Introduction: The Northeast and Beyond: Region and Culture

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From the perspective of mainstream India, the states of Assam, Arunachal Pradesh, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland and Tripura are isolated and remote. The seven north-eastern states are connected to the rest of India by a narrow corridor known as the 'chicken's neck', through which passes a cluster of railways and roads, as well as a pipeline for crude oil. Northeast India shares long international borders with China, Myanmar (Burma) and Bangladesh, but due to the complex relationships that India maintains with each of these neighbouring states, very few border crossings are open to traffic of people and goods.[1] This restricts the legal movement of people and goods across these borders, and contributes to the relative isolation of the north-eastern region as a whole.

In India, the north-eastern region seldom makes headlines. Indeed nationwide surveys by popular news magazines such as *India Today* and *Outlook* sometimes omit the Northeast altogether. On the other hand, Northeast Indians, particularly the people of the hills, at times refer to the mainland as 'India', distancing themselves and suggesting that they do not truly belong to that state.

The seeds for the marginalisation of Northeast India were sown during colonial rule. In the early nineteenth century, the colonial state expanded into the Brahmaputra Valley of Assam and thence into the eastern Himalayas, which were designated suitable for the cultivation of tea. An internal border (the 'inner line') was defined between

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[1] Nevertheless, between these nation-states large-scale illicit movements occur. Northeast India's international borders have been demarcated, but are not tightly guarded and therefore porous. See W. van Schendel, *The Bengal Borderlands: Beyond State and Nation in South Asia* (London: Anthem Press, 2005); and S. Hazarika, *Rites of Passage: Border Crossing, Imagined Homelands, India's East and Bangladesh* (New Delhi: Penguin Books, 2000).

the 'settled area' and the people who lived beyond it. The international border became known as the 'outer line'. The 'inner line' has been redefined since, but the principle of an internal border has not been abandoned.

The people of the plains and the hills of Northeast India relate culturally and linguistically to both mainland South Asia and to the regions lying beyond the international border to the north and the east (the contiguous regions of Bangladesh, Myanmar/ Burma and Southwest China). Topographically this area is an extension of the eastern Himalayas, with mountainous terrain covered by tropical rainforests. Most communities in this area practise swidden cultivation, some combining it with permanent wet-rice terrace farming. It comprises mainly communities speaking Tibeto-Burman languages. In India and Bangladesh, the hill societies are referred to as 'tribes'—a classification based on linguistic and cultural criteria developed in colonial times, and which is still in use today.[2]

This 'cultural area' is outside, or at the margins of, three major academic 'area study' regions: South Asia, Southeast Asia and East Asia. As Van Schendel has rightly commented, the region 'is not only the north-eastern borderland of South Asia, but it can also be described as the north-western borderland of Southeast Asia'.[3] Its marginality has implications for research funding which is likely to be available only to research located firmly within one of the three geographical areas. Yet scholarly research on these borderlands is an essential prerequisite to a proper understanding of its peoples and the far-reaching social and religious transformations they are engaged in.[4]

The marginality of the area in today's academic agendas is distressing when we take into account the fact that the inhabitants of the region were the focus of the very first set of detailed Indian ethnographies (on hill communities such as the Garos, Lakhers, Lushai and various Naga groups: the Angami, Ao, Lotha, Sema, and Rengma to name a few) compiled by British political agents and amateur ethnologists who were posted there. It is clear that these studies were undertaken mainly to facilitate

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[2] The term 'tribe' is used in South Asia (particularly in India) as part of a broader repertoire applied by the state to classify people into groups. These classifications are of great practical importance since they provide, among other things, grounds for measures of positive discrimination. See A. Beteille, 'The Idea of Indigenous People', in *Current Anthropology*, Vol.39, no.2 (April 1998), pp.187–91.

[3] W. van Schendel, 'Geographies of Knowing, Geographies of Ignorance: Jumping Scale in Southeast Asia', in *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space*, Vol.20 (2002), pp.647–68. This discursive article highlights the political and academic reasons for the essentialised formation of these three geographical areas which in turn have divided the 'cultural area' between China, India, Myanmar (Burma) and Bangladesh.

[4] This perspective has been taken up by the multidisciplinary 'Asian Borderlands Research Network' [http://asian borderlands.net/] which is particularly focusing on north-eastern India and the upland areas adjacent to it. The network intends to encourage new approaches to the region and to increase its visibility on the academic agenda.

colonial administration (as has happened in other parts of the world) and as part of a broader information-gathering project designed to gauge the suitability of the region for tea cultivation and the feasibility of opening up a trade route with Myanmar (Burma). But they also constituted an effort to write down for posterity the indigenous way of life which was seen as undergoing rapid change due to contact with the British administration and proselytisation by Christian missionaries.[5]

As mentioned earlier, the policy of 'inner-line regulation' introduced during colonial rule still applies to much of Northeast India today. Special travel permits are needed even by Indian citizens to enter many of the states of the Northeast, and foreign researchers have to go through an arduous application procedure in order to work in these 'sensitive border states' (so labelled due to the various ongoing insurgencies).[6] These requirements have been a deterrent to fieldwork-based research in the region. In the mid 1990s, however, with the implementation of a new 'Look East' policy by the government of India, entry restrictions earlier applying to Assam, Meghalaya and Tripura were lifted (although they remain in place for Mizoram, Manipur, Nagaland and Arunachal Pradesh). This has made fieldwork-based research in the area more feasible, and over the last decade a raft of new work on the region has emerged.

This special issue of *South Asia* celebrates that efflorescence. The articles that follow originated as presentations at a workshop titled 'Towards an Understanding of the Changing Hill Societies of North-eastern India', held in Spring 2006 at Leiden University.[7] The workshop brought together scholars from varied academic backgrounds (historians, anthropologists, linguists, a folklorist and a scholar of literature) who have been pursuing an active research agenda on the societies of

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[5] See for example J.H. Hutton, *The Angami Nagas with some Notes on the Neighbouring Tribes* (London: Macmillan and Co. Limited, 1921); J.H. Hutton, *The Sema Nagas* (London: Macmillan and Co. Limited, 1921); J.P. Mills, *The Lhota Nagas* (London: Macmillan and Co. Limited, 1922); J.P. Mills, *The Ao Nagas* (London: Macmillan and Co. Limited, 1926); J.P. Mills, *The Rengma Nagas* (London: Macmillan and Co. Limited, 1937); N.E. Parry, *The Lakhers* (London: Macmillan and Co. Limited, 1932); and T.C. Hodson, *Naga Tribes of Manipur* (London: Macmillan and Co. Limited, 1911).

[6] For more information and an analysis of the various conflicts in Northeast India see, for example, S. Baruah, *Durable Disorder: Understanding the Politics of Northeast India* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2005); S. Hazarika, *Strangers of the Mist: Tales of War and Peace from India's Northeast* (New Delhi: Penguin Books, 1995); K.P.S. Gill (ed.), *Terror and Containment: Perspectives on India's Internal Security* (New Delhi: Gyan Publishing House, 2001); and S.K. Das, 'Ethnicity and the Rise of Religious Radicalism: The Security Scenario in Contemporary Northeastern India', in S.P. Limaye, M. Malik and R.G. Wirsing (eds), *Religious Radicalism and Security in South Asia* (Honolulu: Asia Pacific Centre for Security Studies, 2004), pp 245–71.

[7] The two-day workshop was generously sponsored by the Research School CNWS (Leiden University), the International Institute for Asian Studies (IIAS) and the Leids Universitair Fonds (LUF). We are thankful to Sabine Luning and Arlo Griffiths (both of Leiden University) for chairing the sessions.

Northeast India and the adjacent upland regions of Bangladesh, Myanmar (Burma) and Southwest China.[8]

The societies of this upland region have experienced considerable socio-cultural change over the last century and a half. These include the introduction of new political and administrative systems, a cash economy, modern medicine, education, and conversion to Christianity (which is rapidly replacing indigenous religions). Some hill communities that were dependent on swidden cultivation are turning to more sedentary methods of farming. New sources of wealth, including commercial forestry and government jobs, are furthering social stratification and the formation of a privileged elite group in societies that were earlier relatively far removed from concepts of caste and class. Yet there are continuities, and the past resonates in the present through oral histories, kinship relations, rituals, indigenous cosmology and disease aetiology.

Since the Independence of India in 1947, the north-eastern Indian region and the borderlands of Bangladesh and Myanmar (Burma) have become conflict zones. Many of these conflicts involve militant groups striving for a larger degree of political autonomy. Despite the emphasis on ethnic distinctiveness nurtured by the current atmosphere of political dissent, the different groups have much in common—including their marginal position with respect to the region's nation-states. Much of this marginality derives from the way political boundaries were drawn during, and since, the colonial period, slicing through the region and dividing it between different nation-states.

The Leiden workshop began with a presentation by Willem van Schendel,[9] which examined the politics of the creation of increasingly smaller administrative units in Northeast India. Since Indian Independence, the state of Assam has been gradually fragmented to form smaller states. Further fragmentation has taken place within these states in terms of the formation of separate administrative units or districts on the lines of 'tribal homelands'. Van Schendel argued that while claims to political autonomy on the basis of ethnicity may be advantageous to some groups, such claims are usually disadvantageous to others and in terms of territoriality, are seldom straightforward. Homelands have a tendency to overlap, which creates scope for further conflicts and the formation of militias. As it was intended to, this opening

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[8] One of the scholars participating in the workshop, Willem van Schendel, had already committed his paper elsewhere. Mandy Sadan was unable to attend the workshop in person. Arkotong Longkumer did not attend the workshop, but was invited to contribute to this volume.

[9] W. van Schendel, 'The Dangers of Belonging: Tribes, Indigenous Peoples and Homelands in South Asia', in S. Dasgupta and D. Rycroft (eds), *Tribes in Colonial and Post Colonial South Asia* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2007 forthcoming).
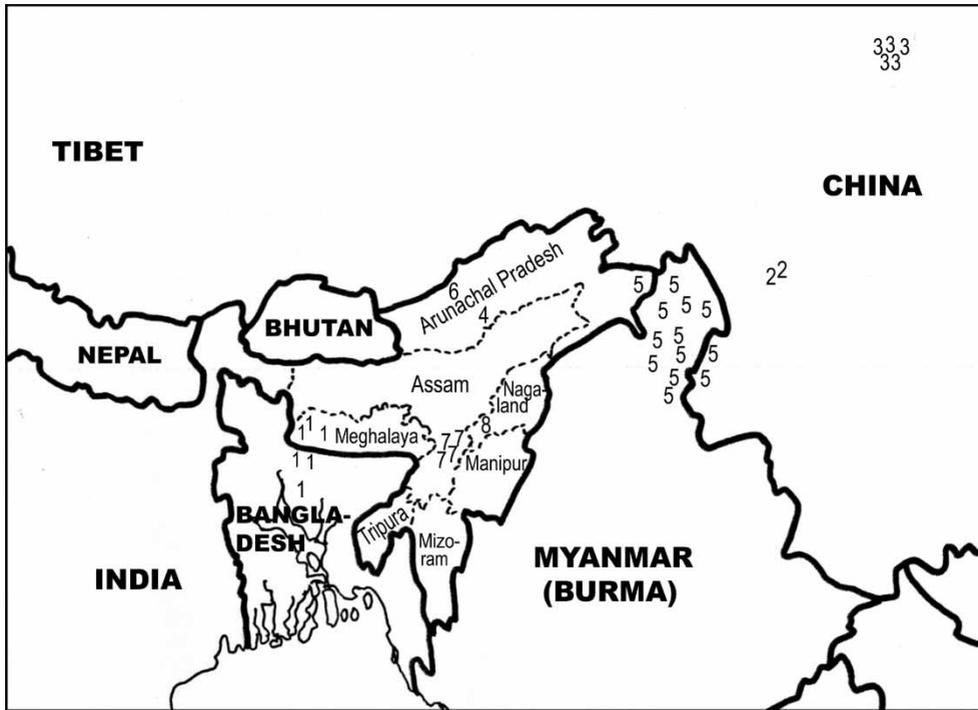
Figure 1
Map indicating the prime locations of some of the upland communities discussed in the articles. 1 = Garos (A'chiks); 2 = Xùmǐ; 3 = Báimǎ; 4 = Apatanis; 5 = Kachins; 6 = Nyishi; 7 = Zeme Nagas; 8 = Angami Nagas. (Note: map not to scale; some of the international borders shown are contested.)

offering by van Schendel triggered further questions. What arguments are used to support the conflicts? How are ethnicities formed? What kind of social, political and religious changes are being experienced by the communities who find themselves in the throes of such identity issues? These were taken up in the presentations that followed, which are reproduced here in revised form.

We have broadly divided the special issue into two sections. The papers in the first section focus on ideas about origin, narratives of migration, and the subsequent claims that are made to territory. These elements are essential to contemporary notions of ethnicity and indigeneity. However such notions are not a given, but rather emerge in the course of historical processes and remain subject to continuous reassessment. External categorisation by agencies such as the state can be an

incentive to group formation, which in due course may become political and assert cultural differences. Oral narratives and historical sources may be reinterpreted to support the process of ethnicisation.

Robbins Burling takes up the issue of contested ethnic boundaries in Northeast India by deconstructing migration stories which assume that language and ethnic (tribal) boundaries coincide, and endure through long periods of time. Such narratives of migration are attributed great importance among the upland communities of Northeast India, as they are played out to legitimise political claims to land and other resources *vis-à-vis* competing communities. Indeed, as Burling points out, such claims are used in political discourses to legitimise ethnically-motivated violence. He demonstrates that while people certainly migrate, they rarely do so as coherent ethnic communities, and their present distribution is better seen as an adjustment to environmental, economic, and political conditions than as the outcome of migrations.

Katia Chirkova's article takes us to Southwest China, and explores how the People's Republic of China deals with the ethnic labelling of groups that are culturally and linguistically related to the upland communities of north-eastern India. She supports Burling's argument that language is not necessarily related to ethnicity and vice versa. In the People's Republic of China, as in India, the official assumption is that every ethnic community has its own language. Considering ethnic identities in Southwest China as an interplay of categories imposed by the state, by oral history and by regional politics, Chirkova's analysis is based on a comparison of two ethnic groups: the Xùmǐ and Báimǎ. Both these groups are officially classified as Tibetans. While ethnic identity as experienced by the Xùmǐ is in conformity with their official classification, the Báimǎ regard their own identity as being distinct from the classification imposed by the state.

Stuart Blackburn, on the other hand, examines the notion of *Kulturkreis* as used by Franz Boas to understand the North American Indian 'cultural area complex' and applies it to the geographical area which harbours Tibeto-Burman-speaking communities. Drawing on his research among the Apatanis of Arunachal Pradesh, Blackburn analyses three cultural features—migration stories, creation myths and the ritualised 'feasts of merit' that were and are common to a number of these communities—to support his argument that common links cannot be explained solely in terms of diffusion. He proposes that the oral stories point towards a vertical transmission of knowledge and thus to some kind of single inheritance from a common tradition, which can be explained when migration stories are taken into account. Blackburn notes that migration histories as presented by scholars (primarily linguists) may differ markedly from local oral stories of migration that are part of

indigenous history and identity formation. The latter he suggests should be understood in the context of ongoing political and cultural processes.

The idea that the identity of an ethnic group may not be a given, but may attain shape in the course of historical events, is developed by Ellen Bal using a case study of the Garos of Bangladesh. Bal argues that the Garos were once divided into several smaller groups of people with diverse social-cultural practices and speaking various dialects of Tibeto-Burman languages, who were clumped together under the category 'Garo' by outsiders such as the British during the colonial period. Her article analyses the various factors and events from colonial to postcolonial times up to the formation of the nation-state of Bangladesh in 1971 which have contributed to the formation of a single Garo ethnic identity. These include the processes of deliberate bureaucratic marginalisation. Bal shows us the alternate ways in which nation-states deal with minority groups—by either giving them a special status (as in India) or none at all (as in Bangladesh).

Adopting a material culture perspective, Mandy Sadan discusses the interpretation of historical photographs, and the new significances that these have acquired for the self-definition of the Kachins in Myanmar (Burma). Like other upland communities, the Kachins lack a written history. Sadan describes her research on the photographic collection (subsequently published as a book) compiled by Colonel James Green, an officer in the British Army who was stationed on the Burma Frontier in the early twentieth century.[10] Green's photographs are important records of pre-Christian Kachin culture. Sadan compares the use of the pictures by the Kachins over a prolonged period of time, and concludes that the images play an important role in the reinterpretation of the past of Kachin society. Sadan thus takes up the question of how ethnicity and a sense of history may be created among a people who until recently lacked written and visual historical records, merely on the basis of hitherto-unknown historical photographs from Western archives. In discussing their significance, she shows how the photographs have not only now become an important visual source of pre-Christian Kachin culture but, ironically, have also been used to support the ethnic claims of a Kachin group which distinguish itself from the dominant Kachins.

The second section of this special issue focuses on religious change and cultural transformation. The articles presented here develop the themes set out in the first section at the level of cultural practices. They take into account indigenous perceptions of ecology, the effect of external factors on land management, and other social changes that have occurred from colonial times to the present as a result of linking

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[10] Elizabeth Dell (ed.), *Burma Frontier Photographs 1918–1935* (London: Merrell Publishers, 2000).

remote areas to commercial townships, access to education and jobs, and conversion to Christianity.

As far as they refer to competition among ethnic groups about land and other scarce resources, discourses about migration and autochthony are indisputably 'modern'. Alexander Aisher argues that these notions are also present in local animist religious perspectives. Among the Nyishi people of Kurung Kumey District (Arunachal Pradesh), local ideas about the environment centre on *uyu*, a category of 'spirits'. As the autochthonous inhabitants of the land these spirits are the primeval proprietors of many of the trees and animals that grow and live in the 'wild'. Humans who hunt animals or fell trees for shifting cultivation enter into exchange relations with various 'spirit'-owners through their activities. Kurung Kumey District has remained long outside the reach of the state. But in recent decades, basic education has become available to small numbers of people. Townships have emerged, resulting in the rural hinterland being depopulated. As less land is required for swidden cultivation, the forest cover has regenerated and some forest animal populations have become more abundant. According to some village-level discourse, these transformations manifest as increases in the wealth of the spirits. But around the emerging townships the wealth of spirits continues to decline. Aisher shows here that belief in spirits not only offers insights into a history of human relations with forests, but also offers a voice for economic risks and uncertainties. An imbalance in the ratio of forest to cultivable land area in the upper catchments of the Brahmaputra River can have devastating implications elsewhere, especially for low-lying regions in the floodplains. Aisher's analysis also demonstrates that any amount of ecological debate needs to take into account the local worldview and the effect of development on upland ecology. Most Nyishi of Kurung Kumey District are still animists, though Christianity is rapidly expanding. This paper poses the question of what consequences conversion to Christianity might have in future for the indigenous understanding of the ecological dynamics.

Taking up the issue of the distribution of cultivable land, Arkotong Longkumer analyses the effect of interference by the state in the migratory agricultural practices of the Zeme Naga people of the North Kachar region during colonial times—first, through revenue-driven British land policies, then through the state-supported settlement of large numbers of migrants—which resulted in land shortages and famines. Such drastic state interference boosted the popularity of the Heraka Movement, a messianic movement begun by a Rongmei Naga in the 1930s and which has been embraced *en masse* by the Zeme. Longkumer attributes the success of the Heraka Movement to the changes in cultural practices associated with agriculture that its leader advocated. Applying the Weberian concept of rationalisation, Longkumer shows how the Heraka Movement reformulated Zeme animism by abandoning

rituals requiring extensive sacrifices which were integral to the earlier animist traditions, and by privileging individual wealth. The shift from the communal to the individual has caused significant changes in the social organisation of the Zeme.

How religious conversion affects cultural values is the main theme of Erik de Maaker's article on the matrilineal Garo community of Meghalaya. Most Garos have converted to Christianity, but a significant minority has not given up the local animist faith. De Maaker analyses a situation where Christianity and animism are practised side by side, dividing kin groups, focusing upon the performance of a mortuary ritual in which both Christians and local animists participate. The funeral has a Christian signature, but nevertheless it resembles in many ways the ceremony performed by the animists. Whereas the Christians try to exclude ritual elements which are overtly animist, such changes are relatively superficial. Animists are not only free to participate in the Christian death ritual, they can also instil it with their own—non-Christian—interpretations. Christianity and animism are recognised by the Garos as distinct, yet both are subordinated to ideas regarded as central to Garo custom. Performance of the Christian death ritual in a religiously-mixed community cannot take away the unity that results from a joint Garo 'belonging'.

The response of a matrilineal hill community to challenges such as religious conversion, access to education and job opportunities that take community members away from their native villages, and conflict between customary and Indian civil law, is discussed by Caroline Marak, herself a member of the A'chik or Garo community. These responses are outlined in three case studies and in a detailed account of the welfare organisations formed by the A'chik community to assist members of its dispersed clan groups. The case studies relate to rules of reciprocity between kin groups and inheritance procedures. The first case describes the continuation of affinal relations between the two lineages upon death. It is customary that a married person who dies is replaced by a relative. The case study demonstrates the complexity of such a custom in contemporary life, where people's individual agency is gaining more and more importance, alongside the continuing significance of matrilineal group membership. The second case takes up the question of the inheritance of property—as when a daughter divorced her A'chik husband and married a man from another community. The third case highlights the role of the clan in contemporary A'chik society, which is to settle family disputes. Finally, all three cases reveal a significant increase in the agency of women. Thus Marak suggests that Garo kinship is able to accommodate changing ideas regarding the position of the decision-making individual versus the larger kin group.

Juxtaposing individual agency with the Durkheimian concept of religious enthusiasm, Vibha Joshi analyses religious conversion among the Angami Nagas of

Nagaland, 90 percent of whom are now Christian. Joshi's article shows how individuals often choose to change their denomination even after having converted to Christianity—feeling themselves not bound to any one sect, but able to engage serially with several. And this practice is fuelled by the fact that breakaway churches are constantly being established, which differ from the longer-established ones in terms of their liturgical traditions and modes of religious enthusiasm. The younger churches exhibit a more vocally-explicit form of worship, while the older ones are more muted, their congregations often celebrating this longevity through the installation of monoliths and the wearing of specially-designed commemorative cloths.

The articles in this special issue refer to a range of cases drawn from many communities of north-eastern India and certain regions beyond. Though diverse in terms of their provenance, they provide a high degree of thematic overlap and so reinforce the central argument of this special issue that the area encompassing north-eastern India and its contiguous regions constitutes sufficient similarity of ideas, practices and languages to be regarded as a socio-culturally distinctive area in its own right—not simply a patchwork of addenda to the conventional macro-areas of South, Southeast, and Central Asia.