Garó Hills have produced writing meant for (in principle) global audiences. All these texts, which have thus primarily been written to ‘explain’ Garó to outsiders, have also made their way into the studies and living rooms of middle-class Garó. In addition to these texts, a body of ethnography and literature has emerged, either in English or in Garó, written by local scholars that primarily aim at a local audience.

One of the most prolific among these authors has been Dewansingh Rongmuthu. Rongmuthu was one of the first Garó to complete a university education and wrote both in English and in Garó. He had a keen interest in the traditional Garó community religion and deplored the degree to which proselytising resulted in Garó distancing themselves from their cultural roots. Rongmuthu had been baptised as a Christian but decided to marry according to the tenets of the traditional Garó community religion, which resulted in him being ousted from the church (Marak n.d.: 3). Convinced about the value of the pre-Christian Garó traditions, Rongmuthu dedicated his life to recording Garó oral literature, creating a solid corpus of texts, which is, however, not easy to interpret (Sangma 1960; 1967b; Sangma and Marak 1996). Among his more complex works is the posthumously published *Jadoreng: The Psycho-Physical Culture of the Garos*, in which he presents an argument for the continued relevance of the cultural ideas embedded in traditional Garó culture (Sangma 1993). Rongmuthu was also among the first authors to publish in Garó, contributing to the emergence of a Garó language publication culture (Sangma 1967a). These texts, published by authors such as Mihir Sangma (1995) and Winnish Sangma (1990b), all in one way or the other focus on traditional Garó culture, providing Garó with a cultural past that exceeds the colonial-era sources (Sangma 1967a; 1995).

Current social scientific research being conducted in Garó Hills and its surroundings increasingly focuses on the trajectories by which cultural diversity is shaped and substantiated, and changes over time. Such changes in the focus of social scientific enquiry invite further scrutiny of the biases and assumptions of the authors of both historical as well as contemporary texts.

Notes

- 1 Francis Buchanan was born in 1762. He changed his name to ‘Hamilton’ in 1815, and died in 1829.
- 2 Hamilton’s account is nearly literally included in Montgomery Martin (1990 [1838]: 84–98), albeit without making any reference to the original author.
- 3 The markets were held at, for instance, Chitabari, Titaria, Bengakuta, Raballab, Singimari, and Palumari (Barooah 1970, 50–51).
- 4 The preamble of Regulation X of 1822 stated:

with a view to promote the desirable object of reclaiming these races to the habits of civilized life, it seems necessary that a special plan for the administration of justice, of a kind adapted to their peculiar customs and prejudices, should be arranged and concerted with the headmen,

and that measures should at the same time be taken for freeing them from dependence on the *zamindars* of the British provinces.

(Clarke, R. *The Regulations of the Government of Fort William in Bengal*, Vol II, pp. 659–663, cited in Barooah 1970: 62)

- 5 Togan Nengminza's Day is an official annual holiday in the state of Meghalaya, which Garo Hills is included in (December 12). In addition, one of the Meghalaya Day Awards, annually awarded by the government of the state of Meghalaya, is the Pa Togan Nengmiza Award for social service.
- 6 Elsewhere in the uplands of the Brahmaputra Valley, in areas that were bordering land that was not governed by the British, this was achieved through the Inner Line Regulation. However, this regulation could not be applied to Garo Hills since these were entirely surrounded by the colonial state.
- 7 The former Garo Hills District, once it became part of the state of Meghalaya, had been divided several times and currently encompasses five districts. These are West Garo Hills, East Garo Hills, South Garo Hills, North Garo Hills, and Southwest Garo Hills.

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