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Citation

Maaker, E. de. (2026). Commoning, conservation and mapping in Garo Hills, Northeast India. In B. Campbell, M. Cameron, & T. Subba (Eds.), *The Routledge International Handbook of Himalayan Environments, Development and Wellbeing* (pp. 136-144). Abingdon: Routledge. doi:10.4324/9781003450894-14

Version: Not Applicable (or Unknown)
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Note: To cite this publication please use the final published version (if applicable).

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COMMONING, CONSERVATION AND MAPPING IN GARO HILLS, NORTHEAST INDIA

Erik de Maaker

Engaging the Record

Kallen was jubilant when he came back to the village where he lived. He had managed to get a statement from the Garo Hills Autonomous District Council (GHADC), saying that he was the title holder to a *chok*, a large chunk of land, comprising roughly one-third of the size of his village. The GHADC is the authority in charge of land management in this region of India. The statement which Kallen had obtained was an official document, which was underscored by it having been printed on “stamped paper,” as is usual in India for such official statements (such a letterhead ensures that each sheet of paper is unique). For Kallen, obtaining the document felt like an important victory in his struggle with the village head over claims to a contested part of the village land. The GHADC had decided in his favor, he maintained, that the first right to the land, and all that belonged to it, was his. This was notably of relevance since coal deposits had been located on the disputed stretch of land. It implied, according to this reasoning, that his competitor, the village head, had been proven wrong. Unfortunately for Kallen, the village head was not impressed. After all, even though the GHADC had produced a statement which confirmed the right of Kallen to the land, it had refrained from drafting a map which indicated exactly which portion of the village land the title related to. Drafting such a map was not impossible, Kallen had been told, but it would cost a humongous sum of money. Much more than Kallen could afford, albeit he was certainly among the more affluent villagers. I presumed that the quote had been given this high to ensure that the map of the *chok* of Kallen would not be made. Even if making such a map would be technically possible, drafting it was likely to create havoc in the village, thus placing the GHADC at the center of an ugly row. Such a map would in all likelihood trigger cartographic counterclaims, if not a court case which would drag on for years, with all the unpleasant confrontations this would give rise to.

Mapping Land in Garo Hills

Garo Hills constitutes the western one-third of the Indian state of Meghalaya, in Northeast India. The expansion of the colonial state from the plains of Bengal into Assam, in the early and mid-19th century, resulted in a de-facto enclosure of Garo Hills, making its eventual conquest inevitable

(De Maaker 2022b). As a forested, hilly range, overall too hot and humid for the creation of tea gardens, while by and large lacking the valuable teak forests of the lower Himalayas, it became an autonomous district. This enabled governance largely through indirect rule, allowing the existing political structure to be subsumed into the colonial state (De Maaker 2022a). While this state claimed the monopoly on the use of violence, outlawing the headhunting and feuding that according to colonial records had been integral to the pre-colonial political setup, the politico-religious office of the village head remained (Sangma 1981).

Going by the available historical sources, all of which derive from European travelers, military men, missionaries and the like, Garo Hills was in the pre-colonial era characterized by an acephalous political structure (Barooah 1970). That is, villages constituted territorial domains, held by one of the many Garo matrilineages. These matrilineages, consisting of women native to the village and (for those who were married) their husbands belonging to a distinct matrilineage, nominated among each other a politico-religious leader (*nokma*). The position of this leader, or village head, depended on the support he had from the side of his wife's matrilineage, as well as from the other men who had married into the village. To gain and maintain such support, the village head had to defend the interests of the village, negotiate favorable relationships with the spirits and be able to afford the kind of competitive feasting that was so characteristic for the region (and in certain respects still is) (Burling 1997 [1963]). With the imposition of indirect rule, the village head became endorsed and registered by the colonial authorities. This meant that people could no longer dispose of him, unless these authorities agreed. Likewise, a new village head could only be appointed by villagers with the consent of the district authorities.

As an autonomous district, village land rights in Garo Hills remained by and large unaffected, although in the early 1880s claims were laid to specific patches of forest by the forest department. In reaction to the expansion of such claims, at the turn of the 20th century, a "revolt" broke out, led by the at that time prominent village head Sonaram Sangma, who demanded some of these claims to be withdrawn (De Maaker 2022c). The revolt drew significant popular support, and this "unrest" triggered the creation of the Arbuthnott commission, which subsequently produced the Arbuthnott report (Arbuthnott Report 1908). This report contained a whole range of recommendations to reduce the "grievances" of the villagers concerned and has in my understanding also resulted in the mapping of all the land held by villages throughout Garo Hills. For this purpose, between 1921 and 1924, approximately, surveyors traveled throughout the entire region and drafted what are known as "boundary" (*delim*) maps. These maps do not show the land surface but are restricted to mapping the boundaries of the village territories. These boundaries are typically marked by rivers, streams, large trees, big boulders and ridges in the landscape. The "boundary" maps were sketched with ink, by hand, and subsequently copied by the clerks of the district council into ledgers. Each village head supposedly received a copy of the map relating to his village. These ledgers, created around 1926, are until today the only record of land in Garo Hills. About a century old, the ledgers are kept under lock and key in a steel drawer at the GHADC, but that cannot avoid that the books are slowly falling apart. To my knowledge, so far no efforts have been made to digitize and thus secure the maps. Such is a Herculean task, of course, considering that Garo Hills has at least 1350 village territories, as I quickly realized myself when on one of my research trips I found myself in a position to access the books and photograph whatever I would like to but did not have the time – by far – to complete the work.

The "boundary" maps of Garo Hills are unique, in the sense that they have now for about a century consolidated the land ownership of Garo villagers over the land they live on and work. While similar maps may have been produced elsewhere in South Asia, these do not exist throughout large parts of the hills of the extended eastern Himalayas. As in Garo Hills, large parts of these hill

areas have historically been worked through shifting cultivation (*jhum*), implying that land was not permanently occupied. This rendered people vulnerable to land that was at any given moment not cultivated and had regrown into forest, to be confiscated as “wasteland” (Sharma 2011). While the boundary maps created for Garo Hills have enabled the sustenance of collective land rights, they have at the same time also facilitated a privatization of land that is seemingly in agreement with the collective titles held. Land, in Garo Hills, as elsewhere in the world, is increasingly becoming a commodity, and Kallen’s attempt to secure his *chok* should perhaps also be seen in that light. A main reason why he was so adamant to receive the title, ideally supported by a map, was that coal deposits had been located on the particular stretch of land. Such shallow deposits can be mined without complex technology by local labor and bring in a steady stream of cash in an economy that can otherwise be at times fairly meagre.

Mapping as a Language

To produce maps of a given territory calls into question the technology of map making, as well as the authority of those who are producing the maps, as Winichakul (1994) has convincingly shown. Winichakul argued, with reference to the “geo-body” of Thailand, that the creation of the modern Thai state was premised on map-making efforts, which resulted in claiming territory as “Thai” which historically maintained at best an ambiguous relationship to the preceding kingdom of Siam. Map making, consequently, can be a hegemonic act, as it entails a definition of places, fields, forests and rivers, the identification of boundaries and so on. Geographical and political maps are sourced from the realities they depict but are necessarily highly reductive and selective. For map making, it is unavoidable to make decisions about what is included and what is left out. To give a well-known example: the People’s Republic of China as a matter of fact includes the Indian state of Arunachal Pradesh in its maps as Southern Tibet, in an attempt to advance a political claim that challenges the actual political situation, in which the region is controlled by India.

In an extension of the argument outlined above, maps constitute a language of governance that once introduced cannot be avoided. Advancing counterclaims to the cartography imposed by modern states almost inevitably required the production of counter maps. Such became evident in Northeast India, for instance, when in the 1990s the A’chik National Volunteers Council produced a map of the Garoland they were fighting for, which covered parts of the states of Meghalaya and Assam, thus rejecting the boundaries as these at the time (and currently) existed between these two states who are both part of the Indian federation (A’chik National Volunteers Council 2006). Likewise, Peluso (2008) has argued for rainforest dwellers in Kalimantan that producing counter maps can be an important strategy for forest dwellers to counter the logging concessions given out by the Indonesian government. Counter mapping has in fact become a strategy frequently used in the Global South, as a part of attempts of local communities, often supported by NGOs, to counter claims made onto their resources by hegemonic societal forces.

A more radical perspective, advanced by among others Oslender (2021), rejects that counter mapping implies that subaltern groups willingly adopt the cartographic language of hegemonic forces, subjecting themselves to the kind of knowledge these represent. This is problematic, according to these authors, since it implies a denial of knowledges of place, land, rivers and water that do not fit the cartographic frame. Throughout the world, local residents harbor knowledge that is affective and sentient, attributing agency to features of the landscape such as the Andean mountains mentioned by de la Cadena (2010). Similarly, in the eastern Himalayas, mountains are perceived as the seats of deities (Smyer Yü and de Maaker 2021).

In the village where Kallen lived, hill tops, large rocks, deep river pools and the like were similarly associated with spirits. How were these cartographies part of the land disputes that surfaced with reference to coal that could possibly be mined? Obviously, such agentic features of the land were not included in the boundary maps kept by the GHADC, thus denying what were (certainly back in the 1920s) important characteristics of the land for its residents. And yet, the maps produced by the district council had, due to it being part of the modern Indian state, and thus backed and supported by its judiciary, become a very real part of village life. Village heads safeguarded the maps which they had inherited from their predecessors as very valuable documents, since these substantiated the claims of their village to land, serving to ward off any illegal intrusions to that domain. In what respects, then, has the mapping of village land done in the colonial era been accepted and become part of local village politics? And in what respects do villagers reject these, building on knowledges that are local and experiential, and not in alignment with the hegemonic cartographies they are confronted with by the GHADC as an extension of the modern Indian state?

Knowledges of Affect, Sentience and Agency

The boundary maps kept by the GHADC, which are in English, are based on draft maps that are written in Bengali. In a village which I visited in East Garo Hills, I was shown a boundary map of that particular village which was dated 1921. Contrary to the boundary maps kept in the archive of the GHADC which are drawn in black ink but also filled in with colors, this one was in a monochrome brownish ink. According to the village head, who had inherited the map from his predecessor when he assumed office, who had perhaps inherited the map from his predecessor in turn, the map had been produced back in the days by a Bengali surveyor on account of the GHADC. These surveyors, it seems, visited each and every village, to discuss the boundaries of the respective village domain with the respective village heads. Considering that the boundaries drawn are often at remote and difficult to reach locations, it seems unlikely that they surveyed all these boundaries physically. More likely, some of it would have been based on descriptions given by villagers, which is a reason why maps are not always in alignment with the kind of geographic realities these are meant to apply to. Another reason may be, as documented already by Burling (1997 [1963]), that villagers might at times overstate the area which their village domain encompassed, thus including shares of land that were claimed by a neighboring village as well. Moreover, the maps as drafted showed not only the boundaries of the village domain but often also the ways in which such a domain was divided internally among different matrilineages. It seems likely that the surveyors have frequently aligned with the interpretation of land rights of the most dominant persons, such as the village head, neglecting or perhaps not being informed about the claims to land of those matrilineages who had less prominence.

In the interpretation of the colonial administration of the Garo political organization, each village had a single village head (*nokma*, or *a'king nokma*, to indicate his paramountcy in a given village domain). In addition to the *a'king nokma*, villages could have minor *nokmas*, who were then thought to be subservient to the paramount one. The records of the GHADC can recognize for each village several of these minor *nokmas*, but going by the ethnographic fieldwork that I have conducted in Garo Hills, many of these minor *nokmas* also remained unacknowledged. Kallen was acknowledged as a minor *nokma* by the GHADC, but the entry of his predecessor into the register of the GHADC had initially been incomplete, resulting in his land rights locally being challenged. Hence his costly investment in being recorded as the claimant of a part of the village land, even though no map was drafted of the area concerned.

In the village where Kallen lived, people were well aware of what the maps of the GHADC showed. But in addition to that, they had detailed memory maps of the land, its streams, springs, valleys and ridges. This became clear to me when I once attended a meeting attended by many of the men of a village, in which they discussed the location of new fields to be made. The village domain consisted of a great many hills, with small valleys in between. It turned out that for the men, the land was divided into innumerable plots (*cha'a*), the boundaries of which were well known. Historically, and to some degree currently as well, Garo are practicing shifting cultivation. The term *cha'a* literally translates as “used one,” or even more literally “eaten one.” The plots, as located in the landscape, are thus swidden fields that have been cultivated earlier, currently remain fallow, on which shrubs or forest has regrown. Or, a plot can be a former swidden field, on which areca nut or cashew trees have been planted, and which has thus remained occupied by the successors of the ones who originally claimed it. What looks to the outsider as areca nut and cashew orchards, as well as patches of forest and shrubs, for the residents of a village consists of a patchwork of innumerable fields, which cover an entire village domain. While the plots are not named, many features of the landscape are resulting in localized oral cartographies. Such oral cartographies encompass, as mentioned before, streams or rivulets which may only be filled with water during the height of the rainy season. It also encompasses the inclination between two hill tops, which is in Garo referred to as a *gitok*, literally “neck.” In addition, hill tops are named, as well as valleys and large rocks.

These labels of features of the landscape, which allow people to orient themselves in their village domain, have not been recorded on paper. These purely exist as a part of a local, village level, memorized cartography that is orally transmitted. This cartography is rooted in the traditional Garo religion, which proceeds from the premise that people live in a landscape that is replete with innumerable spirits. Most of these spirits remain unidentified, but over time, as some of them have manifested themselves, people have gained knowledge about the characteristics of some of them. This knowledge is thus experiential and can either come to people in real life or, more frequently, in dreams. It is transferred from one generation to the other as a part of stories told, not seldom in response to moments of crises. For example, drought is associated with a spirit that has the ability to “hold” the rain and is located at a certain deep river pond. The location of such a spirit gives such a place its name. The same holds for large rocks and hill tops, each one of which can be a seat of a spirit. The landscape is thus, certainly historically, shaped by the presence of these non-human entities. Although the traditional Garo religion has lost much of its earlier prominence, Garo converting to Christianity has not resulted in a denial of the presence of the spirits. Rather, Jesus has been accepted within the existing pantheon, as a superior spirit, who has the capacity to contain if not repress the ones associated with the traditional Garo religion (De Maaker 2013).

While all villagers have the right to use plots of land, in principle, they require some form of consent to do so from the ones who are claiming ownership of the land. In many villages there are only 10–15 landowners, while villages easily encompass 1000–1500 residents. Landownership is rooted, historically, in the ability of landowners to negotiate a relationship with the spirits residing on the given stretch of land. To this end, landowners would maintain a relationship with the spirit *risi*, a fierce and in many respects dangerous spirit, who could be made to reside in a cone-shaped drum (*kram*). To ward off her thirst for the life essence of humans, and thus turn herself against the owners of the drum, she would need to be frequently fed blood and cooked rice. While maintaining such a drum was thus costly, and not free of danger, the privileged relationship with *risi*, and the need but at the same time being entitled to conduct frequent ritualized sacrifices and invocations for her, also translated into significant prestige for the people who could maintain a *kram*-drum. A village would have several *kram*-drums, and competition would exist among the various owners,

which could be expressed in the ritual repertoire provided by the traditional Garo religion. For example, the kram-drum owners had a central role in the rituals at the core of the main post-harvest *wangala* festival. While some of the kram-drum owners would only conduct a basic version of these rituals, others would opt for a more extensive performance, the village head going for the most elaborate and costly version.

Alienation, Commodification and Privatization

The surveyors of the GHADC, in the 1920s, seem to have recorded notably the claims to land advanced by the largest landowners. They neglected the ownership of the minor landowners, perhaps since it was not really in the interest of the major landowners to acknowledge or even mention them. If so, this would be an example of the colonial authorities, in their knowledge gathering efforts adopting the perspective of those who are in positions of power, reminiscent of the ways in which caste and untouchability became included in knowledge production from the perspective of the *bhadralok*, the high-caste Bengalis who were the prime interface between the British and Indian society when the modern colonial state gained shape in the late 19th century (Dirks 2001).

For the Garo Hills, the surveyors also neglected land claims at the level of individual plots. Clearly, with the technology and manpower available at the time, it would have been very challenging to include these in the maps drawn. Such is also clear from the decision to create first and foremost maps which showed the boundaries of the various village domains, giving much less attention to the interior of the village domains.

The GHADC was created with the intention to allow for upholding Garo customary law with respect to everyday economic and agricultural affairs. But because it was a government body, which was legally embedded in the modern colonial state, it also gained judicial powers. In fact, until today the GHADC has courts, and the authority to rule in disputes between residents of the region which fall within the realm of Garo customary law. At the same time, the GHADC became embedded in the Indian state (initially the state of Assam, after 1971 the state of Meghalaya), which further authorized its judiciary and governmental powers (Lyngdoh 1996). In practice this meant that the GHADC, meant to represent Garo custom, gained the authority to formulate rules and regulations, which at times went against rights that were acknowledged at the village level (Garo Hills Autonomous District Council 2007). Even more relevant here, the interpretation of land rights as mapped and described by the GHADC, given its judicial authority, could be used by those in positions of power at the village level to enhance their position against their adversaries.

As long as Garo were primarily swidden cultivators, land ownership was merely a matter of socio-religious prestige, and in that sense it also had a political dimension. While landownership did not give landowners much control about who cultivated the temporary (swidden) plots, it did provide them with the right to what was beneath the soil. And it was this right which made landownership of great value once coal had been discovered, and ways for its extraction and transportation been found. Although it was low-grade coal, which did not fetch a premium price, the returns were such that it could significantly increase the income of the landowners.

In Garo Hills, most of the land belongs to village domains and is in the custody of the matrilineal groups dominating each village. Each village head, as pointed out above, represents such a matrilineal group but at least historically acts as its representative, rather than that they themselves possess ownership rights. However, the endorsement of the village heads by the GHADC has also amounted to, at least to some degree, bestowing their office onto them. One consequence of this development is that village heads have obtained the right, granted to them by the GHADC, to issue an NOC, a “No Objection Certificate.” The NOC is a powerful document. It enables the creation,

on commonly owned village land, of a plot (*patta*) that is permanently occupied. Village heads are, as representatives of the collective village rights, expected to keep the interests of this collective into account, but since they are in the end the ones who sign, granting such a right can also become a personal decision. Or, it can be a decision taken that serves the interests of some villagers, while going against the interests of others. It is not uncommon for an NOC to be signed against the payment of a considerable sum of money, which is then seldom equally distributed among all rights holders. Rather, the village head and some persons close to him will distribute it among each other (Fernandes et al. 2016).

Granting an NOC does not in theory erase the previously existing communal land right, but in practice this right is typically rendered void once *patta* has been created. The title holder to *patta* is liable to pay an annual land tax to the GHADC, and as long as this is paid, the right sustains. If the owner of the *patta* defaults, the right to the plot seems to legally fall to the GHADC. However, in the village of Kallen, this practice turned out otherwise. Some years ago, a number of villagers requested and received the right to register a plot of land as *patta*. Doing so was primarily required for them to access “soft” agricultural loans, offered through a government scheme. In order to qualify for this loan, they needed to be able to show that they held private property, which could act as a security for the loan. Once the loan had been awarded, the *patta* became less relevant, to the degree that some years later its existence was denied. This certainly seemed to indicate that the creation of *patta* at least for some of the men went against the grain of collective landownership and in that sense had come to be regarded as a somewhat anti-social activity. As people told me, it is important for the matrilineage to “stay together” (*melia*).

Climate Change, Crops and Environmental Conservation

Throughout South Asia, climate change manifests itself mainly in higher average temperatures, which last for increasing periods of time. In the hill areas of Northeast India, this typically also means that average temperatures increase in terms of altitude. That is, at altitudes where previously temperatures would drop in winter to a low that would make it impossible for certain crops to survive, this may no longer be the case. Rather, higher and higher up the hills, it becomes possible to grow, for example, areca nuts. Areca nuts are grown in orchards without undergrowth, effectively reducing the amount of forest which earlier may have grown on these slopes. Climate change thus reduces previous impediments against the permanent replacement of forest by cash crops, ameliorating the existential threats which forests face in an area such as Garo Hills any way.

Many villages practice some form of forest conservation on their village domain. Often, a “reserve” (*reserp*) is created which consists of a patch of forest which is not used to make fields. The trees and bamboo that grow in the reserve are kept by the residents of the village for house building, while such a reserve also has for example medicinal plants. In the village where Kallen lived, setting such a patch of forest apart was an agreement which villagers reached among each other. The reserve remained included in the collective property and was therefore also not registered with the GHADC. In an attempt to stimulate villagers to create more of such reserves, and invest even more commitment toward sustaining them, the GHADC has started a program to incentivize villagers to create what the GHADC calls Village Reserve Forests. Creating these involves registration with the GHADC, in exchange for which villagers receive a small monetary compensation, presumably to compensate for the loss of income which could otherwise have been earned had the forest land been used for cultivation. In a complementary development, the Meghalaya Forest Department, which is part of the state administration, and not of the GHADC, is trying to entice villagers to create what it calls Community Reserves, which are registered with the district

authorities, again in exchange for a monetary compensation. The Forest Department, notably, creates outline maps of the Community Reserves, which are subsequently imposed on satellite maps of the Garo Hills.

Whereas both these agencies are reportedly successful in encouraging villagers to create such reserved forests, I also sensed reservation about these kinds of arrangements among them. Villagers are well aware of the importance of having control over their village domains, their land, and are therefore hesitant to engage in any arrangements that in theory may have the possibility of handing over control against the kind of contractual arrangements offered. There is thus a growing awareness of the need to conserve forest in Garo Hills, but the role of the local administration in these respects is limited. Villagers have historically had their own mechanisms by which to set patches of forest apart, ensuring the sustainability of the biodiversity which such patches harbor. Government programs of various sorts are incentivising villagers to be even more proactive when it comes to forest conservation but are not always readily embraced.

Conclusions: Conservation and the Irrevocability of Mapping

What land and forest constitute in Garo Hills differs thus for villagers, for the GHADC as well as for the Forest Department of the state of Meghalaya. For the villagers, land is their main asset, their main resource, which they depend on to sustain themselves. This land is in principle collectively owned and managed by the matrilineage which dominates a given village. Forest conservation, in this context, is included in ways of engaging with forest that have been carried over historically. Setting patches of forest apart to keep these from being logged ensures the sustenance of a biodiverse environment, which also creates a repository for building materials. As the pressure on forest increases, due to the growing and competing permanent occupation of land, the value of this historically anchored practice becomes more and more evident.

The attempts made by the GHADC to encourage villagers to consolidate forest conservation, and to provide incentives to extend conserved forest areas, meet with some degree of success. The same holds for the schemes developed by the Forest Department of Meghalaya state. In both these cases, attempts to provide monetary incentives to villagers in exchange for the commitment to forest conservation are hindered by fears of villagers to sign away precious hereditary land rights, as authorized by the GHADC by the boundary maps which have been created in the 1920s.

The initiatives of the GHADC and the FD to encourage forest conservation depend on the consent of the villagers, but they also invariably entail agreements that require mapping of the areas involved. For the villagers, this mapping implies that their land, their collective property, becomes defined in systems and with technologies that they often do not readily relate to. As such, mapping as a technology results in the creation of claims that are removed from the ways in which villagers among themselves talk about, define and experience their land. Mapping defines borders, and rights to land, from a perspective of governance, as removed from the consensus and experience that guides land relationships among villagers.

Given that mapping land defines it according to the language of governance and authority of the state, it is remarkable that the GHADC as the guardian of villagers' collective land rights has not yet made an effort to define these rights beyond the boundary maps which were created in the 1920s. Apart from the fact that doing so is technically demanding (but not impossible, considering the satellite mapping of the Village Reserve Forests and Community Reserves), it would perhaps also strengthen the collective rights of the villagers to a degree which is not necessarily desirable from the perspective of those in charge of local land governance. After all, even though villagers may not identify their land with the maps produced intuitively, they obviously have a clear

understanding that these are essential in them defining their rights in relation to the state, as well as vis-à-vis each other, as illustrated by the vignette with which this chapter opens. Maps in contexts of governance act as means of control but can at the same time also serve attempts to resist claims made by others and as such provide models that once created cannot be avoided.

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