Performing Ethnicity to Resist Marginalisation
The Tangsa in Assam

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GLOSSARY of some non-English terms, definitions and abbreviations
[not exhaustive; Assamese, Hindi and Singpho are marked as Ass., Hin., Sin. respectively. Words marked as Tan. will mean it is from one or some of the many Tangsa languages. The specific Tangsa language will be written in full, if known.]

AASU: All Assam Students Union
ABAM: Ao Baptist Arogo Mungdang
ABSU: All Bodo Students Union
AGP: Asom Gana Parishad
ANF: Arunachal Naga Federation
Ang (Hakhun): King
AOC: Assam Oil Company
ajanti (Ass.): people who are untouched by civilisation; people from a land not well known
Baba (Ass./Hin.): father
bandh (Ass./Hin.): strike
basti (Ass./Hin.): settlement; part of a village
bhante (Sin.): head monk
bhujjiya (Ass./Hin.): crispy savouries
bigha (Ass.): unit of land measurement; 1 acre is roughly 3.025 bighas
biri-chhung (Cholim): ritual altar for animal sacrifice (left in Photos 4-2)
BJP: Bharatiya Janata Party
bo (Hakhun): dance
BPL: Below Poverty Line
chai (Cholim): rice beer
cham-thop (Cholim): rice-balls wrapped with nyap-shak leaves (topola-bhat, Ass.)
chang (Ass.): raised platform
chang-ghar (Ass.): stilt-house (see Photo 3-2)
chin-cha (Cholim): a spicy chutney (thuk-tu, Tan.)
cho (Cholim): the arum, colocasia antiquorum, grown largely as food and as fodder (kosu, Ass.)
chol (Juglei): rice beer
chosi (Juglei): the squeezed rice left over after extracting rice beer
chum-ki (xo xo pyo, in spoken Cholim): a kind of flower, as seen in Photos 4-2 and 4-7
CO: Circle Officer
CRC: Christian Revival Church
crore (Indian English): Ten million, 100 lakhs
dah-tang (Mossang) / dawan (Ronrang) / di-ta (Kimsing) / kha-tang (Juglei): human sacrifice
dal (Ass./Hin.): a lentil curry
deka-chang / morung (Ass.): bachelor’s dormitories / quarters
DC: Deputy Commissioner
DFT: Dibrugarh Frontier Tract
dhan (Ass.): unhusked grain of the rice plant, commonly known as 'paddy'
Dol: Date of Interview
DPF: Dhising-Patkai Festival
dumsa (Sin.): priest
Fn.: Footnote
gam (Sin.): suffix to name to mean first son
gaon (Hin./Ass.): village
Gaonbura / GB (Ass.): village headman
Gaon Panchayat (Ass./Hin.): Village Council
hai-mi (Tan.): good person.
hara lim (Cholim): a stone post at the hara, the edge of the village
HBCA: Hewa (Naga) Baptist Church Association
hija-chung (Cholim): notched wooden ladder
HQ: Head Quarters
janajati(ya) (Ass./Hin.): tribal
jang (Cholim): hacking knife (dao, Ass.)
jhum (Ass./Hin.): swidden/slash/burn/shifting cultivation is a system whereby fields are cleared by cutting, drying and burning the vegetation and are cultivated only for a short period before allowing the fields to return to fallow
kan (Tan.): mountain
kani (Ass.): opium
‘kassa’: another word for culture
kembe (Tan.): mediator
kham (Hakhun): rice-beer
kham-ktit (Hakhun): sacrificial altar (see Photo 5-3)
khap (Hakhun) or sunga (Ass.): a mug or vessel made from a section of a bamboo stem (tinko, Cholim)
kharam (Sin.): means dry cultivation (rangla, Cholim)
khepoh-khesang new modified ankle-length Tangsa wrapper (purple with white stripes and square patches)
khepop (Tan.): purple and green checked scarf used as turban by Tangsa men (see Photo 4-4)
khesi/khesang (Tan.): traditional Tangsa knee-length wrapper for women with stripes (as seen in Photo 4-6)
khi-chi-samaj (Ass./Hin.): a mixed/impure society
khy-a-se (Tan.)/ningwat (Tai Phake)/mekhela (Ass.): ankle-length stitched wrapper generally worn by women (usually of cotton)
KIA: Kachin Independence Army
kong (Sin.): slightly raised land
kot-sam-tung (Cholim): Naga jacket
kotoky (Ass.): mediator/interpreter
kuh / kuk (Tan.): to gather or to assemble; a general term for festivals
ku-mih-se (Cholim): hill-people-son
kyom-mih-se (Cholim): plains-people-son
lakh (Indian English): 100,000
lam (Tan.): road / (Hakhun): song
lao-pani (Ass.): rice-beer
lengti (Ass.): short loin cloth; a narrow strip of cloth tied around the waist, passing between the legs from behind and up to the waist in front, whence it falls down again in a square flap (see first of Photos 5-4)
Lowang / Lungwang (Tan.): chieftain
LP School: Lower Primary School
lungi (Ass.): ankle-length cotton wrapper for men
mela (Ass./Hin.): a fair or a festival
men ryo chhung (Cholim) / za-man-thong (Kimsing): ritual post (second of Photos 4-2)
MLA: Member of the Legislative Assembly
mongnu khepa (Tan.): the special cloth Tangsa women wear over their blouses at festival time (see Photo 4-6)
mouza (Ass.): the smallest revenue collection unit in the country; the revenue collectors are called mouzadars
NEFA: North East Frontier Agency
nga/noi-tang (Tan.): Buffalo sacrifice
NH: National Highway
NNC: Naga National Council
NSCN: National Socialist Council of Nagaland
NSCN (K): NSCN Khaplang
NSCN (I-M): NSCN Issac-Muivah
nyap-shak (Tan.): a type of leaf used to wrap rice in to make rice balls (koupat, Ass.)
‘older’ tribal groups of the Tirap area: Tangsa, Singpho, Sema Naga and Tai Phake.
paguri (Ass.): turban
papad (Ass./Hin.): thin pancake-like savoury item
pers. comm.: personal communication

phelap (Cholim.) / phalap (Sin.): tea
phul-bari (Ass.): flower-garden
pitha (Ass.): special Assamese rice-cakes
poi (Sin./Tai(Shaan)/Burmese): public meeting; a general term for festivals;
PPWF: Pangsau Pass Winter Festival
pura (Ass.): unit of land measurement, in colloquial use in Assam; 1 pura = 0.77 acres.
pyjama (Ass.): loose cotton stringed trousers
raipang/raitu (Juglei): vertically/horizontally striped wrappers used by Tangsa women
rang-jim (Cholim): stilt-house (see Photo 3-2)
rang-fraa (Tan.): god of the skies
rasta (Hin.): path
reiben (Cholim): wild jute plant
rhi (Tan.): traditional violet and green lungi worn by Tangsa men
rhi-khya (Cholim): basket
rim-rim (Cholim): ritual prayer
rim-rim-ku (Cholim): benign forest spirits
rimwa (Juglei): village priest
rung-ri (Juglei): bamboo tray (dola, Ass.)
sador (Ass.): long strip of cloth normally used by Assamese women to cover the upper part of their body; worn over a mekhela
sam-tung (Tan.): blouse worn by women
sang-yi (Mossang) / ding-du-khya (Cholim): special bamboo-cane basket woven in a special manner kept aside for ritual purposes (as in the second of Photos 4-2)
SDO: Sub Divisional Officer
shamma (Tan.): healer (khamme in Cholim)
shamsa (Tan.): people from the plains, in song language
shi (Ronrang)/ shya (Cholim): song

ST: Scheduled Tribes
tang-sa (Tan.): hill-child or 'children of the hills'; alternatively, cutting-child or 'people who do sacrifice'
tap-khu (Cholim): hearth
TBCA: Tangsa Baptist Church Association
TBCC: Tirap Baptist Church Council
thang-no (Cholim): mischievous forest spirit
THDWA: Tangshang Hakhun (Naga) Development and Welfare Association
‘Tirap’: the area where the Tangsa live in Assam; most of it lies between the Buri Dihing and Tirap rivers
ULFA: United Liberation Front of Assam
VDP: Village Defence Party
VIP: Very Important Person
wi (Tan.): grandmother
**TANGSA GROUPS** (‘tribes’) that appear in the text:
- Bongtai (non-Pangwa)
- Hacheng (Pangwa)
- Hakhi (non Pangwa) related to Hakhun
- Hakhun (non-Pangwa) similar to Nocte
- Hawi (non-Pangwa)
- Juglei (Pangwa)
- Kato (non-Pangwa)
- Khalak (Pangwa)
- Kimsing/Chamchang (Pangwa)
- Lakki (Pangwa)
- Langching (Pangwa)
- Longchang (non-Pangwa)
- Lungri (Pangwa)
- Maitai (Pangwa)
- Mokum (non-Pangwa)
- Morang/Mungrey (Pangwa)
- Mossang (Pangwa)
- Ngaimong (Pangwa)
- Nokja (non-Pangwa)
- Ponthai (non-Pangwa) close to Tutsa
- Ronrang/Rera (Pangwa)
- Sangwal (Pangwa)
- Shangwan (Pangwa)
- Shankc (Pangwa)
- Thamphang/Champang (non-Pangwa)
- Thamkok/Chamkok (non-Pangwa)
- Tikhak (non-Pangwa)
- Tonglum/Cholim (Pangwa)
- Yongkuk (non-Pangwa)

**OTHER GROUPS** that appear in the text
[those having links to mainland India are marked MI]
- Ahom
- Assamese
- Bengali (MI)
- Bhojpuri (MI)
- Bihari (MI)
- Bodo
- Hajong
- Konyaks
- Marwari (MI)
- Mising
- Naga
- Nepali (MI)
- Nocte
- Sema Naga
- Singpho
- Sonowal Kachari
- Tai Aiton
- Tai Khampti
- Tai Khamyang
- Tai Phake
- Tai Turung
- Tangkhul Naga
- Tea-tribes (MI)
- Telugu-speaking (MI)
- Tutsa
- Wakka
- Wancho
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“What is so special about the Tangsa that we should want to know about them at all?” a young Assamese researcher had asked me once after my presentation at a conference. It has taken me a while to work it out but here is the long answer to his question.

Chapter 1 Setting the Scene

1.1 Introduction

The Tangsa living in the northeast Indian state\(^1\) of Assam are a tiny minority community of less than 5000 people, living together with people of other communities, in mixed villages scattered over a relatively large area. Assam has more than a hundred such minority groups, some of whom, like the Bodo, have more than a million members. Hence the Tangsa living in Assam are marginal even amongst the minority communities living in Assam. Although there are Tangsa also in the neighbouring Indian state of Arunachal Pradesh (which I shall often refer to simply as Arunachal), the situation for the tiny Tangsa population in Assam is much more complicated, because while Arunachal is a tribal\(^2\)-majority state, Assam is not, hence the Tangsa in Assam cannot avail of the special privileges reserved for tribal communities in Arunachal. At the same time, the states of Assam and Arunachal Pradesh as well as the region of India, now commonly known as Northeast India\(^3\) (see Map 1-1), to which they belong is also a locationally peripheral and a politically marginalised area compared to other regions of ‘mainland’ India.\(^4\) Thus the Tangsa are, in some sense, at the very margins of the margins.

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1 The term state will be used to mean the Indian state, in the more broad sense as defined in Section 1.2.1, as well as to refer to the federal states (or provinces) of the Indian Union, the sense in which it is used here.

2 The term ‘tribe’ is still used in South Asia (particularly in India) as part of a broader repertoire applied by the state to classify people into groups. I will say more to justify my use of the term ‘tribe’ later in Section 1.2.

3 The region which is called Northeast India comprises eight states that lie in the northeastern corner of the country; the river Brahmaputra flows through the heart of the region; the plains region lies mostly in Assam with the hill states surrounding it. The region is connected to the rest of India by a very thin corridor (22 km at its narrowest). Except for this very short domestic boundary, the rest of the boundary is international. It is bordered by Bhutan and Nepal in the west, China (Tibet) in the north, Myanmar (Burma) in the east and Bangladesh in the south. Of late, there has been an increasing tendency, even in academic discourse, to club all the northeastern states together as one entity called the ‘Northeast’, for example, see Berger and Heidemann (2013).

For a concise but comprehensive introduction to Northeast India, see De Maaker and Joshi (2007: 384) and to the available literature on the region see Subba and Wouters (2013). For a gentle introduction to Assam and Northeast India, to some of the special regulations in place there, and to some locally situated issues, such as the claim that the Northeast is more part of Southeast Asia than of South Asia, see Burling (1967). For an introduction to the Northeast and the problems of minority ethnic communities and also the special constitutional provisions applicable in the area, like the Sixth Schedule etc., see Karlsson (2001). For a more recent study of the status of the northeast viz-a-viz ‘mainland’ India, see Farrelly (2009a).

4 As Farrelly (2009a: 284) point out, the Northeast has been imagined “in opposition to the Indian ‘mainland’, ‘mainstream’, ‘centre’ and ‘core’.” Each of these phrases are regularly used to explain the differences that are perceived, on both sides, between the region and the rest of the country.
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and hence are beginning to feel an existential threat of being completely ignored and forgotten.

However it is not easy for the Tangsa to assert their existence, first because there is no consensus within the community about what it means to be Tangsa, since the term itself is of recent origin, coined in the 1950s in post-independent India as an umbrella term for a loose collection\(^5\) of disparate tribal groups, some of them having hitherto had not much to do with each other. Hence the different groups clubbed as Tangsa speak different languages (some of which are mutually unintelligible) and also have differing cultural traditions and traditional practices. Moreover, although the Tangsa were earlier clubbed under the larger Naga\(^6\) umbrella, the Tangsa are deeply divided on this issue today; this question has also become highly problematic due to the claims of the many underground Naga insurgent groups (more about this in Section 2.5.2). Therefore the project of creating a common pan-Tangsa identity is highly complicated.

\(^5\) There seems to be no unanimity about the number of Tangsa groups. Moreover in Myanmar where the Tangsa also live, the terms Tangshang or Heimi are used for the Tangsa. Simai (2008: 5) claims there are 17; Morang (2008: 17) divides them into 6 larger sub-tribes. There seems to be a list with as many as 32 different Tangsa communities approved by the Government of India. According to a latest count made by our DOBES team (more in the following section), linguistically, there could be as many as 69 groups on both sides of the Indo-Myanmar border who could be considered to be Tangsa/Tangshang/Heimi.

\(^6\) The Naga, like the Tangsa, are also another linguistically diverse (Burling 2003) collection of tribal groups who live in Myanmar as well as in the northeast India. There are 16 officially recognised Naga tribes in India in 2001. See more in Sections 2.5.2.1 & 3.3.1.
But it is deemed necessary, for although some of the older Tangsa groups have since got totally assimilated into the greater Assamese fold, that is not what the rest wish for themselves. But changes in livelihood patterns after moving down from the Patkai hills to the plains and improvements in the economic condition coupled with increased efforts on the part of the state government to induce them to join the mainstream population, and by Christian missionaries to induce them to convert to Christianity, have resulted in a situation where my Tangsa interlocutors have given up most of their older traditions and customs; in the words of one Tangsa writer, “Truthfully, people have no tradition left to practise” (Simai 2008: 121).

Furthermore, once the initial fascination had worn off, neither their new religions nor their new ‘modernity’ have been able to compensate for a sense of ‘loss’ of their old world amongst some of the older Tangsa (cf. Simai 2008: 33). All these factors have contributed to a sense of insecurity and uncertainty amongst a section of the Tangsa population in Assam regarding their common Tangsa cultural identity as an ethnic group and their social identity within the broader framework of the Assamese society around them.

On the other hand, with greater contact with the local administration has come increased awareness in certain sections about the need to be visible and to be in a position to negotiate their positions to ensure their survival by competing for economic resources and political power within the state of Assam. Given this scenario, this study is about some steps some Tangsa living in Assam have taken in order to negotiate a place and identity for themselves in the world around them. It will also document some of their attempts to reformulate and rearticulate their past traditions in forms more amenable to present times, and such that they can then be more easily used to create a new pan-Tangsa identity.

While doing so, the influence of interactions with outsiders (such as foreign academics) and with other neighbouring communities (some of them non-tribal) on their identity considerations will become clear. I shall also analyse the impact of state policy, in order to understand the options such small communities have and the strategies they employ to ensure their survival in the midst of so many other competing groups around them. One strategy has been to relocate to the tribal-majority state of Arunachal Pradesh, demonstrating the crucial role played by political boundaries, however invisible (such as those between two states of the Indian union), in determining the future of the communities living near them.

On a more general level, this study therefore is also about relations between the hill men and those living in the plains as well as those between tribals and non-tribals, in particular those between the predominantly non-Hindu tribal population, such as the Tangsa and the Singpho, and the caste-Hindu non-tribal people, such as the Assamese and the Nepali. It is also about the growing inter-tribal solidarity to be seen amongst the older tribal groups living in the area as a reaction to their gradual loss of land and priority to the settler communities -- both tribal...

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7 I use 'Assamese' to refer to the Asamiya-speaking (predominantly caste-Hindu) community of the state of Assam who wield political and administrative power in the state. The question of who is Assamese is however, hotly contested; other definitions could include people who consider Assam to be their 'homeland'. For debates on this issue, see Bhattacharjee (2008) and references therein.

8 I use the term caste-Hindu to refer to the set of Hindus who follow a caste system similar to that in the rest of India. Many ethnic groups, especially in northeast India, have become Hindus but do not strictly follow the caste system. For more on this discussion, see Pathak (2010).
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and non-tribal -- that have recently arrived there and continue to come. At the core, this study is about marginality and its consequences, and the compulsions which can force individuals from small minority groups, even against their own wishes at times, to make decisions which turn their worlds upside down and make them lose their sense of who they are and who they want to be.

1.1.1 The frame project

The fact that the Tangsa speak a mindboggling variety of languages, many of which had very few speakers left, was the principal reason why the Tangsa were of great interest to linguists. The multi-disciplinary project which employed me had to do with documenting endangered languages. However, the project team also wanted to find an answer to the corresponding question about the Tangsa to the one Leach (1954: 46) asked more than half a century ago with respect to the ethnic groups living in Highland Burma: “Here are populations of nearly identical culture seemingly maintaining differences of language at great inconvenience to themselves. Why?” My brief in the project (as a non-linguist) was to figure out what it meant for the people to be Tangsa, despite their linguistic divisions. And I was encouraged to use the data collected and experience gained to write a doctoral thesis in anthropology.

But that quickly led to methodological contradictions, for while anthropologists do not see any value in just documentation per se, in terms of our project aims, language documentation with rich contextual metadata was of the highest priority, as the numbers of language speakers of some of the languages we were working with were decreasing. Hence, while linguists have no trouble at all to categorise such languages as highly endangered, it is more problematic for anthropologists to use such categories.

Projecting down to my Tangsa reality, however, it was hard for me to tell myself that there was no need to panic when the only man in the village, who could sing their epic Wihu song or who knew how to do augury, died. In terms of our documentation aims, these were clear

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9 I shall say more about the project in Section 1.5.1 and also in Appendix 0. The project was funded by Volkswagen Foundation under the DOBES programme and was titled “The Traditional Songs and Poetry of Upper Assam – A Multifaceted Linguistic and Ethnographic Documentation of the Tangsa, Tai and Singpho Communities in Margherita, Northeast India”. My project colleagues were a linguist from La Trobe University, Australia (Dr. Stephen Morey), a Tai expert (Professor Barend Terwiel) and a German ethno-musicologist (Dr. Juergen Schöpf) besides students of linguistics from Gauhati University.

10 Burma came to be officially known as Myanmar from 1989. Throughout this text, I shall use the terms Burma and Myanmar interchangeably, using the term best suited for the context in which it is used.

11 I use the plural ‘we’ without clarification then it will refer to the project team of which I was a member. The name Stephen will refer to Stephen Morey, my Australian linguist colleague in our project team.

12 Although the Tangsa varieties our team examined are being passed on to children, there is a gradual loss of the cultural richness, as texts like that of the Wihu song are not being passed on. For more reasons in support of language documentation, see Nick Evans evocative book Dying Words (2009) and Bradley (2012).

13 As Eriksen (2010: 159) reports: “The tendency among anthropologists to favour ‘old, authentic culture’ over ‘new, contaminated culture’, which informed much nineteenth- and twentieth-century anthropology, has largely – if sometimes reluctantly – been abandoned (although it may still exist among ethnopolitical leaders, as we have seen). In a networked, globalised world, the isolated tribe no longer exists anyway. Anthropologists working among indigenous peoples today tend not to see their moral obligation as contributing to the preservation of an ancient way of life, but rather in helping the people to make a transition to modernity on their own terms.”
examples of ritual and traditional practices which were rapidly ‘disappearing’ and hence needed to be recorded and documented before they were ‘lost’ forever.\textsuperscript{14} Moreover, when my Tangsa interlocutors themselves were using phrases like “our culture is disappearing fast” and talking about “deterioration of our culture” due to its “voluntary abandonment” (cf. Simai 2008: 33), it was clear that trying to evade these issues would not help me to understand what they were really concerned about, if not miss the point altogether.

While in the field, I postponed worrying about the intellectual contradictions inherent in what I was doing and tried to concentrate on the immediate job at hand. Back at my desk, I could see that most of those contradictions had to do with two different definitions of the term ‘culture’ and with two different approaches to scholarship, one school requiring scholarship to be entirely an end in itself while the other demanding that scholarship to also engage with the community, more so given that there is a growing sense that academics should be doing something for the communities they study (cf. Lassiter 2005). The specific aims and nature of our project as well as my special position as not quite an insider but also not quite an outsider to the community not only made it possible for me, but also demanded of me, to think more inclusively and be able to make and maintain the distinction between the analytically tempered demands of my discipline and that of a clearly normative project such as ours.

The presence of researchers (such as those in our project team) who were interested in knowing more about and recording their traditional practices seems to have triggered off some sort of interest (and perhaps even pride) amongst certain community members to make a greater effort to discover more about and to give more value to their past.\textsuperscript{15} A community elder told us, “You have taught us to value our past which we had earlier thought to not be worth talking about. We were even ashamed of how we lived during ‘ajanti’ times,” referring back to a time when they were untouched by ‘civilisation’. While it could be the case that our Tangsa interlocutors were saying these things simply because they believed that those were the kinds of words we, the project team, wanted to hear, and while it can be debated whether such sort of interventionist action is desirable or not, in terms of the project aims, it was gratifying to have reached a stage when young community members have volunteered to carry on the work of documentation that we had started. In that sense we had succeeded in setting in motion the process of ‘salvaging’, at least partially, their past traditions.\textsuperscript{16}

But I needed to find my own position in all of this. In terms of my ethnographic data, while I can never be certain whether events in the Tangsa villages would have evolved along similar lines if the project had never happened,\textsuperscript{17} since the project did happen, I would have to factor

\textsuperscript{14} This can be considered at best a kind of ‘salvage anthropology’, for more see http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Salvage_anthropology (accessed 20.5.2014).

\textsuperscript{15} The Wihu song, for example, was not recorded at all before we started with our project (cf. Barkataki-Ruscheweyh & Morey 2013). On one occasion one of our principal interlocutors Aphu Tyanglam explained to me why he had asked Stephen Morey to hoist the flag for the Wihu kuh festival celebrations that year: since many of the Tangsa people did not care for Wihu kuh, he thought they might change their minds if they saw that a foreigner was interested. By showing honour to the foreign guests he also expected some political as well as financial return (DoI: 30.12.2010).

\textsuperscript{16} I shall discuss the impact of the documentation project in greater detail in Appendix I.

\textsuperscript{17} For instance, we shall never know in what form the Wihu kuh festival would have been celebrated in the village of Kharangkong if Stephen Morey had not arrived there in January 2007 and Aphu Tyanglam, in his
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that in into my conclusions. I could even go one step further and turn that uncertainty into a strength and investigate how my Tangsa interlocutors instrumentalise the presence of outsiders (especially, foreign academics) for their own ends.

But there were other problems too -- since most of our data was elicited and since we were mostly dealing with village and community elders who could tell us more about the time before they had moved down to the plains and before they had converted to Christianity, it was not easy to find a topic on which to base my ethnographic work. We had documented many Tangsa festivals – both big and small – some at the village level, others at the community level -- in the field. While it is a fact that our very presence certainly did impact on what we got to see at those festivals, since they were not elicited (in the sense that they would have taken place even if we were not there), I decided to base my study on them.

Thus, although I was free to choose the topic for my dissertation, the choices as well as the methodology were limited to what was possible while remaining within the larger project aims. As a result, there were considerable differences in the approach and methods I used from those say, of by a lone ethnographer staying for an extended period of time at one site. For instance, as our project team wished to make contact with as many different Tangsa groups as possible, *multi-sitedness* was in-built into our project frame. Furthermore, since there were linguists in our team who were specifically ‘doing’ languages, and since I could easily communicate with all my informants either in Asamiya, my mother tongue, or in Hindi, I never made a real effort to learn any of the Tangsa languages. On the other hand, my unique position in the project team as the only woman, the sole aspiring anthropologist and (very often) the only Assamese (Indian), also gave me a particular vantage point, both within the group and with respect to our field hosts and informants. My story would have to build on the advantages I had.

1.1.2 Basic aims and claims of the study

This work is first and foremost an introduction to some of the Tangsa people living in Assam. It describes not only the internal divisions amongst the various Tangsa groups in terms of language and cultural practices, their past and present ways of life and their culture and traditions but also the changes that hill-communities have had to accept after moving down to the plains and after beginning to participate as small minorities but nevertheless as equal citizens of a democratic state. A linguistic classification of the different Tangsa tribes is included in the third chapter. All this shows how complex the picture is and hence how complicated the project of creating a pan-Tangsa identity could be. This study also attempts to place the Tangsa in their geographical and historical context by looking at their migration histories and their interactions with neighbouring groups.

great enthusiasm to have a foreigner as guest, had not promised him to hold the festival in a much grander style the following year. I shall discuss this in detail in Chapter 4.

18 Although the language spoken by the Assamese is also usually referred to as Assamese, I shall refer to it as Asamiya to make a distinction. Asamiya is an Indo-Aryan language, closely related to Bengali but which has many loan words from the many Tibeto-Burman languages spoken in the region. It is one of the official languages of the state of Assam.
As a piece of ethnography, this work intends to explore the Tangsa trail in three distinct but related themes in the main ethnographic chapters. The first is to give a description of life in three Tangsa villages in Assam, chosen simply because they are interesting for different reasons, not just in terms of religious affiliations or location but also in their livelihood patterns, linkages with others and attitudes towards change and resistance. While drawing out these different aspects, I will try to understand the internal logic of the differences between them and the mechanism of how they function as units, and also try to show how these village communities negotiate amongst themselves and with other groups around them for economic as well as political space, in an effort to secure their lives and existence. I also put the situation of the Tangsa in Assam in perspective by comparing and contrasting it with that of the Tangsa living in the neighbouring state of Arunachal Pradesh. This is the first story, the aim being to give the reader a general introduction to the Tangsa people and also a sense of what it is like to be a Tangsa living in one of those villages.

The second aim is to do a detailed documentation of a few Tangsa festivals in order to record and understand their attempts at preservation, revival, and revitalisation of some of their past cultural traditions and as well as their deliberate attempts at creating new ones. In doing so, I wish to establish how village festivals ‘reflect’ as well as ‘cause’ cultural change in a community. By analysing the factors that determine the form of the festival itself, and also the impact of this representation on the self-image and cultural identity of the Tangsa themselves, I also wish to come to an understanding of the basic question of what it means to be Tangsa, at least for my interlocutors, and to those around them in the present-day-context.

A section of the Tangsa I had met were actively involved in the process of “constructing, deconstructing and reconstructing” (Richard Handler 1994: 27) their cultural identity by selecting and modifying elements from their past as well as incorporating new elements. I have therefore tried to explore what terms like culture and ethnicity could mean for my Tangsa interlocutors, and how they use their perceived notions of these concepts to construct their new pan-Tangsa identity. These perceived notions, depend, as I will show, on a host of factors, including external ones like state policy and the views of outsiders (like our project team) and those of other communities around them.

Observing these processes of identity construction and self-projection of the Tangsa become even more interesting in the light of ongoing debates, also within the community, about how to use their ethnicity and their particular cultural assets to their best advantage in order to promote their demands for recognition and to win a place in the political and social arena of the state. I claim that they seek to project a new pan-Tangsa identity which draws not only from their past but also from their modern present reality -- they wish to assert their
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ethnicity and their uniqueness, but in modern terms, in the language of citizens of a democratic state.

This study of the Tangsa in Assam explores not only the relationships between some members of the Tangsa community living in Assam but also those between them and at least three other groups -- the majority and dominant Assamese community that has administrative control and wields political power in Assam (as a result of which most of the representatives of the state the Tangsa come into contact with, such as the police and administrative officials, are Assamese), other minority groups, such as the Singpho, living in the same geographical area, and finally the Tangsa living elsewhere in India, i.e. in the Changlang district of Arunachal Pradesh, and to a lesser extent, those living in Myanmar. Intertwined in this net of group relationships is another network of individual relationships that I, as a researcher, as a member of my research team and also as individual belonging to the dominant Assamese community, already had with the Assamese community and those that I developed with my Tangsa and non-Tangsa interlocutors during the course of my field work.

Finally, I wish to follow my own personal journey in the field in order to reflect at every stage the relations between the Tangsa and the others around them in general, and between me and my Tangsa interlocutors in particular. I have deliberately chosen to tell this story as it unfolds at the end of each chapter rather than compress it into a chapter at the beginning, first of all, because I believe that the ways and attitudes of the Tangsa ‘others’ have a huge role to play in the determination of the Tangsa ‘self’. I am in complete agreement with Jenkins that:

> [t]he effective categorization of a group of people by a more powerful ‘other’ is not ... ‘just’ a matter of classification (if, indeed, there is any such thing). It is necessarily an intervention in that group’s social world which will, to an extent and in ways that are a function of the specifics of the situation, alter that world and the experience of living in it. [Hence] the Chileans have the capacity to constitute, in part, the experience of ‘being’ a Mapuche (Jenkins 1994: 217-18).

In the same vein, my Tangsa interlocutors in Assam are what they are today, also because the Assamese (and the other significant ‘others’) around them are who they are.

Moreover, my somewhat unusual position as an almost native Assamese researcher and as an intermediary between my Tangsa interlocutors and my foreign project colleagues have revealed many insights into the nature of doing ethnography, and the tensions and affinities in the field work situation. Therefore I also wish to place on record “our own role in the creation of the phenomenon we study” (Moerman 1993: 90). Neither my description of the Tangsa world nor my analysis of Tangsa festivals would be complete or honest without this mainly reflexive but also self-critical component. This is a crucial peg on which the stability and integrity of my entire project rests.

Some conclusions

The recurring theme that binds together the different locations and the different perspectives in this study is my claim that the performance of ethnic identity as evidenced at festivals, for marginal groups like the Tangsa, is a strategy for survival, and for negotiating a place for themselves in the world around them. In that sense, my Tangsa interlocutors instrumentalise
their ethnicity, and their identity is suitably adjusted and articulated, case by case, in forms which are amenable for achieving other larger ends.

However, rather than considering these actions as calculated or manipulative, it is more productive to consider them as acts of self-preservation and of self-definition, stemming from their fear of being overlooked and forgotten in the world they inhabit and call their own. In many Tangsa persons I met, there is a strong inherent sense of belonging -- a perception of Tangsaness -- even if they cannot really define what it means, but which none of them is willing to give up. It is this sense that forces them to do something, even play the game according to the new rules if required, with the hope that if not everything then at least something about them and their Tangsaness will remain in the end.

And this is important because although many of my older interlocutors know and live their Tangsaness they can see that, given the increasing impact of external influences on their world, it would be harder for their children to hold on to just vague notions. Their continued survival in the world around them requires them to define themselves more concretely, which in the Tangsa case, fraught with divergent religious affiliations, varied cultural traditions and diverse linguistic repertoires, is asking for something extremely difficult, if not impossible. This study seeks to place on record some of those attempts at self-definition in order to resist marginalisation and possible erasure.

In summary, this work is first and foremost about describing and understanding some of the strategies my Tangsa interlocutors use to gain agency and to resist marginalisation. Next it is about how the Tangsa leaders go about constructing a new pan-Tangsa ethnic identity which is both modern as well as traditional, by analysing how they (re)present themselves at festivals; it is also about discovering how ‘culture’ is sought to be preserved, by reinventing it first, if required, to fit the new definitions and then articulated. Finally I also seek to explore and expose the role the significant ‘others’ of the Tangsa, notably the state and the bigger communities around them, have had in influencing the above processes as well as in forcing the Tangsa into the precarious position of vulnerability and insecurity, where they find themselves at present and from where they have been forced to speak up for themselves to secure their place in the future. In that sense, their performing their ethnicity at festivals is not so much a sign of their agency as it is of their marginalisation. That will close the circle.

1.1.3 Positioning this study in the allied literature

In terms of monographs, my work comes closest to the work of Karlsson (2000), Bal (2007), Pachuau (2014) and Ramirez (2014). All these authors look at questions of identity, ethnicity, culture and marginalisation, amongst the Rabha, Garo, Mizo and Karbi communities respectively living in northeast India and Bangladesh. Like the Tangsa, Karlsson’s Rabhas too dance “to communicate their distinctiveness or difference to the audience and importantly, to themselves” (2000: xvi), but the Rabhas are a forest people and they face a tangible threat -- that of having their forests taken away from them not only by the dominant Bengali ‘Other’ but by the forests and wildlife conservation officials. Bal’s work on the Garos focuses on the processes of ethnic identity formation while Ramirez demonstrates the fluidity of ethnic categorizations and the process of ethnic transformation across boundaries. Pachuau’s work shows how the Mizos use their cultural practices, as do the Tangsa, to define their identity.
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However the Mizos are a much larger group, almost all professing Christianity, and have a territory to call their own. The Tangsa in Assam are very few and widely scattered and present a much more fragmented picture. Moreover, if the Mizos, as people from the Northeast, feel ignored by mainland India, the Tangsa feel forgotten even in Assam, where they live. Thus their marginalisation goes one step deeper.

Most of these studies also reveal the hierarchical relationships that exist between majority so called ‘mainstream’ populations and the minority ethnic groups. In Ellen Bal’s work one learns how the majority Bengali Muslim population in Bangladesh view the supposedly ‘frog-eating’ Achiks (or Garos). My work also reveals the asymmetry in the relations between the dominant power-wielding Assamese and the numerically weak and culturally different Tangsa.

Perhaps in some ways I am repeating what other researchers have already said about some other ‘tribal’ communities in the Northeast in other contexts; however, none of the above authors have looked at those questions through the lens of ‘festivals’. For that aspect, I have gained a lot from the recent work of, Alban von Stockhausen (2008), Mélanie Vandenhelsken (2011), Erik de Maaker (2013) and Sara Shneiderman (2015), to name just a few. Von Stockhausen’s work on the Naga expressions of identity at festivals has given me a point of reference, while De Maaker’s study on the Garo Wangala festival and Vandenhelsken’s description of the festivities in Sikkim around the Panglahbosol dance have lent comparative dimensions to my work. Shneiderman’s recent work also focuses on the expressive dimensions of ethnicity, as mine does; however she shows how ethnic identities can be produced through ritual practice; this is not quite how my Tangsa interlocutors define their ethnicity.

Another important difference is the fact that my work is a micro-study -- a look from below -- in the classical anthropological sense and hence I refrain from making any claims about the whole Tangsa community as such. However I believe that such a detailed ethnography of the lives and concerns of a few people living in only three Tangsa villages in Assam can be instructive in understanding bigger questions affecting the world in which such communities live and function as well as in understanding the internal dynamics of the group as a whole.22 More so because, as already mentioned, the Tangsa happen to be a heterogeneous collection of trans-Patkai tribes, professing different religions, speaking different languages, whose antecedents (as well as links to the better-known Naga groups) are not clearly known and who live in areas with differential access to power and resources.

As will be mentioned in Section 3.1, the available literature on the Tangsa is very meagre, among them Dutta (1969), Rao (2006) and Simai (2008). While Dutta’s work is outdated, Simai looks only at one of the many Tangsa groups and his treatment is not academic. Rao’s work, on the other hand, is outright misleading in places, as it attempts to link the older Tangsa practices to ancient Hindu traditions, while omitting to mention the fact that many Tangsa today are Christian. Furthermore, none of these authors attempt to explain the

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22 Although I focus only on three Tangsa villages in Assam and a few in Arunachal, my field visits have taken me to many Tangsa villages in both the states and I have met a wide cross-section of the Tangsa population living in India.
complexity of the group labelled Tangsa, or discuss the relationship between the Tangsa and the Naga, or attempt to give an account of Tangsa life in the present. In that sense, this work is the first ethnographic study of some Tangsa people living in India.

1.2 The theoretical frame

1.2.1 Some operational definitions

I will often use the term traditional in this work, also a label, to refer to what people consider as coming from the past, whether it is objectively true or not. Depending on the context it will refer back to a time when the Tangsa were still in the hills, or to a time when they had not converted (to one of the standard religions like Christianity or Buddhism) and were still following their older beliefs, of course with the understanding that there was probably no agreement even in the past on what these practices were. This is particularly the sense in which I shall use, for example, the term ‘traditional religion’ later on. Sometimes, however, I will use these terms without marking them, so as not to break the flow of the argument.

In much the same way, the term modern will be used as a label to refer to the present, not so much because modern times have arrived in ‘Tangsaland’, but because my Tangsa interlocutors themselves wish to make this distinction between their life in the past and in the present, which is characterised by a move down to the plains and their acceptance of a lifestyle similar in many ways to that of the majority mainstream plains populations (see also Fn. 21).

As mentioned earlier, I use the term tribe as a label for any group, which displays the broad characteristics of ‘tribal societies’, as defined, for instance by Xaxa (1999: 1524); the point being that ‘a tribe is seen as a distinctive type of society’ that marks it to be at variance from the mainstream population. In particular, tribal people are not usually organised along caste lines, as are the caste Hindus. Although the term tribe, with its racial connotations, is no longer used as an analytical category in the social sciences, in the Indian state (where much of its colonial legacy still persists till date) the word tribe -- scheduled tribe, to be precise -- is

23 The past is also therefore a ‘perceived’ past – real, ‘imagined’ (Anderson 1983) or ‘invented’ (Hobsbawm & Ranger 1983) -- on which much of the present-day discussions and deliberations of Tangsa culture and ethnicity are based.

24 I shall use the hypothetical term ‘Tangsaland’ to mean the area in India where the Tangsa live. Of course in reality there is no territorial area that can be termed as such, except for some small pockets in the Changlang district in Arunachal, since the Tangsa live scattered over a large area where many other communities live as well.

25 A scheduled tribe (ST) is one which is mentioned in the scheduled list of the Indian Constitution under Articles 342 (i) and 342 (ii). The Tangsa, if and when they appear, are included as Other Naga tribes in these lists. Curiously, there are separate ST lists for different states of India. In Assam, according to The Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes Orders (Amendment) Act 1976 (No. 108 of 1976, dated the 18th Sept. 1976) there are 13 scheduled tribes in the autonomous districts (including Any Naga Tribes), but only 9 in the areas excluding the autonomous districts (and the Naga tribes are NOT included there). The Other Naga tribes are in the ST list in Arunachal Pradesh.

See Section 1.3 for the defining characteristics of a scheduled tribe, and Nongkynrih (2010) for a discussion of tribe vs scheduled tribe. See also Beteille (1998). For a detailed discussion of the many terms such as tribe, adivasi, indigenous people, etc. that are in use in Bengal and their various connotations, see van Schendel & Bal (2002).
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an officially defined category (Xaxa 2010), and is still in common use. Replacing the word ‘tribal’ with other terms like indigenous people or ‘ādivasi’ or ‘janajati’, has also not found favour in India, even with the tribal communities themselves, since as Van Schendel (2011: 27) points out: “many groups have a stake in self-identification as ‘tribal’”. I shall say more about this in Section 1.3.

An ethnic group, on the other hand, will generally refer to a group of people who claim to have the same identity (Eriksen 2010). The next section takes a more critical look at ethnicity. I shall often use the term community for a set of people who share an idea of belonging together, and the term group to refer to any set of people. Following Cohen (2003), just like an ethnic group, a community exists in the minds of its people and is connected through symbols that hold and perpetuate its meaning for its members.

Finally, the term state, when not further qualified, will be used not merely as an agglomeration of administrative institutions or as a synonym for any specific government. It will be used to imply an institution that symbolises those processes and tendencies that create the conditions for the reproduction of the dominant social relations.

1.2.2 Festivals, rituals and performance

Even if we started with Geertz’s (1973) classic description of the Balinese cock-fight to more recent contributions such as Jonsson’s “Serious Fun” (2001), Harnish (2005), and nearer to my field area, the study of the Khiksaba festival of the Sherdupken community in Arunachal Pradesh by Dollfus & Jacquesson (2013), and the Wangala of the Garos by De Maaker (2013), festivals have been studied by many anthropologists.

However, a brief justification of why anthropologists study festivals is in place here. One basic reason is because “the contemporary festival becomes a potential site for representing, encountering, incorporating, and researching aspects of cultural difference” (Bennett et al 2014:1). This is possible because for outsiders, such as the ethnographer, public events such as festivals “are privileged points of penetration into other social and cultural universes” (Handelman 1990: 9).

But in India there is a further reason for looking at festivals. What Singer observed a very long time ago about ‘cultural events’ such as weddings, temple festivals, plays and dances in India, is relevant even today: “Indians, and perhaps all peoples, think of their culture as

The terms ‘indigenous people’ and ‘tribal’ are often used interchangeably (Karlsson 2001, Srikanth 2014), but to avoid confusion (cf. Cobo 1986), I shall reserve the term indigenous people to mean the ‘Bhumiputras’, the sons of the soil. The Tangsa are not indigenous in this particular sense.

De Maaker & Joshi (2007: 382) define ‘tribes’ as “a classification based on linguistic and cultural criteria developed in colonial times, and which is still in use today.” Bhagabati (1992: 500) quoted in Section 8.1 is of the same view.

One could have also started much earlier with Malinowski (1922), Durkheim (1912) and Mauss (1925).

encapsulated in such discrete performances, which they can exhibit to outsiders as well as to themselves” (Singer 1959: ix, xii).29

Thus festivals, besides having other characteristics, will be considered to be “public in nature, participatory in ethos, complex in structure and multiple in voice, scene and purpose” (Stoeltje 1992: 261). Rituals will be assumed to be repetitive and established patterns of actions which convey some meaning to those performing them.30 Seen as a whole, they are formalised symbolic actions which have specific meaning for the community and often, but not necessarily, have some religious connotation while festivals will be generally thought to be secular. Following Longkumer (forthcoming), by performance, I will mean that it is ‘performed’ for audiences (Ebron 2002: 1). Therefore “actions are deemed performances when they are not merely done but done to be seen” Goffman (1974: 58).

While traditional community festivals comprise mainly a fixed set of rituals, present-day festivals will also include a component of entertainment which could be through participation (for example in a sponsored walk or in a fashion show) as well as through the staging of ‘cultural shows’. A ‘cultural show’ comprises a sequence of cultural performances (Singer 1959: xiii), mostly dances, but often also fashion shows, skits and dance-dramas, which are performed on a designated stage, by a set of performers who are suitably dressed and who have rehearsed their parts beforehand.

Within the frame of this book, festivals at three different levels will be considered, first, the ‘traditional’ village level festival which comprises mostly of ‘traditional’ rituals, second, the community level festivals which include not only rituals but also elements of self (re)presentation and entertainment, and finally, the trans-community mega festivals, like the Hornbill Festival in Nagaland, in which the ritual part is more or less elided or enacted as mere performance, and the emphasis is on performing and presenting the ‘culture’ of different communities in staged presentations, and in displaying and selling ‘traditional’ food and handicrafts, thereby promoting business and tourism in that area.

While rituals are also performed, they can be differentiated according to whom the performance is meant for. When a Tangsa elder performs a ritual at the ritual post in his kitchen during the festival of Wihu-kuh, he does it to appease some spirit in order to ensure his own wellbeing and that of his family. In other words, his action is believed to have some performative force (in the sense of Austin 1975). However, the same ritual, when performed in the village field, ‘just for show’, as a display of their cultural traditions, by an elder, who has since converted to Christianity, becomes an ‘empty ritual’ (Harth 2006: 29); however note that although such a ritual is empty of performative force it might not be empty of symbolic relevance to the audience. I shall take the fact that ‘performances are done to be seen’ as the difference between ritual and performance, regardless of questions about the intentionality of the performer and the efficacy of the performance.

29 This idea is neatly encapsulated in the phrase ‘festivalization of culture’ which is the title of a recent book (Bennett et al 2014) on this phenomenon, world-wide.
30 For a good recent overview of the different meanings and definitions of ritual, see Handler (2011). For a comprehensive and convincing argument about the political implications of ritual, see Kertzer (1988).
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Following this rule, whatever is enacted in public spaces during festivals will be considered to be performance and ritual actions performed in the private space of people’s homes will be considered to be rituals. Hence empty rituals as defined above as well as secular ritualised actions like a flag-hoisting ceremony, a public meeting or a cultural procession will also be considered to be performances as they are enacted in the public space. I then intend to use Turner’s concept of ‘social drama’ (1957) as well as Cohen’s notion (1993) of the transformative interaction between the symbolic (or cultural) and the political to analyse what the representation of Tangsa culture as evidenced in the act of it being ‘performed’ at their festivals can tell me about the Tangsa.

1.2.3 Culture, identity and ethnicity

Culture, identity and ethnicity are the most important concepts that inform my work. I shall restrict the discussion exclusively to group or collective identities. Moreover, I shall consider these terms together rather than separately as my ethnography will demonstrate how communities like the Tangsa use their culture to give a tangible form to their ethnic identity.

Following Eriksen (2010: 16), I will consider ethnicity to be an ‘emic category of ascription’. As mentioned in the last section, festivals are a stage for the ‘cultural expressions’ and ‘the symbolic formulations of ethnic identity’ of a community. By focusing my attention on festivals, I will stress on the expressive dimension of ethnicity.

For a working definition of culture I follow Chit Hlaing (2012: 245) who describes “a culture is what any set of people attributes to itself as their way-of-life without regard to any objective uniformity of custom and practice, variation being taken to be ‘mere’ variation on a common core.” As for identity of a group of a community, it is best described in terms of processes which express “shared difference from others” (Sökefeld 2001: 536). In that sense, social identities are mostly defined relationally and are based on difference from other groups: while the cultural identity is defined on perceived sameness and commonality of certain cultural traits among members of the same group. The ethnic identity of a group is a more political construct and is based on what the members of the group claim they are, which is not always the same as what they actually believe they are or perceive themselves to be. All these constructs are fluid and dynamically change over time and with context.

Although religion is usually considered to be part of culture, that inclusion is not so automatic amongst communities, such as the Tangsa, who have converted recently and whose present differences in religious affiliations make it difficult for them to forge a common ethnic identity. So for this study, although a person’s religion is definitely part of his individual

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32 This is also important because, as Shneiderman (2011) points out, “Even though ethnicity is a constructed category, one must investigate carefully the ritualized forms of action through which specific ethnic consciousnesses are produced if we wish to understand the nature of the category itself.”
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identity, it need not necessarily be a part of his cultural identity. Moreover, religion, in this study, will not automatically be supposed to have underlying political connotations.

Rather than going into the ‘constructedness’ of terms like ethnicity, identity etc. (cf. Linnekin 1992: 251), it is more productive to consider them to be strategic, positional (cf. Hall 1996b) and also expressive. Furthermore, I second Ramirez in claiming that these terms have some ‘real’ meaning for the people themselves, in giving them a ‘perception’ of belonging:

It is not cultural homogeneity that makes an “ethnic group” but a perception. It is through such representations that people feel they belong to a coherent and perennial entity. In this sense, the Assamese ethnic groups, or “tribes” as they are called and call themselves, are real (Ramirez 2007: 92).

Moreover, as I wish to show in the Tangsa case, these ‘perceptions’ have something of value in themselves. They go deeper, and also have to do, not only with belonging together, but also with a nostalgia for an imagined past and lost traditions. On the other hand, they are dependent on the context at hand.

In that sense, I prefer the term ‘articulation’ of identity to the more widely used notions of ‘construction’ or ‘invention’ because the latter terms seem to imply that people lend meaning to their identity in strictly intentional ways (Van Ginkel 1995). Articulation also carries a sense of nostalgia for and continuity with an imagined or perceived past. Moreover, Hall’s use of the term ‘articulation’ carries the double meaning of ‘being’ as well as ‘becoming’, of ‘expressing’ as well as of ‘linking’ (Fiske 1996: 213); it is exactly this notion that allows selection of certain elements and rejection of others, not for ever but for the present moment, while building up identity; hence making the study of the process of identity-construction so interesting.

1.2.4 Related theoretical debates

Rather than give an overview here of the general debates surrounding the concepts mentioned in the last section, I shall take them up as and when they become relevant in the following chapters. A final discussion around the questions of performance of ethnicity during festivals, and its relation to the construction of a pan-Tangsa identity, will follow in the last chapter, once my empirical data has been laid out. In the intervening chapters, one shall see instances of selective reification and (re)articulation of cultural traditions, externalisation (Litzinger 2000: 231) and commodification (Cohn 1987: 235) of culture as well as its instrumentalisation and use as a resource (Tonkinson 1993, 2000) to gain agency and

33 This is not necessarily true of all groups, for, as we shall see later, ‘Nagaland for Christ’ as a motto for the Naga, can be considered to be an attempt to introduce religion into cultural identity.
34 The word ‘articulated’ in the sense of Hall (1986) can be used to mean to express, as well as to link (as in an articulated lorry) and comprise different elements which can be put together in different combinations at different times according to the specific need and context.
35 Tonkinson argues for the conceptualisation of tradition as a resource, strategically employed (or not employed) by certain (but not all) of a community’s members in pursuit of individual or collective goals (cf. Otto & Pedersen 2005: 18).
36 Broadly speaking, agency can be understood as the capacity to make choices and impose those choices on others.
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visibility. I have tried to keep clear of the debates on what is ‘genuine’ and ‘authentic’ versus what is ‘invented’ and ‘fake’ as far as possible, but will discuss authenticity briefly in Section 5.4.2. I hesitate to use ‘invention of tradition’ (Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983) in my Tangsa case, because the Tangsa practices that I saw being (re)articulated in the field were strictly more ‘custom’ than ‘tradition’ (Hobsbawm 1983). Perhaps Tangsa ‘traditions’ are in the process of being ‘invented’ out of their ‘customs’ but the situation is too fluid and still-in-the-making for saying anything definite. Furthermore, it is not whether traditions are invented or not that is the crucial question in my study, but rather what use they are put to, by whom, for what ends, and what they reveal about agency or marginalisation of the community in question.

The (re)presentation and articulation of culture evident during festivals involves not only the processes of politicisation of performance (Cohen 1969, 1981, also see Parkin et al 1996) but also that of politicisation of ethnic identity. That is not surprising as the need to have an ethnic identity is itself prompted by state policies (see next section). This brings in the role of the state and the gradual emergence of elites (Brass 1991) from within the community to mediate between the state and the community. It shall become clear that the actions of neighbouring communities have a mimetic influence on the processes of ethnicity articulation and identity formulation of a community. As a subtext, the still persisting colonial attitudes of plains people belonging to the dominant communities towards minority hill groups as well as the attempts at instrumentalisation of minority communities by political leaders from dominant communities to further their own agendas will become evident.

1.3 State policy and rise of ethnic consciousness

According to the 2011 Census data, there are more than 31 million people living in Assam.37 There are 23 notified Scheduled Tribes (ST) in Assam accounting for around 13 per cent of the total population.38 However, many tribal groups do not have official ST status, hence the proportion of tribal people living in Assam will certainly be much greater.39 At least forty-five languages are spoken in Assam, most of them belonging to the Austro-Asiatic, Sino-Tibetan, Indo-European or Tai–Kadai language families. While the majority of the population in Assam are Hindu (nearly 65%), there is a sizeable Muslim population (more than 30%) while Christians account for less than 4% with even fewer Buddhists.

As already mentioned earlier, in the Indian state, a policy of ‘reservation’ or protective/positive discrimination exists in favour of the communities listed as scheduled tribes which entitle them to special privileges and concessions.40 To be recognised as a

38 With a population of more than 1.35 million in 2011, the Bodo are the biggest ST group in the state.
40 For more details of constitutional safeguards, see Neog (1999). Certain areas in the Northeast Indian states of Assam, Meghalaya, Tripura and Mizoram have been designated as Tribal Areas. The Sixth Schedule of the Indian Constitution states precisely the areas which are to be called Tribal Areas and lays down the precise provisions regarding the administration of these areas by the formation of Autonomous districts. For an
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A *scheduled tribe*, a group has to fit the following requirements: (a) indication of primitive traits; (b) distinctive culture; (c) geographical isolation; (d) shyness of contact with the community at large; and (e) backwardness; (est. 1965, see *GoI* 2005). In the new revised policy statement, community consciousness, harmonisation with nature, and distinctive culture have been associated with tribal social formation (cf. Roy Burman 2008: viii). Even though primitive traits and ‘backwardness’ are no longer officially part of the requirements, they still persist to some extent in the mainstream discourse in India even today.

This system of ‘compensatory discrimination’ (Galanter 1991) is paradoxical in the sense that it identifies groups along cultural criteria to compensate socio-economic disadvantages. (cf. Sheneiderman & Middleton 2008). Karlsson (2001: 11) calls them “inconsistencies and uncertainties”, and observes that “the process of scheduling is heavily politicised”, since political grounds often determine whether the ST status is given to a community or not.

The state intends to protect ‘tribals’ against mainstream society, strengthening ‘tribal’ cultural institutions, while at the same time furthering their integration with mainstream society. However well intended these measures are, their goals are contradictory, resulting in policies that in one way or another fail to deliver (De Maaker & Schleiter 2010).

Moreover, the ST/SC labels have been created and given, sometimes rather arbitrarily. Given this scenario, Baumann’s prediction: “if ethnic belonging becomes a resource in economic competition, then ethnic radicalisation is an all but inevitable consequence” (1999: 33) has come true for many ethnic communities in India. This is the relation between state policies and ethnicisation of tribal minorities in borderland regions of Northeast India (cf. Bal 2007b).

Therefore, in this sense, as stated eloquently by Pachuau, “it is the nation state that creates ethnicities” (2014: 21). Furthermore, such ethnic considerations are intricately linked with the campaigns to acquire and maintain ST status, which in turn is related to essentialised cultural traits. This ‘politics of tribalisation’ (Sinha 2006) gives the elites the grounds on which to base their case, for as Brass (1991: 15) argues “the cultural forms, values and practices of ethnic groups become political resources for elites in competition for political power and economic advantage.” I shall demonstrate these processes in the Tangsa case in the chapters that follow.

Furthermore, ethnic communities can sometimes even subvert these imposed categories, so that they can then be used as a tool by ethnic communities in their fight for fair representation.

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**Note:**

Lepcha (2013) has shown how the Lepcha community in Sikkim has been downgraded to a primitive tribe in order to make place for the Nepali Gurungs to be given the ST status; Grothmann (2012) describes how the Memba ST label was arbitrarily given to two different communities in Arunachal. However, in the Memba case the community members do not like the connotations of backwardness and primitiveness associated with the ST status while many other tribes are fighting to get recognition as ST. Vandenhelsken (2011) shows how the claim for ST status can become a platform for political representation, and a resource for political struggle and ethnic competition. With regard to the Gorkhas, Middleton (2013) describes how, given their transnational migration history and significant degrees of socio-cultural hybridity, “these groups have found it virtually impossible to achieve compliance with the ethno-logics of the multicultural state”. This illustrates some of the paradoxes involved in the politics of recognition at the borders of India.


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“Minorities can thus be transformed, through a strategy of normative inversion, into ‘nations’” (Wimmer 1993). This is precisely how it has evolved at least for some ethnic minorities in Northeast India. For example, the Bodos, the largest ethnic minority in Assam, have already won their fight to have their language recognised, have also been awarded an autonomous territorial council but have still not given up their demand that the state of Assam be divided fifty-fifty to create a new state of Bodoland (cf. Deka unpublished, Sharma 2007).

Thus, having forced ethnic minorities to fight for their rights in the first place, the state finds itself often at the receiving end, as Duncan (2004: 17) illustrates:

These civilising programs also have the unintended side effect of empowering the very groups that they are seeking to assimilate..... Another frequently mentioned by-product of these state development programs and policies is the creation of a heightened sense of ethnic identity among target populations. The government sponsored stereotypes of groups as primitives and backward can often lead to the creation of ethnic pride in response to this disdain, or to a wider recognition of ethnic similarities.

In the following chapters, I shall demonstrate that what the Tangsa present during festivals can be seen as expressions of their marginalisation rather than of their agency, in that they are responses to requirements of the state; however they can also be seen, in their subversive aspects, also as some kind of resistance to the state, in that they seek to instrumentalise the very categories that were created for their discrimination.

While it is clear that state policies and the actions of the dominant communities are largely responsible for the rise of ethnic consciousness, it is also true that, “[t]he ethnopolitics of the ‘tribals’ in the region represent to a large extent, an attempt to resist the majority’s efforts to eradicate the distinctiveness or otherness” (Pachuau 1997). Also, the ability to make political claims in ethnic terms is viewed as an increasingly valuable skill by the communities themselves (cf. Shneiderman 2015). Ramirez (2014: 30) sums the situation up neatly as follows:

Ethnicisation has neither preceded nor resulted from political contention or from a quest for communal interests provided by reservation policies. These processes have taken place simultaneously and have mutually reinforced each other. .... Affirmative action aimed at smoothing out inequalities among communities has, by creating new resources, created elites who base their legitimacy on reviving identities and in reinforcing reservations.

These assertions are confirmed by facts on the ground. Bhagabati’s (1992: 507) claim that “[e]thnicity is being used by the tribal leaders for mobilising the people into forming viable pressure groups” is also true for the Tangsa. Hence, attempts at articulation of ethnic identity are embedded in the political discourse of the region. In other words, the processes of identity formation are implicated with ethno-politics (Rothschild 1981, Baumann 1999: 60-61), and in the case of some communities have even led to rabid ethno-nationalism, as the Bodo example illustrates. The Tangsa have not got that far, at least not yet, although awareness is growing.

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42 For a detailed analysis of how new states were progressively carved out from the state of Assam after Indian independence in order to meet the demand for ‘homelands’ for different ethnic groups, see Van Schendel (2011).
43 For a survey and an extensive bibliography of identity related material on India, see Jayaram (2012).
1.4 Outline of the book

1.4.1 The structure of the chapters

There are eight chapters in this book; in this introductory chapter I lay out the general outline, the second chapter is a general introduction to the ‘Tirap’ area where this work is based and the third, an introduction to the Tangsa. Chapters 4, 5, 6 and 7 are the main ethnographic chapters, with the first three focussed on three Tangsa villages in Assam-- Kharangkong, Malugaon and Phulbari (located as on Maps 1-2 and 2-4) -- and the last describing the Tangsa situation in Arunachal. The final chapter, Chapter 8, is mainly analytical and will draw all the different threads together.

Besides specific Tangsa festivals that are described in detail in each of Chapters 4 to 7, the multi-ethnic Dihing Patkai Festival is discussed in Chapter 2 and some older Tangsa festivals described in Chapter 3. The public meeting described in the prelude of the final chapter is a public event and hence also a festival. Therefore each chapter (except this one) contains description of some festival or the other.

Each of the Chapters 4 to 7 will be structured as follows -- it begins with a narrative section (in italics) as a kind of prelude, followed by a descriptive part in which I depict certain aspects of life in the villages, the living conditions and the aspirations of the villagers. The sections on festivals in each chapter will comprise the analytic part of this work. The final part (in another font), which I shall call the ‘Postscript’, will discuss other aspects relevant to the understanding of the village. These final sections are thematically different from the preceding sections in which the Tangsa are centre stage, and are devoted to discussing certain aspects of doing fieldwork with the Tangsa, my own field experiences and development, and the relations of my Tangsa interlocutors vis-a-vis the Assamese and the other communities.

The remaining chapters are structured slightly differently, but should not be difficult to navigate given the difference in fonts.

Since the three villages selected for study in Chapters 4, 5 and 6 are very different from each other, they will be described using different perspectives of narration: personal biography in the first, landscape and livelihood in the next, and religion as a way of life in the third. The focus of the seventh chapter dealing with Arunachal is meant to only bring out the differences, in the festivals as well as in the ways of life, between the Tangsa living there and those living in Assam, besides giving a glimpse of the much greater ethnic, linguistic and religious diversity amongst the Tangsa population in Arunachal.

The descriptive style of writing I have chosen has made this text longer, but hopefully, also more accessible to non-specialists. At times, I have moved relevant theoretical discussions to footnotes in order not to break the narrative flow of the text. Other footnotes contain references or further details about the issues under discussion. Consequently, there are many

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44 In the two introductory chapters (Chapters 2 and 3) as well as in the appendices, I have included topics (such as descriptions of some of their past practices as told to me by elders from memory) because I am also interested in documenting the changes that have taken place in Tangsa society in recent years, and hence I consider an understanding of their past important to the understanding of their present. In so doing, I do not wish to ‘objectify’ their past, or be normative; rather I wish to give my analysis historical depth and record a small part of the cultural history of a few of these groups.
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footnotes in this work, Although they can be disruptive, I have decided to keep them since they add contextual richness to my arguments, and also because adding the contents of some of them to the already long main text would only make it longer.

Translations of all non-English words will be given the first time they appear in the text and also in the glossary. Some non-English words, however, such as ‘basti’ (Hin. settlement) or ‘chang-ghar’ (Ass. stilt-house), will occur frequently and are worth remembering. When using Tangsa terms, I will not mention the language if I am quoting some Tangsa elder -- I will give the form in his/her Tangsa language. Assamese and Hindi words will be marked Ass. and Hin. respectively. The general names of all ethnic groups (both Tangsa and non-Tangsa) that appear in this work are listed in the glossary. Non-English words are reproduced here in a standardised way (using the Roman script) to sound closest to the original but without using diacritics and tone-markers.

1.4.2 Summary of the chapters

Besides giving a general introduction, setting up the theoretical frame and providing a summary of this work, this first chapter also contains, in a section that follows, a description of the DOBES project under which this work was done. I also discuss the methodological problems involved with doing field work as a team and in ‘Tangsaland’; it also contains my personal background as well as the genesis of the central questions I hope to investigate in the chapters that follow.

The second chapter is a general introduction, both geographical as well as historical, to the ‘Tirap’ area where the Tangsa live. It also contains an introduction to the other ethnic groups such as the Singpho, the Sema Naga and the Tai Phake living in the same area as well as a discussion of the problems that these older groups face as a result of the settling of other communities such as the Nepali, the Ahoms and the Tea-tribes in the area. One section is devoted to describing the gradual polarisation that is taking place, and the state’s reaction to the prevailing situation, which finds expression in two events -- first in the organisation of the annual state-sponsored multi-ethnic Dihing Patkai Festival in that area and secondly in the recent formation of a Development Council for eight ethnic groups (including the Tangsa, the Singpho and the Sema Naga). The next section discusses the coming of Baptist Christianity amongst the Tangsa and provides a brief background summary of militant activities of the two insurgent organisations, the NSCN and the ULFA, active in the region. The final section introduces the problem of the Assamese hegemonic attitudes towards the smaller ethnic groups living in Assam.

Chapter 3 focuses on the Tangsa, and discusses their classification into sub-groups such as the Pangwa, their relation to the Naga and the Singpho, as well as some of their ‘traditional’ practices, their festivals, their life-style and their social and cultural traditions. Starting with the past, I end in the present by describing the changes that have come to their lives with their move down the hills, their conversion to Christianity and their gradual move to a ‘modern’ style of living. The last section of the chapter describes my own first introduction to the Tangsa and my first reaction to the difference I noted in their life-styles with mine.

Chapters 4 to 7 are the main chapters of this work based on my own field work experiences and records; while the first three deal with one Tangsa basti in Assam each in turn the last
Chapter 4 unfolds in the Cholim basti of Kharangkong in the home of Aphu Tyanglam, one of the most respected Tangsa elders in Assam. I use Aphu’s biography to describe the Tangsa situation in the basti, and also his personal efforts to revive the Wihu festival for the Tangsa in Assam, and some of the problems involved in the process. I end with a discussion of the advantages as well as problems of having one dominant leader in the village as well as in doing field work with such a person.

Chapter 5 moves closer to the urban centres of Margherita and Ledo to the little Baptist Hakhun Tangsa basti of Malugaon perched on top of a hill right next to a coal mine. By focussing on the landscape and livelihood of the Tangsa living there, and by describing the problems caused by insurgent activities as well as the opportunities offered by the informal trade of coal and opium, I wish to understand the efforts made by the Hakhuns to survive as well as to gain visibility by organising festivals. Their proximity to urban centres imply that the Hakhuns have closer links to the mainstream population and have adopted many of the ways of the plains people; they have also moved ahead in terms of being able to use modern technology for recording their cultural traditions, as well as appreciating the need for language re-vitalisation by developing a script and literacy materials for the Hakhun language.

The Ronrang Tangsa basti of Phulbari described in Chapter 6 is also Baptist, but because of its location in the plains close to the Arunachal border and because of the strong influence of the Baptist Ronrang Tangsa living in the neighbouring bastis in Arunachal, the picture in Phulbari is very different from that in Malugaon. Baptist Christianity plays a defining role in determining the daily routines of many Tangsa people in Phulbari. Efforts of the village leaders towards Tangsa consolidation by organising a pan-Tangsa festival in Phulbari in 2010 will also be described.

The final sections of Chapters 5 and 6 will deal with various aspects of relations and networks my Tangsa interlocutors have with the wider world around them and of my field work experiences in relation to these villages as well as with respect to the Assamese I came into contact with during the course of my work.

Chapter 7 takes us to Arunachal, where I focus only on aspects of Tangsa life there which bring out the difference between the situation there and in Assam, both in terms of the greater diversity of religion and ethnic grouping as well as the differences in the political and administrative set-up. Besides describing a few Tangsa festivals that I attended there, I also describe, in the final section, some critical stages of my stay in the field and the culmination of my field work.

In the final concluding chapter, I try to bring the different strands together, to discuss the various strategies that the Tangsa use in Assam to survive as a small ethnic minority group and how performing identity and ethnicity at festivals can be considered to be yet one more such strategy. This leads to a discussion of Tangsa identity, ethnicity and culture as well as the role of the state and the Assamese ‘other’ in defining what it means to be Tangsa. I also give a listing of all that I did not manage to do or did badly, and also of all that that still needs to be done before some amount of clarity can be achieved in understanding the complex Tangsa picture. The concluding section summarises my findings to make clear the underlying and undeniable connection between performing ethnicity and negotiating marginalisation.
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Postscript to Chapter 1

1.5 Defining my position in the project and in the field

1.5.1 Working in a multi-disciplinary documentation project

The fact that I was an Assamese woman based in Germany with an MA in Culture Studies had got me my job in the Volkswagen-Foundation funded DOBES project,\(^45\) which I have already referred to in Section 1.1.1. The project was titled “The Traditional Songs and Poetry of Upper Assam – a Multifaceted Linguistic and Ethnographic Documentation of the Tangsa, Tai and Singpho Communities in Margherita, Northeast India”.\(^46\) But it was not without trepidation that I, by then already more than 40 years old, joined the international and multi-disciplinary project team.\(^47\)

Since I joined the project more than a year after it had already started, there was not much else for me to do but to quickly fall in place and find my stride. The positive side of joining mid-way was that I could start working right from the first day, as I did not have to do any of the time-consuming initial spade-work a researcher would normally have to do when one visits a field site for the first time; that had already been done by my project-colleagues. But it did restrict my choice of place and field interlocutors. Also since our project had to do with ‘documenting’ the ‘traditional’ culture of the Tangsa, most of our interlocutors were older men.\(^48\) After I joined, I did try to make a special effort to talk to the younger people and also to the women, but somehow it always lapsed after a while and I was left talking with the older men.

Documentation implied that we did multi-sited field-work, all the more since the Tangsa are subdivided into a number of groups, separated mainly by language, spread over several villages in Assam and Arunachal Pradesh. This implied a considerable amount of travelling to collect field-data from different field locations; more so for me, since I wanted to document as many Tangsa festivals as possible.

I joined the project in December 2008 and in the 4-year period made five trips to the Tangsa area amounting to a total time of 16 months,\(^49\) and another trip for more than 2 months early in 2013. We always stayed with Tangsa families. This however also implied that after the first

\(^{45}\) DOBES stands for ‘Dokumentation Bedrohter Sprachen’ or ‘Documentation of Endangered Languages’. Further details are available at http://www.mpi.nl/DOBES.

\(^{46}\) For my fourth and final year I worked in an extension of the earlier project titled “A Multifaceted Study of Tangsa – a Network of Linguistic Varieties in North East India”.

\(^{47}\) The project required all team members to make visual, audio and photographic recordings in the field, make rich meta files to explain each media file and then to upload and archive all our material in the open-access DOBES-archive (http://www.mpi.nl/resources/data/dobes) at the Max Planck Institute for Psycholinguistics at Nijmegen, Netherlands. Workshops were regularly held at Nijmegen to train researchers in the use of the sophisticated software (also for advanced linguistic analysis) developed by the Institute for the purpose

\(^{48}\) This is due to several reasons, first that most of the initial work was done by Stephen Morey who is male, secondly that in each village the men are usually from the tribe we were studying while the women were often from other grops and had come to live in the village only after marriage; which meant that for investigating language this was an added complexity. Finally the women had less time to spare to be able to work with us. Of course there were exceptions.

introductory trip, I decided to travel alone, because our arriving in groups always added to the pressure on our hosts, as they had to find not just one but two rooms: one for me and another for my male colleagues, since it was not considered proper for me to share a room with them.

There was another good reason for working alone which had to do with the efficient use of time – since all the team members had mostly to do with the same few (most often only one) interlocutors, it was really quite a waste for us to arrive together as only one of us could really work with him while the others just waited for their turn. However, being alone also creates a large set of technical problems. It is almost impossible to single-handedly video-record an interview while trying to conduct it. Even more impossible it is to try to record a whole festival alone.

Our methods comprised basically of conversations and interviews which we recorded using only audio recorders for plain conversations and discussions, and video recorders when singing or dancing was involved. Photographs were mainly used to keep records of places, people and artefacts, and GPS recordings were made of all the places visited. Sketch maps, field notes, metadata files were routinely made. Even though not all our Tangsa interlocutors were fluent in Asamiya, almost everyone spoke it to some extent. Moreover, as I do not speak Singpho or any Tangsa language, I spoke to most of my interlocutors in Asamiya, (and sometimes also in Hindi and English) recording conversations and interviews, whenever possible, and later made free translations\textsuperscript{50} into English. These translations form the base of my empirical data.\textsuperscript{51}

In terms of field-work practice, there were some excellent norms, such as the practice of making and giving back soft-copies of every recording to at least a few of those who figure in the recording; we informed our interlocutors that all the data we collected in the field would be archived (at the central DOBES archive at the Max Planck Institute for Psycholinguistics at Nijmegen, Netherland) and would be freely available for use in the future, also by the community.\textsuperscript{52} We also routinely asked permission from our interlocutors before making recordings and explained what we would do with the recordings before uploading any data into the archive, and restricted access to particular recordings, if so wished by the interlocutor.

1.5.2 Field work methods and problems

1.5.2.1 Unconventional field work methods

In order to get the best possible quality of documentation, the technical equipment used by our project was very sophisticated, and there were strict quality standard levels that we were required to maintain. I was acutely aware that my presence itself was changing the picture, more so when I turned up all wired up with cables and ear-phones and carrying a professional-looking

\textsuperscript{50} I am aware of the dangers of misunderstanding and also misinterpreting while making such free translations.\textsuperscript{51} Also since I was part of a team and most of the textual work was done by the linguists in our team, I have decided not to include any samples of language or of translation in this work, and concentrate mostly on my own contributions to the project.\textsuperscript{52} Internet connectivity is still not good in that area; however things have improved significantly even within the duration of our project. Today there is internet connectivity in even a few Tangsa homes and many of the English-educated younger Tangsa people, especially in Changlang, go to internet cafes regularly to check their e-mail.
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camera in my hands. I did try to minimise technical interference, by restricting the use of the video camera\textsuperscript{53} as much as I could, but still it could not be avoided at times since recording visual data was also part of my job.

As an aspiring anthropologist, I could see that my colleagues, who came from other disciplines, had somewhat other methods of doing field work that what I would have preferred. The main problem was that by the time I joined the team, our interlocutors had got so used to being asked questions (to elicit information) that I really could not get them to understand that I was just happy to hang around and observe what was going on. They expected me to ask questions. And when I did ask questions they were often surprised if I did not ask them to sing me a song or tell me a story.

Since most of my Tangsa interlocutors spoke some Asamiya, my mother tongue, I did not learn any of the Tangsa languages. On the other hand, given the incredible linguistic diversity of the Tangsa, my knowledge of any one of the Tangsa language would have not got me very far.\textsuperscript{54} Moreover, since most Tangsa, especially those living in Assam, were fluent in Asamiya, which they used as a sort of lingua franca, I never felt that there was any problem in communication or comprehension. I did not need any assistants/interpreters. While this made communication more direct, it had the disadvantage that my data was not vetted by a second person. It also meant that they could easily switch to their own languages if they did not want to share something with me.

1.5.2.2 Problems to do with the field area

With time, one gets used to the bad to non-existent roads, rudimentary toilets, basic living conditions, and so on. More annoying were the frequent power cuts in the evenings, poor telephone connectivity and the subsequent logistical problems of arranging travel and accommodation. There was also the problem of having to carry substantial amounts of cash, since there were hardly any cash machines (ATMs) beyond Margherita. Crossing the inter-state borders was also not easy as Indians need to obtain Inner Line Permits (ILPs)\textsuperscript{55} to enter Arunachal Pradesh.

The biggest anxiety which was constantly hovering in the background had to do with the proximity of underground insurgents in the area (for more on this, see Section 2.5.2). Certain pockets of the ‘Tirap’ area of Assam, which I will define in Chapter 2, are known to be bases of the ULFA (United Liberation Front of Assam) militants. There was also some NSCN (National Socialist Council of Nagaland) presence in the area, spilling over from Nagaland and Arunachal. The KIA (Kachin Independence Army) were also believed to have some cadres stationed along the Buri-Dihing river. And most recently there have been reports of some major Maoist activity in

\textsuperscript{53} I bought myself a smaller and hence much less conspicuous video camera after my first field trip.

\textsuperscript{54}While staying put with one community would have been fine as far as anthropology was concerned, it would not have served the basic purpose for which I was employed in the project – to use the fact that I could communicate with almost all of the different groups using my knowledge of Asamiya or Hindi to make contact and make recordings from as many different Tangsa communities as possible.

\textsuperscript{55} Although ILP requirements are still in place for non-local Indians, recently the requirement of Restricted-Area-Permits (RAPs) for foreigners have been lifted from all other northeastern states (except Arunachal Pradesh).
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that area. Given this scenario, there was also a lot of army and para-military forces stationed in the region and frequently one heard news of ‘encounters’ between militants and army personnel, often leading to a call of a ‘bandh’ (strike) by some group or the other in protest.56

The town of Margherita is the Head Office of the Northeastern Coalfields of Coal India Limited and there are four operational coal mines in the Ledo area with many high ranking officers and engineers living there. The nearby town of Digboi has an oil-refinery and is the Headquarter of Assam Oil Division of Indian Oil Corporation Limited while the oil drilling company Oil India Limited has its headquarters in Duliajan, also close by (more in Section 2.1). While this meant better infrastructure and facilities in the area, it also meant more money in the hands of the local people, hence making the officers prime targets of militants and underground activists operating in the region.57

Early on in the project, we decided that we would not go out of our way to meet or interview any militant or militant organisation. We also did not ask to know more about their activities, nor even their reaction to our presence in their midst. At least one village where I have stayed is known to be home for some insurgents. Our Tangsa interlocutors would often tell us about incidents involving some of these groups. There were often reports of the presence of insurgents in neighbouring areas and of army searches. We did try, as far as was possible, to find out whether a particular village was ‘safe’ before we arrived there; none-the-less there were a couple of close calls, but we were lucky.

1.5.2.3 A Brahmin Assamese woman alone in Tangsaland

The fact that our field sites were mostly in Assam made me an almost ‘native’ researcher. Of course, that label is contested (cf. Narayan 1993), and there are problems in either case:

The outsider may enter the social situation armed with a battery of assumptions which he does not question and which guide him to certain types of conclusions; and the insider may depend too much on his own background, his own sentiments, his desires for what is good for his people. The insider, therefore, may distort the “truth” as much as the outsider (Jones 1970: 256).

This rang true, for there have been occasions in the field when I have jumped to conclusions too quickly, or misinterpreted things. Therefore I did consciously try to be constantly aware of the importance of “problematising my own cultural blindness” (Ruotsala 2001: 121).

For most Tangsa it was immediately clear (from my name) that I was an Assamese Hindu. What was not as clear was what an Assamese Hindu woman was doing in their midst. Initially, the very idea that such a woman could want to stay in their village simply to find out more about the day-to-day life of the people made some doubt my sincerity, and made them wonder if I was not a government spy or some undercover agent. The reasons for their suspicion have to do with the fact that the Assamese caste Hindu community to which I belong is seen by most of the minorities in the state, including the Tangsa, as the dominant community which controls the state. The

56 The culture of bandhs is a legacy of the Students Agitation in Assam in the 1980s. For more, see Kimura (2013: Chapter 4).

57 There have been several cases of kidnappings of foreigners or high company (Oil or Coal) officials for a ransom often ending in torture and death.
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minorities therefore believe that the Assamese have a much bigger share of the cake (that too perhaps, at their expense) and also that the Assamese do not care about them, and I have witnessed real instances when they have been right in believing so, as I shall describe later in Section 6.4.2.

But soon my Tangsa hosts found out that not only was I a Hindu, but also that I was a Brahmin, that is, I belonged to the highest Hindu caste (which is known for its strict rules for purity and impurity etc.). So while it might have been conceivable for my Tangsa interlocutors to imagine that some Assamese people would not mind eating in their house, they would not expect a Hindu Brahmin to eat a meal with them, leave alone stay in their houses. That fact, coupled with my urban, upper-middle class family background, made it even harder for me to explain to my Tangsa interlocutors my reasons for wanting to work with them and how I could possibly live with them and eat with them without things going badly with me later back home.

Even when they did not figure out my Brahmin Hindu background right away, there were many times, when our hosts were not sure what to make of me because even though as an Assamese I was not quite an outsider, I was not a complete insider either; what was more, I was a woman, that too, a woman, apparently claiming to have a husband but one that none of them had ever met, roaming around all by myself, or with a bunch of men, none of whom was my husband!

In certain senses, it can be easier for a foreigner to do fieldwork in Assam than for an Assamese because of generations of distrust and the far from satisfactory nature of much research done in recent years by local academics (see Section 6.4.1 for more on this). However, since they could speak to me easily in Asamiya, and could relate to me more easily because I was from closer home, my Tangsa interlocutors treated me with a little less formality than they did my foreigner colleagues in the project.

But it also came at a price. For although my foreign colleagues had the right to ask any question they wished to, as an almost native researcher, one did not have the permission to ask silly questions (Ruotsala 2001: 123). There was also this additional ‘burden of a native researcher’, where one is supposed to not only know what is the correct behaviour in certain situations but also to comply. So for example, during a festival, they expected me to sit in my allotted place and not be all over the place trying to record the event. I was also expected to know and tell my foreign colleagues about what they considered to be sensitive topics, and about the ethical issues involved. They automatically assumed I would know. Moreover, since I was a woman, that too one who was expected to conform to the village norms of decent behaviour, I felt uneasy to hang around too long with the men, once they started smoking opium or drinking. That implied that I did not really manage to get included into the men’s domain. And with the women the distance was even greater – for the cultural differences are more obvious when one sits in a kitchen but does not know how to help with the cooking.

Following the rules of field-ethics I did try to explain to our interlocutors about our project and its aims but I am not entirely sure they believed me – after all, why should Germany pay for an

58 Most of the Asamiya-speaking people who live in the same area are either Ahoms or Sonowal Kacharis (see Section 2.3.2); they are usually not Brahmin.
Assamese woman to go and hang around with them for months on end, with apparently no other job but to just chat with people and make free video recordings of village events for them?

1.5.3 Coming to terms with writing up

For me the hardest part, at least in the initial periods of my fieldwork, was not so much coping with the Tangsa but with myself: I could not somehow accept the fact that although I was Assamese and had lived in Assam for most of my life I did not know anything about (worse still, had not even heard of) and had not cared to find out about any of these people, who lived so close by, till then. I told myself that my Tangsa interlocutors had been right in treating me with that initial mistrust.

But they were the first ones to extend their hand of trust and of friendship, which I gratefully accepted. There were even a couple of incidents when I was asked to actually participate in decision-making by my host-families, and I turned into a circumstantial activist (cf. Marcus 1995: 113); at those times my wish of wanting to be just an observer came into direct conflict with my obligation to respond to the request of my hosts, and I chose to follow my gut instincts about which role to take on depending on the context.

Later, as familiarity turned into friendship, I realised that my attitude towards my Tangsa interlocutors had also changed with time (and especially towards the end of my six-month long field trip in the third field season). As I slowly began to really participate in their daily normal life (like cooking with them), I stopped thinking of them as objects of study. Their problems had started to become ‘real’ for me. I had become part of their families, as much as they had become part of my life.

And with this also changed the nature of how I looked at the project. For, I was no longer doing it because I was paid to do so or for the sake of my Ph.D. but for ‘their’ sake as well. There was this growing sense of responsibility towards my field community – “people to whom we are bonded through ties of reciprocity” (Narayan 1993: 672), and this sense of obligation and responsibility grew stronger over time. I was terrified that like Lassiter’s Kiowa interlocutor, my Tangsa interlocutors would also accuse my ethnography of having more relevance to other anthropologists than to them (Lassiter 2005: 18-19). For like Lassiter, I wanted to do an “ethnography that could be read, discussed and used at various levels by both academics and my interlocutors” in an effort “to narrow the gap between anthropology and the communities” studied. But that seemed like a tall order.

59 My Master’s thesis was on Assamese identity (Bhattacharjee 2008). But in that study I had only looked at the Assamese caste Hindu population. The fact is that there is very little contact between the dominant majority Assamese population and the other groups living in Assam.

60 For instance, on one occasion I was asked by my host Tangsa family to intervene in order to persuade their young son to return to boarding school; the young boy had come home for his holidays and had met his other friends who had either stopped going to school or were attending the local village school, and told his parents that he would not go back to boarding school again.

61 The level of my emotional involvement in their affairs became clear to me particularly on the occasion of the eloping and then homecoming of one of the daughters of one of our interlocutors.
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And if that was not enough, came the next worry -- did I know anything about the Tangsa at all that was worth writing about, that would bear scrutiny? Furthermore, was there anything that I could write about that even my Tangsa interlocutors would value? That worry had haunted me for a very long time. There were many moments during the course of my field stay when I really asked myself if my informants were simply telling me what they thought I wanted to hear, but which carried no real meaning to them. Were we (the team) then in danger of over-interpreting or mis-interpreting what we had seen and what we had been told? These questions became more and more relevant to me over time as I sometimes had the feeling that our Tangsa interlocutors were beginning to use the fact of our presence for their own ends, for instance, when they sought to raise the importance of their village festival in the eyes of the local administration by mentioning the fact that some foreign researchers had attended.

Coupled with my diffidence about my knowledge about the Tangsa, there was another big question that bothered me no end. It was the question I was asked at the beginning of the chapter: Why study the Tangsa at all? For on most counts, the Tangsa story, or that part of it that I had been able to unearth, apart from their mind-boggling linguistic diversity, seemed very similar to stories of other ethnic groups in the region. There was this irritating sense of déjà vu when I read works of other scholars, such as Erik de Maaker’s work on the Wangala dance of the Garos or Alban von Stockhausen’s description of the Naga Hornbill festival, working in the area. Was there any point in writing another book about the same things? It would have the same arguments, the same logical development, and the same conclusions.

Why then must it be? The bottom line of course was that it is the only story I had to tell, and secondly, for my Tangsa interlocutors it did matter whether their story was told or not, whether there was a book with their name on the cover; perhaps not many Tangsa would be able to read and make sense of my writing immediately, but as Robbins Burling had pointed out to me a long time ago, the Garos were just happy to hold his book (Burling 1963) about them in their hand, look at the photos and feel that someone at least had taken them seriously. And since it bothered me so much, perhaps this could be one way of making up to my Tangsa informants for all the indifference and insensitivity they have had to suffer at the hands of my fellow Assamese.

Added to all these worries related to the Tangsa, I had also some problems with myself and with my discipline of anthropology. As already mentioned, my seniors in the anthropology department did not approve of the working methods (based on eliciting information) of our team (led by linguists) as well as the basic idea of documenting ‘endangered languages’ and ‘disappearing cultures’. I did see the problem with that, but it was also hard to argue that a language should not be called ‘endangered’ in the face of the certain fact that the only two speakers left of the language were both over 80 years of age.

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62 One instance of this was when a red chicken was sacrificed one year at a festival, and we naturally assumed the red colour to have some meaning till a brown chicken was sacrificed the following year.
63 See Saikia (2005: xiv) for a similar discussion viz-a-viz the Tai Ahom community in Assam.
64 It was heartening therefore to discover that I was not the only one who had problems of this kind. See, for example, the discussion in (Pelto 1970: Epilogue) titled “Relevance, Ethics and the Future of Anthropology”, not only about topics of research but also the language in which one writes up.
I also had problems also with the anthropologists’ endeavour to find deep meaning in everything and the need to be politically correct at all times. For, working with the Tangsa had made me realise that, rather than having some deep unfathomable logic, most of their decisions were based on primarily pragmatic considerations; therefore I felt that it was my duty to “not build things up that aren’t there” (Lassiter 2005: 14). In other words, I had to be careful not explain away the Tangsa, but to describe them in a way that readers could get a faithful impression about them, and to do that one should be allowed to comment about what was surprising or what was unpleasant. I was aware, of course, that my reactions could not be assumed to be typical or canonical in any way. Still I believed that as long as I made my position clear, adding my own reaction would make the description only ‘thicker’.

Therefore, it was not just the ‘what’ but also the ‘how’ I would write that was bothering me. If it were not for Kirin Narayan’s staunch defence of ‘narrative ethnography’ (Narayan 1993: 681) and Sanjib Baruah’s timely prod to ‘suspend disbelief and just write’, I might have perhaps not made it this far. Considering everything, I decided to use the ‘language of everyday life’, as recommended by Abu-Lughod (1991: 151). Jaarsma’s words below came both as a challenge as well as an invitation. I wanted to see how far I would get:

Taking this challenge seriously will profoundly change the way we work. Theoretical sophistication and exclusionary jargon will no longer be the measure of our work, but will be superseded by a demand for clarity and accessibility. Sophisticated analysis, however fruitful in its application, cannot serve any community’s long term purpose if it virtually encrypts the knowledge it produces. In the long run, the production of ethnographic knowledge defeats its own purpose if it does not become available and accessible to a wider audience, including the people we study (Jaarsma 2002: 12).
Map 1-3: Part of the 1927 British Map showing the Tirap area (see Map 2-3)
Chapter 2 Introduction to the Tirap Area

The Tangsa and the other Naga tribes are like the five fingers in one hand, each a little different from the others, but all bound together.

Aphu Tyanglam, Kharangkong village, Assam

The Tangsa population is scattered over the trans-Patkai region. Most Tangsa in India live in the Changlang District of Arunachal Pradesh, mainly on the western slopes of the Patkai hills. Many more Tangsa live across the border in Myanmar (where they are called Tangshang or Heimi Naga). A handful of Tangsa also live in Upper Assam, concentrated in its eastern most tip, in the Margherita subdivision of the Tinsukia district, capped by the Changlang District, as shown in the map below, which also shows some Tangsa villages where I worked, both in Assam and in Arunachal. I call the area where the Tangsa live in Assam ‘Tirap’ as it contains the Tirap mouza\(^1\) and since most of it lies between the Buri Dihing and Tirap rivers, see Maps 1-2 and 2-4.

Map 2-1: Some of my field locations

The first time I had heard the term ‘Tirap’\(^2\) was in an Assamiya song by the Assamese music maestro Bhupen Hazarika titled ‘Tirap Simanta’ (The Tirap Frontier). As a child, places like Tirap and Sadiya were really at the outer boundaries of my Assamese world. Today, there is a

\(^1\) A *mouza* (perhaps a term brought into use during Mughal times) is the smallest revenue collection unit in the country, the revenue collectors being called *mouzadar*. See Section 2.2.2 for more details.

\(^2\) The word Tirap is possibly derived from *ti/di* meaning water or river in several languages of the area (the Bodo word is *di*). The word *rap* does mean ‘cross’ as in cross the river in some Tangsa varieties. The word is probably borrowed from Singpho. Upadhyaya (2012: 172) claims that Tirap is a Tangsa word.
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district in eastern Arunachal named Tirap, bordering Nagaland. During my first visit to the Tangsa village of Phulbari, I discovered that Tirap was also the name of the beautiful river along which it was located; and it was the same river one crossed near Lekhapani at Tirap Gate. And of course I had seen the Tirap colliery near Ledo. Many other terms -- the Tirap Frontier Tract, the Tirap Tribal Belt, and the Tirap Transferred Area -- also contained the word Tirap. Hence that name Tirap sounded just right for the area in Assam where I would base my work with the Tangsa. From now on, whenever I use the word Tirap, I will refer to this particular area, unless specified differently.

2.1 Brief History of the Tirap area

Although most of the Tangsa villages I worked in were beyond Ledo towards Lekhapani and Jagun, the Tirap area belonged to the Margherita subdivision with head-quarters in the town of Margherita. During my first visit to ‘Tangsaland’ what had surprised me most were the many industries, besides the tea gardens, that were to be seen in that supposedly remote and forgotten corner of a state that had not many industries to boast of, in any case. I had imagined that the landscape beyond the urban centres of Dibrugarh and Tinsukia would be ‘rural’. Contrary to my expectations, the area looked almost ‘cosmopolitan’. The little towns of the area – Digboi, Makum, Duliajan, Margherita, Ledo (see Map 2-2 on page 33) -- were populated not just by the Assamese and the tribal communities of the area, but also by Nepalis, Bengalis, as well as people from other parts of the country. Also the name Margherita sounded quite European – I was mystified!

To set the scene, I need to go back at least to British times, to the first quarter of the nineteenth century. It is common knowledge in the area that it was a Singpho chieftain who first gave a wild tea plant to a British officer, heralding the birth of the tea industry in Assam. This led to what later came to be called ‘the great enclosure movement in Assam’ (cf. J. Sharma 2012) when the British tried to acquire large areas of agricultural and forest land to set up large tea gardens in the vast rolling plains and valleys of Upper Assam. More disturbingly, the establishment of tea-gardens not only implied the ‘entry of over a million labouring migrants’ from Central India, but as J. Sharma (2012) argues, “decisively transformed the region’s social demographics”, because besides the ‘tea coolies’, Marwari traders, Nepali graziers, Sylhetti clerks, and East Bengali Muslim peasants’ also came to settle in the region and to create new social and political identities; (cf. J. Sharma 2012: 17, Dasgupta 1991). Some consequences of these demographic changes will be discussed later in this chapter.

3 Not any more, after the recent creation of the Longding district in 2011 dividing the earlier Tirap district into two.
4 Approximate distances between some these towns: Dibrugarh to Tinsukia (NH 37): 50 kms; Tinsukia to Margherita, via Makum and Digboi) (NH 37 & NH 38): 45 kms; Margherita to Ledo (NH 38):10 kms; Ledo to Jagun, via Lekhapani (NH 38 & NH 153): 20 kms.
5 In some Tai languages, ma means to come and kum means to get together. So Makum was known to be a meeting place of the plains and the hills people for a long time already. The original town of Makum was where Margherita is now, and the name Makum junction was given to refer to the place where the train headed off towards Makum. Now Makum Junction is simply called Makum. Also, according to some Singphos, there is a Singpho clan called Magum, and the name comes from that -- yet another instance of folk etymology.
6 For details of the relations of the British to the many hill tribes of Assam, see Chakravorty (1964).
The existence of coal deposits in the area around Makum in Assam was already known to the British by then but since transportation was a problem not much happened till the middle of the nineteenth century. In 1867, oil was also discovered in the area by a group of British prospecting for coal.\(^7\)

In the early years, tea -- grown in upper Assam -- was transported by big steamers down the Brahmaputra to Calcutta. Soon, however, the Assam Railways and Trading Company (A R & T Co) was set up in 1881 to extend the railway beyond Dibrugarh. The Company was also given rights over coal and hence also oil prospecting in the area. An Italian engineer Roberto Paganini stationed himself in Makum to supervise the work. The Ledo Colliery was started in 1882. In 1884 when the railway line, the bridge across the Dihing river and the Tikak coal mine were opened, it was mentioned in a company report that the Company’s settlement beyond Makum junction had been named Margherita in honour of the Queen of Italy.\(^8\) And that tiny little settlement became so important for the British that during a visit in March 1900, the Viceroy Lord Curzon said, “As soon as my present tour to Assam was arranged, I wished from the first to include in it a visit to Margherita and the coal mines and oil wells and other industries which have

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\(^7\) For more on the history of oil in the region, see Saikia (2011).

\(^8\) Margherita of Savoy (Margherita Maria Teresa Giovanna; 20 November 1851 – 4 January 1926) was the wife and Queen consort of the King of Italy, Umberto I who reigned from 1878 to 1900. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Margherita_of_Savoy (accessed 13.6.2013)
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been developed by the Company.... I find here a most interesting and enterprising corner of Her Majesty’s Dominions."

The other industries besides the flourishing tea industry, were a very large wood industry producing plywood for the wooden chests for transporting tea to Calcutta; wood was also necessary to produce berths for the railways wagons. Timber was plentiful and was transported from the forests using elephants. A saw-mill and plywood factory was set up in Margherita. The construction of the railway and collieries created substantial demand for bricks. By 1890, a brick-kiln was set-up at Ledo.

As far as the underlying objectives of the British were concerned, Rustomji (1985: 23) remarks:

The British interest was primarily commercial, the development of the tea industry and, later, the exploitation of oil, mineral and forest resources. Their concern with the hill-men was strictly limited – that they should not come in the way of the acquisition of land and forest areas required for establishing tea gardens and not interfere with the functioning of such gardens when established.

In those early days, work in the coal fields progressed rapidly with the use of local Naga workers who lived in the area and who were adept at cutting down trees and clearing forests, as they did that all the time for their jhum (swidden) cultivation. But nothing would tempt the Naga to go down the underground mines or to work in the oil-wells. But the British had already learnt the trick of importing labour from other parts of India to work in their tea-gardens, so they brought in labour from Bengal, Bihar and also from faraway Andhra Pradesh to work in their mines and in the oil fields.

Much earlier, the oil interests of the A R & T Co were taken over by the Assam Oil Company (AOC) which was formed in 1899. Digboi refinery, commissioned in 1901, is the oldest refinery in India, and played an important role of making available fuel to run the Allied effort in the area during World War II. The coal mines were nationalised in the 1970s and restarted operations again in the early 1980s under the aegis of Coal India Limited; see Section 5.2.1. Many of the tea gardens in and around Digboi, Margherita and Ledo now also belong to huge conglomerates such as the Tata Group and Williamson Magor. The flourishing timber and plywood industry in the Margherita-Makum-Dumdooma area (and also elsewhere) collapsed after the ban on felling trees came in December 1996 by order of the Supreme Court (cf. Simai 2008: 18-19).

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9 For this and many other delightful details of the first years of the A R &T Company, the reader is referred to Surita (1981) published during its centenary celebrations in 1981.
10 Some valuable timber varieties were Hollong (Dipterocarpus pilosus) (Dipterocarpus macrocarpus), Mekai (Shorea assamica), Hollock (Terminalia myriocarpa), Nahor (Mesua ferrea), Sal (Shorea robusta), Gondhosoroi (Cinnamonum Cecicodaphne) etc.
11 Most of these supposedly Naga people who used to live in this area must have been Tangsa. As mentioned in Section 2.2.1 before the term Tangsa was coined, many of the Tangsa tribes were clubbed together as Naga.
12 Other tribal groups also seem to have limits on the kind of work they were willing to do. The Tai people, for instance, told us they would never build roads, for example.
13 Ledo, Margherita, Pawoi, Namdang, Pengeri, Dirok and Bogapani Gardens are names of some of the larger tea estates in the area today.
Margherita today is a bustling trading town of more than 25,000 people, a majority of them Bengali. Given the history of the area around Margherita it is not difficult to explain the heterogeneity of its population and also the difference of this area, in terms of having a concentration of so many industries in a small area, compared to most other parts of Assam where the picture is more homogeneously agricultural and rural. It is rumoured that, during some period in the early 20th century, the undivided Dibrugarh district was supposed to have brought in the highest amount of excise revenue for any district in the country. The dilapidated 1890 brick kiln at Ledo (see photo on the left) and a rather inconspicuous signboard of a school in Margherita mentioning the A R & T Co are the only reminders I found in the field of those old Company days.

2.2 Geographical description and political history of the Tirap Area

The old maps of the Tirap area tell the story of progressive migration and settlement in the area. The 1927 British map\(^\text{14}\) (Tandy 1927), see Map 2-3 on the next page, shows vast tracts of the Lakhimpur Frontier Tract marked as Singpho areas in the north and Tikhak (Naga) and Ponthai (Naga) areas in the south. It shows that at least at that point of time, there were Singpho and some Naga groups like Tikhak, Yongkuk and Kato living in the area between the two rivers. The Tikhak were to the south of the Tirap river; the Naga village of Tokjong (presumably Ponthai) was on the north bank of the Burhi-Dihing river and the Naga village of Hasak (presumably Yongkuk) as well as the Singpho villages of Bisa, Kumsai, Kotha and Pangshun were between the two rivers, as they are today. The village of Longtong (Sema Naga) and Khongban (presumably a Yongkuk clan name) are also marked on the map just north of the Tirap. The term Tangsa was not in use at that time; the term ‘Rangpang Naga’ (which the British used later for the Tangsa) also does not appear in the 1927 maps; in most documents the Tangsa groups were named separately and qualified by the term Naga.\(^\text{15}\)

\(^{14}\) Part of the map is reproduced in the original as Map 1-3, on page 30, at the end of the last chapter; a sketch map showing the named Rangpang Naga groups (Map 2-3) is given in the next page.

\(^{15}\) Some present day Tangsa groups were also referred to as the Trans-Patkoi Nagas in some British reports.
Map 2-3: Sketch showing the Tangsa (Naga) groups named in the 1927 British map (Map 1-2)
2.2.1 Administrative history

The administrative history of the area is very complex; as early as 1903-04, the tribal tracts in the plains of Lakhimpur were brought under direct administration. The Tangsa were the main inhabitants of this area. This area was part of Dibrugarh Frontier Tract (DFT) of the erstwhile Lakhimpur District till 1914, when the DFT became part of Sadiya Frontier Tract and Lakhimpur Frontier Tract.

In 1943, the Tirap Frontier Tract was created (with Headquarters at Margherita) with certain areas from the Sadiya Frontier Tract. This Tract was created during the time of the World War II mainly to facilitate the construction of a motorable road, later known as the Stilwell Road (see Photo 2-2 on the next page), for opening of a passage to Burma (cf. Barua 1991: 23).

The area which was carved out from the Sadiya Frontier Tract to form part of the Tirap Frontier Tract in 1943 was known as Rangpang Area. [...] From February 25, 1943, following the posting of a separate Political Officer, the Rangpang area with some parts carved out of the Lakhimpur Frontier Tract and the Excluded Area (1936) was formally constituted into a separate administrative unit to be known as Tirap Frontier Tract (Barua 1991: 345ff).

In 1951, some part of the Rangpang Area, now called the Tirap Transferred Area, which was in the plains, was transferred from the Tirap Frontier Tract to the jurisdiction of the erstwhile Lakhimpur district of Assam (Barua 1991: 353). Although the reasons were not stated officially as such, the presence of the coal mines and the oil wells in the Tirap Transferred Area was possibly the main reason for this area to be transferred into Assam from the Tirap Frontier Tract.

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16 As mentioned in Gazetteer (1980: 39ff), see also Chakravarty. The Tangsas were required to pay a tax of two rupees per house and the Singphos of Bordumsa three rupees per adult (cf. Gazetteer 1980: 41).
18 During the WWII, the Stilwell Road was known to the Allied forces as Ledo Road — starting from Ledo in upper Assam up to Pangsa Pass in Arunachal Pradesh — and Burma Road from the Indo-Myanmar border up to Kunming in China. Considered an engineering marvel, the road was built mainly by the Americans with the help of British, Indian, Burmese and Chinese soldiers and labourers. Meant as a supply channel from India to China through Burma to support the Chinese troops fighting the Japanese Army, the road zigzags through the rugged mountainous region of north-eastern India and the dense jungles of Burma. The full length of this route was 1726 kms. Only about 60 kms of the Stilwell Road lie in India today, most of it in Assam. See Photo 2-2. For more details on the Stilwell road, see Barua (1991: 23).
19 For the notification and a full description of the area, see Barua (2013[1991]: 426-8, Appendix II, para 3).
20 As early as in 3rd May 1926, the then Political Officer of the Sadiya Frontier Tract, Mr.T.P.M. O’Callaghan, had written a letter to the Deputy Commissioner, Lakhimpur, in which he wrote: “In connection with the notification of the Inner Line of the Sadiya Frontier Tract consequent to the completion of the survey of this district, I have the honour to ask whether you do not consider if the time has not arrived for the revision, if not the abolition of the Lakhimpur Frontier Tract by absorption in the Lakhimpur District[...] The Assam Railways and Trading Company have opened a colliery and it is for consideration whether this area should not, for administrative reasons, be absorbed in the Lakhimpur District together with the area occupied by the Nagas up to the Tirap river boundary of the Sadiya Frontier Tract” (cf. Report 1929).
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which then became part of the erstwhile North East Frontier Agency (NEFA) and was subject to Inner Line Regulations. 

The Tirap mouza was created in 1953 with the portion taken out from the Tirap Frontier Tract i.e. the Tirap Transferred Area (with an area of above 100 square miles). In 1976, when the Lakhimpur District was split, with the creation of the Dibrugarh District, the Tirap mouza became part of the Dibrugarh District, and when the Dibrugarh district was split in 1989, it became part of the Tinsukia District. This is the area where the Tangsa now live in Assam.

The Tirap Transferred Area was earlier part of the Abor-Mismi-Tirap-Balipara Tribal Belts. In 1951, this area was separated and reconstituted as the Tirap Tribal Belt with a total geographical area of about 2,90,400 bighas (about 96,000 acres or 150 square miles) and 62

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21 NEFA was later renamed as Arunachal Pradesh when it became a Union Territory in 1972.

22 The Inner Line Regulations of 1873, were in force in the hill areas of northeast India and restricted entry of outsiders into these areas. The Government of India Constitution Act of 1935 conferred upon most of the hill areas of northeast India the status of ‘excluded areas’, under the direct administration of the provincial Governor.

23 As stated in a letter dated 25th July 1953, in which the appointment of Bisa Jokhong as the Mouzadar of the newly created Tirap mouza is also mentioned. [The letter is currently with the son and current Mouzadar of the Tirap Mouza, Bisanong Singpho (DoI: 20.1.12) and published in Changmai (2003: 51)]. This area extended from Lekhapani right up to Jairampur.

24 The Abor/Mishmi and Tirap Tribal Belts were originally one belt but were separated into three different belts. Tribal Belt means that only certain notified protected classes of people can live here, besides the tribals: they are the tea-tribes, Nepali (grazers and cultivators) and scheduled castes. These Belts are administered under Section 161 of Chapter X (added in 1947) of the Assam Land and Revenue Regulation of 1886.


26 1 acre is roughly 3.025 bighas. The difference in size of the Tribal Belt and the Tirap Mouza is explained by the fact that some parts of the Tirap Tribal Belt (for example, the area around Ketetong) do not belong to the Tirap mouza.
villages. Although these facts have not changed significantly,\textsuperscript{27} as I show later in this chapter, the demography of the area has changed drastically in the period between then and the present.

### 2.2.2 Some administrative and terminological details

Top-down, for administrative purposes, each of the 29 states (formerly also called provinces) of the Indian Union is divided into districts, and the districts into subdivisions. Subdivisions, headed by Sub Divisional officers (SDOs), are further divided into circles for revenue purposes (headed by a Circle Officer, earlier called the Sub Deputy Collector or SDC) which are then again subdivided into mouzas under a mouzadar. Kharangkong, Phulbari and Malugaon, about which I shall say more about in the following chapters, belong to the Margherita subdivision of the Tinsukia district of Assam. Margherita subdivision has one Revenue Circle which is further subdivided into three mouzas -- Makum, Buri Dihing and Tirap. Malugaon (as well as the towns of Margherita and Ledo) belongs to the Makum mouza while Kharangkong and Phulbari belong to the Tirap mouza. All villages in the Tirap Mouza belong to the Tirap Tribal Belt.

I have already used the term ‘basti’ (originally a Hindi word) to mean settlement, village or part of a village; for example, by the Cholim basti in Kharangkong village I will mean that part or section of Kharangkong village area where most of the Cholim Tangsa people live. Note also that besides the Cholim basti and the main Kharangkong basti there is also a Nepali basti and an Asamiya (Ahom) basti, all of which belong to the village of Kharangkong. Village will mean an official administrative and revenue unit, often covering a much larger area than just the basti where the Tangsa live. For example, Parbatipur village (of which the Ronrang Tangsa basti of Upper Phulbari is only a very small part) extends technically all the way from 4-mile near Lekhapani to 10-mile beyond Jagun on the right of the National Highway.

A (revenue) village often has a Headman called ‘Gaonbura’ in Assam or simply GB. Gaonburas are selected and then appointed by the administration,\textsuperscript{28} but in the Tangsa area it is often hereditary, the current incumbents often being descendants of one of the first families who came to live in the area. While Kharangkong and Parbatipur are revenue villages, in the above sense, Malugaon is not to date an officially recognised village and is referred to as a NC (non-cadastral) village. The Gaonbura of Malugaon, therefore, although he exists and performs more or less the same functions as the others, is not officially appointed and is called an honorary GB. I shall continue to refer to Phulbari and Malugaon as villages (and sometimes also as bastis), even though they are not strictly officially recognised villages as defined above, and even though Phulbari actually comprises of two bastis -- Upper and Lower (see Section 6.1.1). In the same sense, I shall refer to places like Ledo, Manmao and Nampong as towns, to make a difference between semi-urban settlements and villages (or bastis), even though they probably do not classify to be called towns in the strictly technical definition of the term, which is reserved for places which have a population of more than 5,000 inhabitants.

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\textsuperscript{27} As per official records, presently there are 62 villages and 25 NC (non-cadastral) villages in the Tirap Tribal Belt.

\textsuperscript{28} The GBs are essentially revenue functionaries and are accountable to the mouzadars at the mouza level and to the Circle Officer at the Circle level. In Arunachal, GBs are given red coats as a sign of their status.
2.3 The diversity in Tirap

Summing up Section 2.1, in the words of one senior Assamese interlocutor from Margherita:

Margherita was ‘discovered’ by the British because of the coal, tea, plywood and minerals that were available in this region. Hence the local society at that time was based mainly on the British and the industrial workers who had come in from other parts of the country. Therefore, there was this immigrant (but economically and socially advanced) community in Margherita on the one hand and the tribal people who had always lived here and led relatively undisturbed (and hence relatively laid back) lives till the onset of World War II (DoI: 26.2.2012).

Some of the tribes that were present in the Tirap area by the first quarter of the twentieth century are mentioned in the quote from a British Report below.

The tribes known as Nagas occupy the hills stretching south and east of the Sadiya, Lakhimpur, Sibsagar and Nowgong districts from the Patkoi to North Cachar. In the northeast they merge into the Singphos and in the south (in the Manipur state) into Kukis...... East of the Tirap the ascendancy of the Singphos are said to be complete, but west of that their influence in the past has probably been considerable. The Rangpang and the Tikhak Nagas, who live on the slopes of the Patkoi and west of the Hukong valley, are said to have been driven into their present area by pressure from the Kachins or Singphos (Report 1921-22: 90).

29 There are also some other groups living near the area, like the Morans, a big community living to the north of the Dihing. They had their own language, which was still in use till the 1870s (Gurdon 1904).
Most of these groups had crossed the Patkai and come in from Myanmar at various points of time in the past. For more on these groups (see Barua 1991). The four tribal groups who have been longest in the area are the Tangsa, Singpho, Sema Naga and Tai Phake. From now on I shall call them collectively the ‘older’ tribal groups of the Tirap area. Next I introduce three of them, except the Tangsa about whom I shall say more in the next chapter.

2.3.1 Some of the ‘older’ tribes living in the Tirap area

Singpho

The Singpho, literally meaning ‘man’, (also known as Jinghpaw (Kachin) or Jingpo in Myanmar and China respectively), belong to the group called Kachin in Leach’s 1954 classic treatise on the groups living in Highland Burma (see also Ghosh 1992). The Singpho lived in the Hukong valley in the Kachin and Shan states in Myanmar and have migrated from there several hundred years ago across the Patkai ranges to settle in the plains of the Dihing and Tirap rivers of Assam. Another source sets 1793 as the date of arrival of the Singpho in the eastern tip of the frontier region, crossing the Patkai Pass to meet the Khampti, whom they ousted from their settlement in the Tengapani area, east of Sadiya.

Famed to be fierce fighters, these Singpho came into contact (and conflict) with the other local population including the Ahom (see Section 2.3.2) as well as with the British and several treaties were signed between Singpho chieftains and the British administration to maintain peace and law and order in the Tirap area. For more details, see Gazetteer (1980: 35-39).

The Singpho living in India embraced Buddhism as early as in 1891. The Singpho/Jinghpaw language was till very recently a sort of *lingua-franca* of the tribal population in the area. Many Singpho words like ‘*pum*’ for hill are still in common use in the area. Names of many villages and towns, like Ledo, Kumsai, Pansun etc. are also derived from Singpho words. Unlike the Tai groups who have a script, the Singpho in India initially had no script, so they had used the Asamiya, Burmese or Tai scripts, but now some try to use the Roman script (although many Singpho elders I met still usually write Singpho using the Asamiya script).

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20 Kachin is a cultural term, Jinghpaw is a linguistic term. Kachins are not just Jinghpaw speaking people, but a range of groups, several speaking distantly related Burmic languages, who form a cultural unit. This relationship doesn’t exist in India. The term Singpho refers both to the people as well as their language in India. The language of the Singphos in Assam is similar (though not identical) to what Leach (1954) calls Jinghpaw. For more see Nath (2013), Sadan (2013).

21 Although they are acknowledged to have arrived in the area earlier, the first mention of them in British records is around 1825, when a band of Singpho men invaded Sadiya (cf. Mackenzie 1884: 62).

22 “The Singphos are by far the most powerful tribe bordering on the valley”, wrote Robinson in 1871. “They are generally a fine athletic race above the ordinary standard in height and capable of enduring great fatigue; but their energies are greatly impaired by the use of opium and spirits in which they freely indulge. And probably for this reason their number is dwindling” (cf. Gazetteer 2010) (see also Sadan 2013 Ch. 1).

23 Jinghpaw is widely used as a *lingua franca* by groups who have some quite different mother tongues – this is the case with many Naga villages on the north-western fringes of the Kachin Hills Area (Leach 1954: 46).

24 For more on this see Mahanta (2011: 30).
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There are not many Singpho in India, but they have close links with their relatives in the Kachin state, in Yunnan, in Thailand and elsewhere. The Singpho in India have put in a lot of effort in recent times to reconnect with their relatives abroad. There is a Singpho Development Society in Arunachal and a Singpho National Council in Assam. They also organise a big annual festival called the Shapawng Yawng Manau Poi in mid-February every year.

Manje la Singpho is one of the main leaders of the Singpho community in Assam today. He is very much involved in all these activities as well as with creating a new Singpho orthography using the Roman script (cf. Nath 2013). He has also composed an anthem for the Singpho to be sung at the Shapawng Yawng Manau Poi. He and his wife run the Singpho Eco Lodge in Inthong. He was the Organising Secretary of the Dihing Patkai Festival in 2010 (see Section 2.4.1) and has become the President of the Development Council formed in 2011 (more in Section 2.4.2).

Sema Naga (Sumi/Simi)

The Sema Naga living in the Tirap area have come from the Zuhneboto district in the state of Nagaland. Today there are seven Sema Naga villages in Assam, the oldest being Tsaliiki followed by Lalpahar and Longtong, and then Paharpur, Balijan, Tinkopathar and Kopatoli (near Makum). Longtong village, close to Kharangkong, was established in 1931, and Lalpahar in 1936.

About the Sema Naga people living in the area, the official website has this to say:

In 1904, it was the British Rulers who brought about 300 to 400 young people of this tribe to upper Assam and encamped them at Sadiya. These tribesmen were brought with a view to engage them in

35 According to the 2001 Census, there were 3,412 Singpho in the Bordumsa area of the Changlang District of Arunachal Pradesh (see Map 0-2). Manje la Singpho (see Fn. 38 below) claimed there were about 15,000 Singpho in India at present (2012), about half of them in Assam, settled in 34 revenue circles. The actual figure could be lower. Sadan (2013: 7) puts the number at around 10,000.

36 Some Singpho we met maintain very close links with the greater Singpho/Jinghpaw/Kachin organisations based in Myanmar and Thailand and go often to Bangkok for conferences etc. There are also regular periodicals published by these organisations to which they often contribute articles. Mandy Sadan’s 2013 monograph gives many details of these connections and networks. However, she also points to the the fact that the Kachin is Myanmar are Christian and the Jingpo in Yunnan are communists create tensions in their relations with the Buddhist Singphos in India.

37 Poi is a general term for festivals. Shapawng Yawng is believed to be the first Jinghpaw (cf. Leach 1954: 270). They have been celebrating this festival in India since 1985, when it was held in the town of Miao. For more on this festival see Farrelly in http://asiapacific.anu.edu.au/newmandala/2008/02/22/manau-in-arunachal-pradesh/(accessed 07.04.2015). See Sadan (2013 Ch. 9) for another description of a manau festival.

About the role of the manau festival in identity considerations of the Kachins in different parts of the world Sadan (2013: 420 ff) states: "The manau festival today has become the main symbol not only of Kachin ethnic identity in Burma but also of Singpho Tribal identity in India and Jingpo identity as a National Mainority in China. In recent years it has also gained status as a symbol for a new, formally recognised Kachin cultural presence inside Thailand, as well as many Kachin diaspora groups around the world today.[...]They also provide the setting for the ongoing negotiation of internal ideologies and symbolic social relations.".

38 Manje la grew up in the Dibong Buddhist monastery (where he lived from 1969 when his mother died to his graduation from Digboi College). Manje la had met our project advisor Barend Terwiel, as a little boy, when Terwiel had stayed with the ‘Bhante’ (head monk) of the monastery for nearly 20 days in 1977. His father was Haren Manje, a leader of that area who was also active in the Santi Parishad, see Fn. 69.

39 More on the Sema Nagas see Hutton’s classic 1921 work. For more recent work in linguistics, see the work of Amos Teo, Ph.D. student at the University of Oregon.

different sort of activities as these young folks were brave, honest and were accustomed with jungle life. Some of the youths were selected as guards, some of them were engaged as cooks and the rest were sent to Digboi for Jungle clearing works etc. Later some of them were employed in the newly established Assam Oil Company. Lastly, these hard working tribesmen were brought to Margherita, popularly known as Telpong in those [days ? (sic)], for using their labour in the construction of the historic Stilwell road from Ledo to Pangensau Pass (Indo-Myanmar border). Some of these brave tribesmen died halfway through due to malaria etc. and the rest who survived never returned to their native land i.e. Nagaland and settled down under Margherita sub-division with due permission from the then British political officer G. D. Walker.

There were about 2,500 Sema Naga living in Assam some ten years back. They claim to have embraced Baptist Christianity from as early as in the 1930s, encouraged by Baptist missionaries from Nagaland. But they still celebrate a ‘traditional’ festival called ‘Tuluni’ on the 8th July every year. Although many of the Sema Naga people I met could trace their descent to some place in Nagaland, most of them did not have any direct links to any Sema Naga living in Nagaland, except those through their church.

**Tai groups**

Besides Singpho and Naga Sema villages there are a few villages of Tai people, mainly the Tai Phake and the Tai Khanyang, scattered in the Tirap area. These ‘Buddhist’, Tai speaking, wet-rice growing, valley and plains dwelling populations’ are what Leach (1954) defines as the Shan people of Highland Burma. The allied Tai communities in Assam are the Tai Phake, Tai Khanyang, Tai Khampti, Tai Aiton and Tai Turung. This section excludes the Tai Ahoms about whom I shall say more in Section 2.3.2.

**Tai Phake**: The Tai Phake village of Ninggam, is very close to Kharangkong. Like most other Tai groups, the Phake also follow Theravada Buddhism. They are a literate community and most families have family records (Ass. Bangshabali) called the “Khu Tai Phake” which records the family history. Tai Phake history is relatively well known. They once had a principality somewhere in Myanmar and came over from there in 1775 (Phukan 2005: i). They are linguistically related to the Ahoms but the Tai script used by the Phake/Aiton/Khampti/Khanyang is different from that used by the Ahoms. The former is very similar to Shan, itself similar to Burmese.

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41 It is not clear exactly when Buddhist conversion began. Some of these communities have been going back and forwards with regard to Buddhist conversion for a long time. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Buddhism_in_Southeast_Asia, for example, suggests that the people of Myanmar were Mahayana first and became Theravada (Hinayana) Buddhists only later.
42 For more about the Tai (Shan) communities living in Myanmar and the differences between the Thai people of Thailand, see Farrell (2009b), according to whom ‘Shan’ is a Burmese term commonly applied to the Tai speaking peoples of northern and north-eastern Burma. They call themselves ‘Tai’, or derivatives of that word.
43 Turung are Singpho speaking; whether they descended from Tai speaking people is contested, see Morey (2010). They are listed as Tai in Grierson (1903) and that has persisted ever since. For more on the Tai, see Terwiel (1980).
44 There are nine Phake villages in Assam, of which only two are in the Dibrugarh District – Namphake and Tipam-Phake, the other seven – Borphake, Ninggamm, Phaneng, Mounglang, Longphake, Pomungaon and Nonglai – in the Tinsukia district.
45 For instance, Chai Weing Chakhap of the Tai Phake village of Ninggam could look up the records to inform me that his ancestors came into Assam in 1742 from Hukong. He could follow his ancestry up to 10th generations.
In recent years, the Tai Phake have started the practice of coming together on the 17th November every year to celebrate the festival called Poi Pi Mau to mark the Tai Phake New Year. They celebrated it centrally for the first time in 2009. This tiny group, numbering not more than 2000 in all in Assam, have managed to retain their distinctive cultural identity even though they are numerically weak and geographically very scattered; the facts that they possess a long written tradition and that they are almost all Buddhist, possibly make the process slightly easier.

2.3.2 The other communities living in the area

Besides the older tribal groups mentioned in the last section, there are many other communities living in the Tirap area. I will look at only a few of them -- the ones who are most relevant for understanding the Tangsa situation -- in the rest of this section.

Nepali

The Nepali are Nepali-speaking people whose roots can be traced back to Nepal but many of whom have lived in India for several generations. In colonial times, the Nepali were called ‘Nepalese’ by the British. Some of them, especially the Gorkhas, were known for their bravery and fierce loyalty. Hence a large number of ‘Nepalese’ were recruited into various frontier regiments. Following the encouragement of migrations into both the valleys of the Brahmaputra and the Barak (Surma) by local authorities for the cultivation of waste lands, the Nepali came originally as immigrants to Assam from Siliguri (West Bengal) in about 1832. They were even financially assisted to move to Assam. They were mostly rubber-collectors, buffalo-dealers, dairy farmers, herders, graziers, sugar-cane cultivators and jaggery-producers. Many continue in those occupations even today (see also Baruah 2001: 63).

World War II brought a new wave of Nepali workers who subsequently settled in the area. Furthermore, in the early fifties, about 400 Nepali families, all victims of the Sadiya earthquake, were given permission to settle in the Tirap area. Many more have come in subsequent years and today the Nepali number about 40,000 and form the biggest group in the Tirap mouza. So much so that today the Nepali refer to an area including Sadiya and the Tirap circles as ‘Second Nepal’. They are mostly Hindu, a small percentage is Buddhist (cf. Upadhyaya 2012).

(Ex) Tea-Tribes / Adivasis

By these terms I mean people belonging to various ethnic communities of Central India who were brought into Assam by the British in the middle of the 19th century to work in the newly established tea-gardens in the region. Earlier referred to as ‘tea coolies’ or indentured labourers, officially referred to today as ‘tea garden labourer community’ or ‘ex-tea garden labourer community’, today they prefer to call themselves Adivasis or (Ex) tea-tribes. Some were

46 In the Tai languages, the term poi means festival, pi is year and mau is new. Besides this new year festival, they have many other festivals, some of which go back much longer. Some are fully Buddhist, like ‘khau wa’ in July, the beginning of the Buddhist rains retreat, while others are mixed, like Sangkyen, around 13 April, which is a pan Southeast Asian date.


48 In the rest of this work I shall use the term ‘tea-tribes’ in preference to the term ‘adivasis’ because it can be a source of confusion -- while the term ‘adivasi’ elsewhere in India refers to tribals in general, in Northeast India, and particularly in Assam, the term is generally used as above to refer to the tea garden labourer community.
speakers of Austro-Asiatic languages; today they usually speak Sadri. As J. Sharma (2012: 87) remarks, “[they] remained for the most part an economically and socially disadvantaged group. Well after Indian independence they were a labour reserve for the tea sector, since most believed to lack the skills and opportunities to venture outside the plantation.” Today, even after the British have left, most members of this community are still dependent upon the tea plantations for their livelihood. And although they are recognised as ST in the places from where they have come in Central India, in Assam they are still fighting to attain this status.\(^{49}\)

**Asamiya speaking groups**

Among the Asamiya-speaking communities living in the area are the Tai Ahoms, who I shall refer to simply as Ahoms to make the point that unlike the other Tai groups in Assam, most of the Ahoms today are not Tai-speaking Buddhists but Asamiya-speaking Hindus, and also some plain tribal groups like the Sonowal Kacharis, many of whom are followers of the Vaishnavite Hindu traditions. There are not many Assamese caste Hindus living in the Tirap area.

**Ahoms:** The Ahoms came into Assam over the Patkai Hills and ruled over it for several centuries till the British annexation in 1826 (see Chatterjee 1955: 10, Saikia 2005, Terwiel 1980). The ancestors of the Ahoms as well as those of the Shan/Tai/Thai people of Southeast Asia migrated from China and split once they reached the south-west corner of the China-Myanmar border, and came into present day Assam via Myanmar before the other Tai groups (discussed in Section 2.3.1) converted to Buddhism. The Ahoms had maintained their traditional religion and language before they embraced Hinduism. The Ahom priests (deodhais) continued to write the Ahom Buranjis or chronicles in the Ahom language till the advent of the British (cf. Bhuyan 1932, Chatterjee 1955, Gait 1905, Hall 1955). Today the Ahom language is not spoken as a mother tongue,\(^{50}\) and is used only for ritual purposes. However, serious attempts are being made in recent times to revive the language as well as some traditional Ahom ritual practices.

The Asamiya-speaking Hindu Ahoms are an integral part of present-day mainstream Assamese society. They are concentrated in the Upper Assam districts of Sibsagar, Lakhimpur, Dibrugarh and Tinsukia. In the middle of the 20th century, some Ahom men were invited to come to live in the tribal villages in the Tirap area as school-teachers by the tribal chiefs; later their relatives and friends from elsewhere in Upper Assam also joined them. In terms of population figures, they are the third largest group in the Tirap area today after the Nepalis and the Tea-tribes (cf. Table 2-1).

**2.3.3 The ethnic mix**

As mentioned in the beginning of Section 2.2.1, British maps of the late 1920s show that there were Singpho, Sema Naga and some Naga (now Tangsa) groups living in the area between the Tirap and the Buri-Dihing rivers. A few new Tangsa, Singpho and Sema Naga settlements came up in the area in the succeeding years, and a few Tai Phake villages (such as the one in Ninggam) comprising various recognised tribal groups of central India such as the Santhal, Munda, Oraon etc. (cf. Anathanarayanan 2010: 290).

\(^{49}\) Today, they are recognised only as OBC (Other Backward Classes) in Assam. For more on the contradictions of the peculiarities and absurdities of the present regulations, see Baruah (2007). For a recent history of tea-plantations in Assam during British times, see Behal (2014).

\(^{50}\) According to Van Driem (2012: 187), Ahom is a now extinct Kra Dai tongue.
were also established, mainly through the efforts of a few hardy and adventurous men, in search of cultivable land. The communities lived there in close proximity to each other; each of these groups was numerically very small, not more than a few hundred each.

As mentioned earlier, the coming and settling of people in the area from elsewhere in India had started at least by the middle of the nineteenth century, when the British brought in large numbers of Adivasi people from central India to work in the tea-gardens, Bengali clerks and officials to work in the railways, Nepali chowkidars or guards and also Telugu miners from as far as Andhra Pradesh came to work in the newly established coal mines in the Ledo area. Over the years Marwari, Bhojpuri and Bihari traders and businessmen have also come to live in the region. It is not without reason that today this area is often referred to as ‘Mini India’.

There was a fresh wave of migration during World War II when many bases were set up in the Dibrugarh district at Chabua and at Lekhapani. One of my older Assamese interlocutors recounted his memories of that time:

During British times the tribal people living in this area were protected and allowed to live life according to their own ways but all this collapsed during the World War II when many people came from abroad and from elsewhere to build the Stilwell Road. They camped in the Lekhapani cantonment and exploited, raped and harassed the tribal women, who had to run further into the jungles to keep away from the soldiers (DoI: 08.01.2012).

See also Simai (2008: 10). Barua (1991: 394) is even more categorical:

And the impact and effect on the local inhabitants: a temporary economic gain to the able-bodied men by way of labour in road building, porterage, guides, informants, vigilants, accompanied by fear and fervour in one hand; and molestation, rape, prostitution, and VD to the females on the other by the disorderly American and Chinese soldiers and the most un-mannered labour forces. Group after group strayed out, trespassed into villages at night or intruded upon the cultivation fields like stray cattles, and overpowered the females holding the males at the point of arms. Sometimes the inmates of the entire village had to run to jungle for safety or abandon their houses for the night and live in the jungle.

Girls were taken to campus and detained there for rape, prostitution or enjoyment at ease.

The onset of World War II meant that many tribal people living in the hills were displaced, and as already mentioned, many highlanders, who had come down to work in the construction sites, to build the Ledo road, also called the Stilwell road (see Fn. 18 on p. 37), for instance, and as porters during the war, stayed on in the plains around Ledo and established their own villages. The Sema Naga village of Lalpahar and the Nepali village at Lekhapani came up in this manner. There were many Nepali (Gurkha) soldiers in the army who stayed back after the war in the Lekhapani area. So there was a large Nepali population already in this area at the time of

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51 See Weiner (1988: Ch.3) for details of the migrants. For another account of this, see (Karlsson 2001: 8).
52 The operations in Assam were under the South East Asiatic Command (USA, Britain and China) created in August 1943. For more details of the horrific impact of this war on the region, read Barua (1991: Ch.23).
53 For example, the area which now has the town of Jairampur (then known as Khatang Pani) was earlier a purely Singpho and Tikhak area. It was an important base during the World War II operations. It was renamed Jairampur much later in 1952 after the then Lieutenant Governor of Assam, during the establishment of the 7th Assam Rifles Battalion there.
54 However, the village Baptist Church at Lalpahar is supposed to have been established as early as in 1936.
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independence. This has implied that several Nepali leaders have been elected to the Assam Assembly from that area since.

The earthquake of 1950 and the subsequent devastation of the Sadiya-Saikhowa area left thousands of people living in that area homeless. 509 families were given settlement in the Lekhapani area of which 394 were Nepali. They were all settled on both sides of the National Highway 153 from 0 mile (near the bridge at Tirap Gate) to 6-mile (at Rampur). At that time there were only forests in the area and only about 15 tribal villages. The Tikhak Gaonbura of Tinsuti-Mullong recounted how the tribal chiefs and headmen of that area were asked where they would prefer the Nepali to be settled (DoI: 04.01.2011). The tribal chiefs together decided that they would move away from the main road leaving the land along the highway for the refugees from Sadiya.

But that was not the end of the influx. Over the years, many Asamiya-speaking communities (mostly Ahom and Sonowal Kachari) have also come to settle in the Tirap area, some in search of land, others in search of employment. They now form a large group in the Tirap mouza. Over time, many tea-tribe families have also come into this region from elsewhere in the state.

Some reserved forests in the Tirap Tribal Belt have been de-reserved and given to new settler groups like the Misings while other areas have been forcefully ‘deforested’ and occupied. In the last decade, about 600 Hajong families have come to settle in the reserved forests beyond Jagun in the direction of Namchik Gate. The forest cover has almost completely disappeared there. This is part of a more general phenomenon seen elsewhere in the state as well.

Faced with the waves of land-hungry peasants coming in, enforcing these exclusionary rules proved extremely difficult. From time to time, governments in the colonial and postcolonial era have had to adapt to the reality of settlements in prohibited areas, and even to legalise them. Thus, forest reserves and grazing reserves have been ‘de-reserved’, and tribal belts and blocks have been turned into un-prohibited spaces. Over time, what were known as the grazing reserves of Assam almost disappeared, as have many forest reserves (Baruah 2010).

55 An earthquake measuring 8.6 on the Richter scale with epicentre located near Rima, Tibet, occurred on August 15, 1950, causing a lot of devastation, also from the massive flash floods that ensued. The earthquake was destructive in both Assam and Tibet, and 1,526 people were killed. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/1950_Assam%E2%80%93_Tibet_earthquake (accessed 6.12.2013).

56 There were also 16 Asamiya (which later became 22), 62 Bihari, 28 tea community and 3 Bengali families in that group. (Upadhyaya 2012: 173)

57 Upadhyaya (2012: 172) states that till about 1950 only the following villages existed in the Lekhapani-Tirap-Jagun area: Bisa, Toklong, Kumsai, Hasak, Ningam, Kharangkong, Kotha, Longtong, Lalpahar, Lekhapani Nepali village, Mullong, Tinsuiti, Phaneng, Keniya and Jagun village.

58 This fact is seconded by Upadhyaya (2012: 172); some members present at that meeting were tribal chiefs Baisaladai Singho, Kothagam, and Jahabi Sema, besides Nepali leaders Sankardev Sharma and Prithviraj Chouhan besides the DC, Lakhimpur District, Sultan Ahmed.

My interlocutor told me that the main reason behind this decision was that since most of the tribal people took opium if they settled away from the main roads, there would be fewer police raids etc. In a micro-scale, this is reminiscent of the picture Scott (2009) paints of the hills people retreating to the hills (read interiors) in order to evade the state.

59 Many Ahom families came to settle in Phaneng and a large number of tea-tribe families came from the Tengakhat area and settled in Parbatipur in 1957; whether they have official permission is contested.
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Evidence of this is to be seen in many places in the Tirap area.

The population figures in the table below (Table 2-1) show that the ‘older’ tribal population has really become a small minority in the Tirap Tribal Belt today. Moreover, while the population of those ‘older’ groups have not increased significantly,60 the rate of increase of the Nepali, the Ahom and the Tea-garden communities have been phenomenal. Furthermore, many new tribal groups (like the Hajongs and the Misings) have come to settle in the area, while many of the older ones like the Khamptis and the Abor have more or less disappeared or relocated.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Tangsa</td>
<td>1299 (1482)</td>
<td>Nepali</td>
<td>32,132 (9,304)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Singpho</td>
<td>1341 (702)</td>
<td>Tea-tribes</td>
<td>10,323 (5,341)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sema Naga</td>
<td>2485 (855)</td>
<td>Asamiya Ahom</td>
<td>5,829</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tai Phake</td>
<td>598 (355)</td>
<td>Bihari</td>
<td>3,196 (1399)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sonowal Kachari</td>
<td>1,834</td>
<td>Muslim</td>
<td>502 (10)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hajong</td>
<td>1,603</td>
<td>Telugu</td>
<td>365</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mising</td>
<td>820</td>
<td>Marowari</td>
<td>210 (157)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Khampti</td>
<td>0 (22)</td>
<td>Bengali</td>
<td>104 (576)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total population</strong></td>
<td><strong>62,967 (25,008)</strong></td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2-1: Population figures of the Tirap Mouza/ Tirap Transferred Area61

As is clear from the 2001 figures in Table 2-1, more than half of the population in the Tirap mouza are Nepali, while the 4 ‘older’ tribal groups – Tangsa, Singpho, Tai Phake and Naga Sema -- added up to less than 10% (5823 out of 62,967) of the total population. For comparison, there were only 8 villages in the Mouza, where the population had more than 50 Tangsa (see Table 3-1 on page 82), and only 7 such for the Singpho, with the highest number of Tangsa in any one village was not more than 250 (at Lakla), whereas there were at least 7 villages with more than 1000 Nepali inhabitants, and the largest Nepali village (Udaipur) had a population of close to 5000! Also while the tribal communities were settled in only a few villages, the Nepali, the Tea-Tribes and the Ahoms were to be found in almost every village in the mouza.

2.4 The present scenario

As far as the complex population picture in the Tirap area is concerned, there are three main groups: the ‘older’ tribal groups, the Nepali, and the others (consisting of both the new settlers as well as the descendents of those who were brought in earlier by the British). The present population of the Tirap mouza could be close to 100,000 in 2011, the Nepali undoubtedly and by

60 In fact, as I shall discuss in Section 7.4.2, there have been instances in the past when tribal groups have had to return to the hills from the plains. A detailed account of this movement is given in Appendix II.

61 Government records obtained from the Circle Officer, Margherita.
far the largest group in the area (more than half) and they are increasing by the day, while the total population of the four ‘older’ tribal groups will not add to more than 10,000.

There are increasing tensions among these different communities, also due to economic disparity (between the salaried class, the big businessmen and the farmers) and increasing pressure on land with increasing population. The Nepali and the more recent settlers are generally more proactive and more enterprising and are hence getting richer faster; the leaders of the ‘older’ tribal groups feel wronged as they believe this whole area originally belonged to them but they are now the weakest amongst the different communities there. Moreover, although the latter two groups had made many strides forward, apart from a couple of successful ventures by Singpho entrepreneurs in setting up a few restaurants and also the Singpho Eco Lodge near Margherita, the situation has not changed much for most of the ‘older’ tribal groups.

Government efforts so far, to improve educational and employment levels and to create awareness amongst the ‘older’ tribal groups about the possibilities of converting their skills into commercially viable and valued commodities, have been feeble and largely unsuccessful. On the other hand, even those attempts were viewed by the non-tribal people with concern and apprehension as they felt that letting the tribals gain in importance would be to their disadvantage. With growing encroachment, the new settlers -- both tribal and non-tribal -- were worried of being evicted from their lands, even though the state machinery so far has been totally ineffective in stopping these settlers. The Nepali leaders were determined to resist any move to promote or support only the tribals.

Identity issues have also become increasingly important due to the growing political activism of the expanding educated middle class within the communities living in the region. For all these reasons, recent years have seen a gradual polarisation amongst the different groups living there. The four ‘older’ tribal groups have thus decided to come together and join forces mainly against the Nepali, but also against the new settler groups. Evidence of this polarisation, as well as the state’s response to it, are to be found both in the organisation of the Dihing Patkai festival which I shall discuss next, as well as in the award of a Development Council to the ‘older’ tribal groups which I shall discuss in Section 2.4.2.

2.4.1 Performing ‘unity in diversity’: The Dihing Patkai Festival

In recent times, a three-day trans-community mega cultural event called the Dihing-Patkai Festival (hereafter referred to as the DPF) is held each January at the site of an abandoned World War II air-strip near Lekhapani beyond Ledo. Close to the Indo-Burmese border, the air-strip is located along the historic Stilwell road (see Photo 2-2) and close to World War II monuments (like the War Cemeteries at Digboi and at Jairampur), thereby adding a sense of history to the area to attract tourists. Sponsored by the Assam government, this festival, like the famous Hornbill Festival of Nagaland, aims at fostering “communal harmony and understanding” among
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different indigenous groups of the region, as well as promoting tourism and commerce. Culture is sought to be displayed as “unique yet distinct” to the world beyond.

However, for the many diverse communities living in the area, this festival has become a platform for publicly performing their presence in the region, which in turn enables them to advance claims on land and further dues. Paraphrasing Douglas (2013: 190) to the scene in Tirap: “How to manage the minority communities and create a unified sense of nation is of paramount concern to the [state] leaders, how to maintain and increase agency and earn rights and resources locally is of paramount concern for many of the [minority] groups.”

Originally conceived of as a festival to showcase “the social unity amidst ethnic diversity” of this area, to present the diverse lifestyles of the different tribes, as well as the ecological diversity and historical sites of the area, under pressure from the other communities living in the area, such as the Nepali, Telugu, Bhojpuri and others, who also wanted to participate and display their cultural and material heritage in the festival, the festival has, over the years, assumed a pan-Tirap, if not a pan-Indian character, and the festival is not exclusively tribal anymore but has become inclusive in character.

Hence the transformation of the nature of the DPF has meant growing dissatisfaction amongst the ‘older’ tribal communities. Not only was the DPF no more exclusively tribal, it was also a very lucrative business proposition for mostly the non-tribals living in this area, because it was they, and not the tribals, who profited most from the whole exercise of staging the event as well as from the increased number of visitors to the area to attend the DPF. “It is essentially a ‘business mela’ (fair) to sell things,” one tribal leader told me, “the cultural show is just to attract people to come. But while the Burmese sellers, the Bengali contractors and Nepali taxi-drivers make a big profit, we get nothing.” Therefore, although the DPF is seen as an attempt to connect with the discourses of tourism, development and nation-building, many tribal leaders felt that the gains were not evenly distributed across the communities.

So the original idea of using the festival to appease the indigenous groups of the area seems to have boomeranged to some extent. Even if one were to believe that the state has the noble intention of bringing all communities together in a common platform, in order to increase understanding, and dialogue between them, there is not much to show for that. In fact, if the comments made by some community leaders at the DPF 2011 are any indication then they go precisely in the other direction – “the Nepali tried to hijack the show”, “look how the Ahoms have moved from mud houses to stilt houses”, and so on. Going by what one saw at the DPF in 2011, at which I was present, the Tirap area presents a highly fractured picture.

64 For more on festivals and their relationship to tourism and cultural representation, see for example, the essays contained in Picard & Robinson (2006). Many writers, such as Magliocco (2001) and von Stockhausen (2008), have alleged such mega festivals to be inauthentic and have called them ‘folkloric’. However rather than writing them off as such it is more productive to consider that ‘newly invented and ‘touristified’ festivals remain expressions of community participation and identity operating within different social and spatial scopes (Azara & Crouch 2006).

65 This is not entirely correct. For, there are indications that the Ahoms traditionally did have stilt houses, but then they moved down to mud houses with only the kitchen on a raised platform, before giving them up altogether. Our team members have visited and have photos of Ahom houses on stilts – some even have mud floors and walls.
Dissatisfaction among the ‘older’ tribal groups has grown in recent years: the loudest voice of protest came from Manje La Singpho, who was the Organising Secretary of the DPF, 2011. “The original character of the festival is gradually getting lost. The fate of the DPF is miming the fate of the Tirap Tribal Belt which is also being taken over by non-tribals,” claimed Manje La (Souvenir 2011). He believed that political considerations had played a part in this process – after all in a democracy it was numbers that mattered. Working on a policy of silencing through rewards and incentives, Manje La was made the Chairman of the Development Council which was announced soon after. But before going to discuss that let me discuss the DPF 2011 in a little more detail.

A closer look at the cultural aspects of the 2011 festival

Cultural innovations like the opening welcome song in Assamese (sung by four girls from each of the Tai Phake, Singpho, Tangsa, Sema communities and six Assamese girls, see Photo 2-3) were supposed to create new bonds of tradition and a sense of ‘local common heritage’ among the communities participating in the festival. And since these groups had no rituals in common, a new common ritual called the ‘Tipam pooja’ was ‘invented’. [‘Invented’ because although Tipam (or rather Dibam) is a place name in that area, no participating community has a deity/spirit named Tipam.] Interestingly, only the ‘older’ tribal groups and the Assamese were included in the welcome song and the Tipam pooja was performed by a Singpho priest. Hence a subtle differentiation was sought to be made between the participating groups.

As for the format of the events, everything was reduced to the time-tested standard formula for such mega festivals everywhere in the region – sports and official events in the mornings, traditional and ‘folk dances’ during the day and the big attractions – the real crowd pullers – the fashion shows, the popular entertainers and pop stars, who had been invited from the state and beyond, to perform in the evenings till late into the night, on a stage lit brightly with psychedelic lights and booming sound effects. The demands of tourism and ‘local sentiments’ had to be taken into account while deciding the programme, I was told by the festival organisers. “The idea is not to transform but just to transmit the reality of the region.” And if the response to the popular entertainers and pop stars dancing in Bollywood style at the event was any indication then the impact of the greater Assamese and even pan-Indian culture is a reality in that region.

“The DPF does not aim to safe-guard but only to showcase and highlight indigenous cultures,” the Working President of the Organising Committee told me. But how was traditional culture ‘show-cased’? The rule seemed to be: “you show us your culture, but according to our specifications: not more than so many dancers on stage at a time, not more than so many minutes per dance item, and so on”. Everyone had to agree to be cast in a standard mould. Even the ‘ethnic houses’ – one house per group – set up in the Heritage Village had a look of inevitable uniformity: one long row of similar-looking, similar-sized, equally-badly-constructed, mostly empty structures.

In other words, the ‘culture’ of these communities was sought to be externalised – on the one hand by presenting ‘culture on stage’ which means just song, dance, music and costumes; and on the other by presenting the ‘typical’ living style of a community by building ‘typical’ ethnic

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There is a Tai village called Tipam in Dibrugarh district, and some Tai people say the word means ‘place of battle’. Singphos use the term Dabam frequently and it is found in traditional songs. This is a contested term.

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houses where ‘typical’ elements of everyday life of these communities (including their cuisine) were sought to be presented. But this too was at best another ‘performance’, another stereotyping, another labelling -- ‘the Singphos smoke their meat, the Tangsa roast it’; the idea behind the organisation of the heritage exhibition to present the material culture of the participating groups was also along the same lines – hence reducing their culture to a few material objects and a set of distinguishable and highly performative practices and elements, which MacCannell (1976) eloquently calls ‘staged authenticity’.

Photo 2-3: The chorus at the DPF inauguration

Many of the costumes and accessories used in the Ethnic Costume Show, which tried to combine the ethnic and traditional with the popular and fashionable, were based on video images obtained via TV or from DVDs often smuggled in from across the border from places like Nepal, Myanmar, Yunnan and Thailand. Also evident was innovation and modification in the way these communities presented themselves keeping pace with their counterparts in other countries.

Moreover, as already mentioned, a lot of uniformization and standardization, in the cultural fare dished out by the ethnic communities, was also necessary in order to present it to the world: for the logistics of performing on stage are simply different – they have to be seen from afar and be caught on TV; and with each community trying to outdo the other, the use of brightly coloured plastic string around legs, or sewing mirrors\(^{67}\) on shoulder-bags in order to make everything look more striking -- or perhaps more exotic -- have become commonplace. In this the communities compete with one another and also learn from one another. What is more some have even gone to the extent of deliberately ‘exoticising’ their ‘culture’ to fit in with popular perceived notions about the tribal way of life, a kind of ‘strategic essentialism’ (Furniss 1998). Thus, not only are these communities smart enough to play along to the gallery, they have also figured out that they are part of a ‘modern’ connected world.

\(^{67}\) Some Jinghpaw bags were traditionally done this way, but not usually in India.
The long arm of the state was amply evident in the diverse symbols of state – the flag hoisting, the tri-coloured balloons, the brass band of the Gorkha Battalion – and in the format of the official part of the programme. The ubiquitous hand of the Assamese was evident in many subtle but unmistakable ways: the language used for moderation on stage was Asamiya, the entire festival was stage-managed by a set of Assamese government officers, journalists and individuals; the choreographers of the welcome song and the costume show were also Assamese. Furthermore, the participating communities did not seem to have much say in deciding whether the DPF would be held in a particular year or not. For instance, in 2012, when Ledo was selected to host a session of the Assam Sahitya Sabha, the biggest literary organisation of the state, the DPF was reduced to just one evening’s ‘cultural show’, that too, only as part of that Sahitya Sabha session.

What was also clear is the impact of other similar festivals on the DPF, notably the state-sponsored but much larger and much more ‘exotic’ Hornbill Festival in Nagaland in the artificially constructed Kisama village in the outskirts of the capital Kohima in December every year. Even at the Hornbill, the Nagas are also made to enact the same ‘unity in diversity’ slogan ostensibly to bring some sense of unity and cohesion amongst the very diverse Naga tribes – and to create a sense of ‘Naga-ness’. At the DPF however, since the participating communities are even more diverse (and include tribal as well as non-tribal groups) such a ‘collective identity production’ is not possible; but in newly defined communities like the Tangsa that are again a collection of even smaller tribes, it does perhaps help to create a sense of pan-Tangsa solidarity.

### 2.4.2 Minority politics: the formation of a Development Council

One tribal leader claimed that as early as in the early fifties, seven tribal chiefs wrote a memorandum to the then Political Officer at Margherita demanding that the land in the Tirap-Lekhapani area should be returned to the tribal people. Towards the end of the 1960s, tribal elders (belonging to the Singpho, Tangsa and Tai Phake communities) from Kharangkong, Ninggam, Bisa, Hasak and Kumsaigaon called for the formation of the ‘Janajatiya Santi Parishad’ (Tribal Peace Council) to mediate with the Assam Government on this issue, (cf. Ningkhi 2009). They demanded that either the non-tribals be deported from the Tribal Belt or the Tirap Transferred Area be transferred back to Arunachal Pradesh. But nothing happened. So on December 15, 1980, a delegation of tribal leaders met Mrs. Indira Gandhi in Delhi and submitted a memorandum to her. She promised to do something but after her assassination and subsequent turbulence in Assam due to the Assam Agitation (see Baruah 2001, Ch. 6), there was no progress.

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68 While Assamese intervention might have been necessary to prevent the festival from getting hijacked by one or the other community and to prevent smaller communities from feeling ignored, it also could mean one or both of two things: first that that sort of trust does not exist between the communities and second, that the local administration perhaps believed that they have not reached the stage of being able to manage the show by themselves.

69 The team members were: Haren Manje, from Mungong, Inthem, President of the Santi Parishad and Manje la Singpho’s father; Aphu Tyanglam, Vice President; Lilakanta Kiyang, Singpho leader from Kumsaigaon, General Secretary; and Khamau Larin, Singpho leader from Mungong, Inthem, and Member, Santi Parishad.
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In 1995, the older tribal groups of the area again came together and formed the Tirap Autonomous Council Demand Committee, with the hope that such a Council would protect the rights of the tribals living in the Tribal Belt and prevent further influx of non-tribals. Despite some setbacks, such as the alleged disappearance of one of their most prominent leaders, due to the sustained campaign of the Demand Committee, soon they were close to getting a Council. A meeting was called at the Patkai Festival grounds in November 2006 where the formal declaration of the Council would be made by the Chief Minister. But the meeting could not take place as the Nepali laid siege on the roads. The local Sub Divisional Officer’s car was burnt down by the mob, the Chief Minister had to cancel his visit and the announcement of the Council was never made. The whole campaign petered out gradually.

This is a good illustration of political scientist Sanjib Baruah’s (2013) claim that “territoriality is an idiom of resistance by ‘indigenous’ ethnic groups against what is seen as a process of minoritization”. This is also an example of the principle of ‘negative solidarity’ (Subba 1988: 169) that sometimes come into play among minority groups in the face of a common threat.

Their main demands, as stated in Memorandum (2004), included creation of an Autonomous Council for “the immediate political protection of the Buddhist, Christian religious and linguistic minorities and hill tribal groups like Singpho, Tangsa Nagas, Tai Phakey, Sema Naga, Man (Tai-speaking), Khampti, Hajong, Sonowal Kachari, Deori, Bodo, Maran, Motok etc. to protect the aforesaid tribal community groups from the salient encroachment of Nepali, Bangladeshi and other non-tribals in the tribal areas”.

Curiously, in their memorandum (demanding the creation of the Council), which they had prepared in the mid nineties, the tiny Singpho village of Bisa (with a population of 430 people in 2001) was mentioned as the proposed Headquarters of the Autonomous Council. Moreover the total tribal population in the Tribal Belt was stated to be 68,647 (while even the total population of the entire Tirap mouza in 2001 was less than 63,000).

Moreover, as Das (unpublished) writes about the Yinchunger Tribal Council (YTC) in neighbouring Nagaland, “In asserting their claims, YTC has deployed much of the colonial and postcolonial apparatus and the language of the state, ‘written evidence-maps, memorandums’ to assert their identity.”

The Central Bureau of Investigation Inquiry into that disappearance was closed in 2010 due to insufficient evidence.

It was not clear what kind of a Council was going to be announced. The government claims that they would have been awarded a Satellite Council, while the Demand Committee leaders believed they were going to be awarded a full-fledged Autonomous Council.

The Nepali version is that rumours were spread by some Nepali BJP (a Hindu right wing political party) leaders and other non-tribals that the Chief Minister was coming to declare this area as a tribal belt, which meant that they would be evicted, or would have to pay tax to the tribals for their cows, or that they would have to marry tribal girls. Hence every Nepali was asked to go out in protest to stop that from happening. Nepali leaders claimed that the situation got out of control largely because of lack of communication — the local administration did not bother to explain what the real story was to the non-tribals before hand. The police resorted to firing and three Nepalis were also seriously hurt.

On their part, the Nepali felt that it was unfair that land-settlement papers have not been given even to those Nepali families who have lived in the area for close to a hundred years; whenever they went to ask the local administration about it, the tribal leaders put in an objection and the matter just got stalled.

This kind of protest action is a very common in Northeast India. Baruah (2010) remarks: “When a tribal political organisation protests that a state government has failed to protect tribal lands, and demands separate statehood or greater autonomy, there is often a subtext: that territory in the hands of interlopers could be reclaimed as tribal lands under a reformed pro-tribal political dispensation. Not surprisingly, popular movements for tribal autonomy in the Northeast, such as the Bodo movement, have often been accompanied by strong counter-mobilisation by groups that fear being legally marked as interlopers in a new political dispensation.”
On the first of March, 2011 came the news that a single Development Council had been awarded jointly to eight small ethnic communities including the Singpho, Naga Sema, Tangsa and Tai Phake. While it was seen by many as just an election sop offered by the outgoing government (since elections to the Assam Legislative Assembly were due in April 2011), most tribal leaders considered it to be a long-awaited breakthrough. Aphu Tyanglam, Lemo Rara and Gaobura Khejong (all three of whom we shall meet later) became the Tangsa members in the Council. Manje La was nominated the Chairman and Aphu Tyanglam the Vice-Chairman of the Council.

The newly constituted Development Council was given a grant of 1 crore INR (roughly about 120,000 Euros) for the year 2011/12. Compared with what they had originally demanded -- an Autonomous Council with administrative and territorial powers, and what they could have possibly got in November 2006, what they finally got -- a Development Council, with no administrative or territorial powers whatsoever, but with just some allocation of funds to carry out developmental work of their communities -- is not very much; this is perhaps an indication that the ‘older’ tribal groups are slowly but surely losing the battle of control over their own area. We shall see more indications in this direction in the chapters that follow.

2.5 Two crucial developments

In this section I wish to discuss two separate issues both of which are relevant and necessary for an understanding of the communities living in the Tirap area. The first is about the gradual process by which certain tribal groups living in the area have embraced Christianity. Since the Ahom and Nepali populations are still mostly Hindu, as more and more tribal groups convert to Christianity, religious difference has become an additional point of difference between the tribal and non-tribal communities living in the area. The second issue is the rise of militant nationalisms, which has become a disturbing feature, not just of this area, but of the entire northeast, in the last decades. I shall present some background information about the two main insurgent groups operating in the Tirap area in Section 2.5.2.
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2.5.1 The coming of Baptist Christianity

I begin with what Burling (1967: 220) wrote about Northeast India over half a century ago.

Over the past century, many tribesmen have become Christians (the largest number are Baptists), and virtually every tribal leader is Christian. The differences between hills men and plains men are far older than the coming of Christianity to Assam, but both tribes and Hindus have often come to look upon Christianity as the chief symbol of their separation. Indeed, some hill men may become Christians precisely because they feel they need a symbol that will emphasize the feelings of separatism they already have and which, at the same time, will give them a claim to be ‘civilized’.

More reasons are given by Bhagabati (1992: 493-4):

The phenomenal success of Christianity in the hill areas was largely due to the specificity of new faith and the ‘modern’ world from which it came. The tribals saw in the new religion elements of radicalism and it offered them hopes for the future. Spiritual gains apart, the process of conversion should also be seen in terms of the technology the missionaries involved for the material wellbeing of the people. The development of written forms of various languages, printing of books (beginning with the Bible), medical work and opening of schools were but some of the important introductions into the tribal arena.

The first Baptist missionaries had arrived in the neighbouring state of Nagaland already in the 1870s. The impact of their coming on the Nagas was not much different from that on the upland communities of Southeast Asia:

With the arrival of Christian missionaries in the hills around the turn of the century, upland people gained access to a new salvation religion. Many of them seized it. It had two great advantages: it had its own millenarian cosmology, and it was not associated with the lowland states from which they might want to maintain their distance. It was a powerful alternate, and to some degree oppositional, to modernity (Scott 2009:319).

However, contrary to Scott’s reading, as I shall show later, Christianity is not seen by my Tangsa interlocutors as being oppositional to modernity, it is rather their path to it (cf. Comaroff & Comaroff 1991). For instance, Christianity is clearly strongly associated with education, which is a big aspect of modernity, anywhere in the so-called Zomia area.

The Tangsa living in Assam and Arunachal first came into contact with Christianity at the time of World War II when British and American soldiers stationed in the area left behind small pocket Bibles for them (Ronrang 1997: 21). But they could not read them then. Many new roads were also built in the remote areas of Arunachal during the war, and missionaries from Nagaland and elsewhere used those roads later to spread Christianity. The Tangsa living in Myanmar (where they are called Tangshang or Heimi/Hewe) had started to convert to Christianity from the middle of the 20th century (Ronrang 1997: 23). As there was a lot of contact between the Tangsa living on both sides of the border, Christianity also spread through these mutual contacts.

The Ao Naga village in Tikok and the Sema Naga Baptist village in Lalpahar already existed in the 1950s. A Sema Naga Pastor Yeluvi Sema had been appointed for the Sema Baptist Christians in 1955 under the Upper Assam Sema Baptist Church Association. Initially, the Ao Naga and the

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81 For more details about the spread of Christianity in northeast India, see Downs (1976), Eaton (1997). For more recent accounts of the spread of Christianity in the Angami areas of Nagaland, see Joshi (2007, 2012: Ch. 5).

82 The first Christian Fellowship was organised by the Ao people in Tikok village on Oct. 20, 1958.
Sema Naga Baptists had no plans to go to the Tangsa areas. But Tangsa people from the neighbouring areas visited these villages at Christmas, there were also a few Ao-Tangsa marriages; slowly the Tangsa began to convert. The process was always the same -- first a few people converted when an evangelist visited their village, then a few converts got together and built a church. The Tikhak *basti* of New Kamlao and the Kimsing *basti* of Nongtham in Arunachal were among the first Tangsa villages to have churches.

Impur, near Mokukchung, was the Head Quarters of the Baptist Church in Nagaland. Rev. A. Temjen from the Impur Baptist Church visited Tikok and baptised some people (including three Tangsa women) there in 1965 (Ronrang 1997: 27). Yeluvi Sema baptised some Tangsa people (including two in Phulbari) in 1968, and as the only licensed evangelist in the area, continued to do so in the following years, baptising more than 500 Tangsa in Upper Assam and Arunachal.

The Tirap Baptist Church Council (TBCC) was formed in 1972 in New Khamlang (in Arunachal) with 21 village churches under its control; (cf. *Souvenir* 1997). Following the centenary celebrations of the ABAM (Ao Baptist Arogo Mungdang, the Central Organisation for the Ao Baptists in Nagaland), and in response to a request made by the TBCC a decision was taken by the ABAM leaders to start a Tirap Mission Project (for 25 years) from 1974 to support the TBCC and to help the churches financially, spiritually and otherwise from Impur. Tangsa pastors went for training to Impur and also to other places like Jorhat, Dimapur etc. Kamthoi Mungrey of Phulbari, who we shall meet later in Chapter 5, described the situation accurately: it was the Sema Naga Baptists who sowed the seeds of Baptist Christianity amongst the Tangsa in Assam, while the Ao Naga Baptists built on that and took it forward.

In 1979, the TBCC was renamed the Tangsa Baptist Church Association (TBCA). According to Executive Secretary of the TBCA, Mr. L. Mossang:

> The TBCA, with its HQs in the village of Lakla on the Assam-Arunachal border, was fairly successful amongst the Pangwa Naga groups living in the Kharsang and Mannmau areas. At present the TBCA has over 90 churches and about 10,000 members in Changlang and Assam (DoI: 12.01.2011).

Thus the Baptists are by far the largest among the Christian denominations who have a following among the Tangsa living in India.

### 2.5.2 Militant nationalisms

According to a recent estimate of the Home Ministry, there are 79 insurgent groups including splinter factions, which are active across six North Eastern states (*Assam Tribune* 23 Aug.2011).

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83 Most of the above is taken from an interview with Molem Ronrang, former Executive Secretary of the TBCA, on 11.01.2011. He also claimed that missionaries did not come from Nagaland to convert the Tangsa as is commonly believed. Rather, people converted because of contact with Christians and because of missionary and evangelist activity from within their own people, not from outside. The churches were run with the help of local evangelists. The motto of the Baptist Church is self support, self govt. and self propaganda. In the beginning, around 1974/75 a pastor was paid a monthly honorarium of Rs.30 per month, an evangelist something like Rs. 300 per month from Impur. Later, after the Tirap mission came to an end, it was decided that the pastors would be paid by the local church and that only evangelists would be paid by the TBCA.
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Of these five were active in Assam and three in Arunachal Pradesh. Militancy stemming from ethno-nationalistic demands has spawned in the Northeast ever since independence. 84

2.5.2.1 The NSCN problem

The National Socialist Council of Nagaland85 (NSCN) is a Naga militant underground outfit, demanding sovereignty of the Naga state. In 1975, the Naga leader Phizo’s Naga National Council (NNC) signed the Shillong Peace Accord with the Indian Government. Muivah (Tangkhul Naga), Swu (Sema Naga) and Khaplang (Burme or Heimi Naga, more accurately, Shangwan Tangsa), then members of the NNC, disagreed with the accord and broke away to form the National Socialist Council of Nagaland (NSCN) in 1980. Since then, these groups have been running a parallel government of sorts in Nagaland.86 The NSCN’s Greater Nagalim demand is based on the territorial unification of all Naga inhabited areas in Nagaland, Assam, Manipur and Arunachal Pradesh.87 But in 1988 the NSCN split into two factions, identified by the names of their leaders Khaplang (K) and Issac-Muivah (I-M).88 Born in Pangsau very close to the present day Indo-Burmese border, Khaplang is a Burme national. He is a Heimi Naga, which is how the Tangsa are called in Myanmar. Hence the Tangsa in India feel more inclined to support his faction rather than the other led by Nagas from Nagaland.

However, each group has certain areas under its control where it has established bases. The NSCN (K) have bases also in a few Tangsa villages in Assam. Although there is a ceasefire in place between the Indian government and the NSCN, in recent times there have been frequent

84 While Assam has five active militant outfits including ULFA, NDFB, DHD, UPDS and KLO, neighbouring Meghalaya has overtook the state and now boasts of nine insurgent outfits. In Arunachal Pradesh, apart from the two factions of NSCN, another militant outfit, National Liberation Front of Arunachal has reared its head in the state.


85 For a recent and comprehensive analysis of the genesis of the Naga problem, see Joshi (2013); for a pro Naga reading, see Franke (2009). Refer to N.K. Das (2011), N. Goswami (2014), Iralu (2005) for other readings.

86 Moreover, all government departments in those areas pay 2% of all developmental funds to NSCN separatists as an unofficial tax, a local MLA from Arunachal claimed (see http://scroll.in/article/719587/Arunachal-complains-that-it-was-not-even-consulted-on-AFSPA-notification, accessed 11th April 2015).

87 These include: Manipur’s four hill districts of Churachandpur, Senapati, Tamenglong and Ukhrul; Assam’s Dima Hasau and Karbi Anglong districts; and Arunachal Pradesh’s Tirap and Changlang districts (cf. Goswami 2011).

88 The split was caused mainly because the leaders belonged to different Naga tribes. In 2007, the NSCN (I-M) witnessed a split when Azetho Chophy, a Sema leader of the outfit broke away and formed the NSCN (Unification). This group later formed a strategic linkage with the NSCN (K).

The latest split occurred in 2011 with the break up of the NSCN (K). Kitovi Zhimoni, the Kilonsor (Prime Minister) of the NSCN (K) faction, and Khole Konyak, a senior leader (co-founder) of the outfit, broke away to form a new group called NSCN (Khole and Kitovi) complaining of Khaplang’s dictatorial leadership. Moreover, unlike Khaplang, who does not enjoy similar local clout like Muivah due to the former’s origins in Myanmar, Khole and Kitovi are local Naga leaders from Mon district of Nagaland. Consequently, the latter duo could pose a serious challenge to the NSCN (I-M) on its home turf (Goswami 2012b).
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clashes between the rival factions, also in those areas of the Tinsukia and Changlang districts where the Tangsa live, leading to a lot of disruption and uncertainty, with innocent villagers caught in the cross-fire. N. Goswami (2014) below gives further details of the situation:

The NSCN (K), with its headquarters in Myanmar, signed a ceasefire agreement with the Myanmar government in 2012. This faction holds sway over Nanyun and Lahe Townships in the Naga Self-Administered Zone, with a liaison office at Khampti town in Sagaing Region of Myanmar.

The Indian Government too has a ceasefire agreement with the NSCN (K) since 2001, which has expanded its presence in Naga inhabited areas of India. Traditionally the NSCN (K) has been challenged in Naga inhabited areas of India by the NSCN (I-M). There have been numerous deadly clashes between these two NSCN factions in a fierce feud to dominate maximum Naga inhabited territory. As a few illustrations, a significant development starting in the early 2000s was the advent of NSCN (I-M) cadres into Arunachal Pradesh, originally the NSCN (K)’s backyard, turning the peaceful districts of Changlang, Tirap and the newly formed Longding into a battlefield. Both factions were fighting for dominance in Naga inhabited areas of the state, when in 2009 the NSCN (K) brought in their traditional ally, Myanmar’s heavily armed and battle hardened Kachin Independence Army (KIA) to take on the NSCN (I-M). The NSCN (K) also combined forces against the NSCN (I-M) with non-Naga militants like the United Liberation Front of Asom (ULFA) and the United National Liberation Front (UNLF) of Manipur, both of whom have camps in NSCN (K) active areas in Arunachal Pradesh and bordering the Naga Self-Administered Zone, Myanmar.

According to an informant from the Tirap district of Arunachal, there is also a third front now called the Arunachal Naga Federation (ANF) led by local leaders from Tirap and Changlang. This group is in alliance with the Khaplang faction, against the (I-M) group.

Given the many factions, clashes between rival insurgent groups continue in the two ‘troubled’ districts of Tirap and Changlang. There are frequent media reports of army operations to flush the insurgents out of those districts. However, the NSCN have developed strong political links and it is believed that some of the Tirap and Changlang politicians and MLAs depend on help from one or the other group of NSCN during their elections. I was told informally that the NSCN has had a role in the formation of at least two ministries in Itanagar, so their influence in the state cannot be just ignored, nor have the local politicians the power (or the will) to get them to leave.

There is certainly an established relationship between the NSCN and Baptist Christianity. Most NSCN cadres are Baptist Christians. With their motto, “Nagaland for Christ”, the NSCN had been the main force behind mass-scale conversion to Baptist Christianity in the Nagalim areas. There were many instances of entire villages in the Tirap district being forced to convert to Baptist Christianity ‘at gunpoint’ (Kumar 2005: 140). According to eye-witnesses, armed NSCN cadres surround a village one evening and leave before the next dawn, after having forced

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89 Their main argument is that paying Rs. 2-3 crores every month as ‘taxes’ to the NSCN (I-M), which has its stronghold in Tirap, is a huge economic drain for the area. Instead of paying the NSCN, the ANF wishes to use the funds for the development of their own district instead.

90 In continuation of the nation building strategy envisioned by the NNC: “one people (Naga), one nation (Nagalim), one religion (Christianity)”. 

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everyone in the village (except the very old and the very young) to get baptised by the evangelist they normally also bring along.91

The rather contradictory picture of the NSCN with a AK47 gun in one hand and the Bible in the other is not the only problem many of my Tangsa interlocutors have with them. As strict Baptists the NSCN formally oppose opium production and consumption, even though the illegal sale of opium produced in Myanmar is one of their main sources of income. The NSCN also collects tax regularly from Tangsa villages in Changlang district.92 As Goswami (2011) observes, both the NSCN and the ULFA have common strategies of sustained armed struggle. Furthermore,

[b]oth the ULFA and the NSCN (I-M) have training camps in Myanmar and Bangladesh. Significantly, the unified NSCN was formed in Myanmar on January 31, 1980. In 1986, ULFA established linkages with the unified NSCN. Both the rebel groups have strong connections with the Kachin Independence Organization (KIO) in Myanmar (cf. Tucker 2000: 82-85, Goswami 2011: 10).

2.5.2.2 The ULFA in Assam

Some writers believe that the ULFA, an acronym for the United Liberation Front of Assam, was formed on the advice of the NSCN (cf. Phadnis & Ganguly 2012: 339). Formed in 1979, the ULFA aims to liberate Assam from ‘Indian Colonial Rule’ and to form a ‘Swadhin’ independent state with the help of armed insurgency.93 It was banned in 1990 by the Government of India. In the mid 1990s however, the closure of the timber business was a big blow to a large section of the people living in the Tirap-Margherita area; and as a fall out many young men from the Moran Muttocks communities of the Margherita Subdivision (led by the ULFA Commander-in-Chief, Paresh Barua, who also hails from the area) joined the ULFA. The dense forested area around Kakopothar and Pengeri (close to Margherita) were hideouts of the militants for a long while.

Basing their arguments on the idea of internal colonisation of the Northeast by the Indian state and asserting the right to self determination, the ULFA ideology had initially caught the imagination and also the support of a large section of the Assamese people. However, over time their support base has corroded due to the excessive violence that was unleashed on the population (both by the ULFA and the Indian state) and also because of several practices, including collecting funds by extortion from common people, business houses and commercial establishments. Most of the ULFA leadership have surrendered now and are in talks with the government.

Many Tangsa elders have described to me occasions, mostly in the 1990s, when they have had no option in the middle of the night, but to open their doors to ULFA militants who arrived at their door step and asked for food and shelter for the night, at the point of a gun. Fearing for their lives they did as they were told only to have to face the brunt of the army and police harassment and

91 In one instance at least I have also heard of a village reverting back to their old faith after some time. All the Buddhist Tikhak villages in the Nampong area (in Arunachal) had also been threatened with dire consequences by the NSCN if they did not convert within a specified date.
92 In most cases, the GBs are asked to collect money from the villagers and hand it over to them. But these GBs then get into trouble with the local administration when they ask the villagers to pay.
questioning the following days for having sheltered miscreants. Similar stories were also narrated by Naga village headmen with respect to the NSCN.

Postscript to Chapter 2

2.6 Persistence of colonial attitudes

What Burling (1967) wrote almost half a century ago about the attitude of the plains people towards the hills men hold good even today: “If the plains people would stop insisting that they live on a higher level of civilization than their tribal brethren, half the problem would be solved.”

Administrator Nari Rustomji’s (1985: 2) echoes the same sentiments below. But they are not of the past, as he states, but are relevant even in the present:

The hill people have been regarded in the past with an attitude of condescension, as simple folk with quaint and curious customs which they will outgrow as they are progressively civilised. Much of the discord on the borders is a reaction to this attitude of patronising condescension.

And he goes on to say, “The failure has been, for the most part, not so much in intention as in empathy and sensitivity” (Rustomji 1985:3). And this has not been without serious consequences, for it has resulted, for instance, in the progressive breaking away from Assam of the many states of Northeast India.94

More recent literature coming out of the region provide more evidence of this well-meaning but sub-consciously paternalising attitude, as in the quote below:

In that manner they understand their religion or spiritual world in their own way and we so in our own way. But, certainly, what we believe in, so they also believe in. Only negligible differences may be that they walk along one path and we along another in between the even and the uneven surface. For that matter, it would perhaps be a vague notion to say that they alone are animists and we are the true religionists.... Therefore, in no way can we say that the faiths of the people of the area towards God is inferior to us. It is as superior as to our own faiths.... (Barua 1991: 142-3)

The same condescending attitude is also revealed in the remark (stated at the very beginning of this work) made by the young Assamese researcher mentioned, and also in statements such as: “They are the children of nature” (Dutta in Morang 2008: 104). Not just in the written word, one sees this attitude also in practice. For instance, the Assamese Headmaster of the primary school in the Hakhun Tangsa basti of Malugaon, Mr Phukan, tried, as best he could, to bring the Hakhun children of Malugaon in contact with the Assamese living down in Ledo. Having spent many years teaching the Hakhun children, he had seen them from very close and had also made friends with many Hakhuns in the village. Although he cared for and respected the Hakhuns, and wished them well, Mr Phukan saw

94 Rustomji (1985: 152) describes why that happened in his words, “Assam, in her zeal to promote unity by prescribing Assamese as the official language for the entire state including the hill areas, succeeded in alienating and finally losing the hill areas.”
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no other way for the Hakhuns but to join the mainstream and become (like the) Assamese95 (see Section 5.2.2 for more). In their defence, it must be said that all of the Assamese mentioned above only meant well. But although their wish to ‘hold them by the hand to show them the way’ was sincere, it was paradoxically still paternalistic.

The ignorance and apathy, however, of many well-to-do and educated Assamese, who live in the nearby towns and cities, is hard to comprehend or condone. One day, a high-ranking Assamese officer of Oil India from Digboi who had come with his family to spend the day at the Singpho Eco Lodge, told Manje La, “I thought you were a Singpho, but I’m surprised that you speak such good Asamiya.”

“Is that a contradiction?” Manje La shot back. “I was born in Inthem, went to an Asamiya-medium school in Margherita, and went to college in Digboi. Why should my Asamiya be any worse than yours?”

The oil town of Digboi is around 10 kilometres way from Inthong where the Eco Lodge is located, yet, for that Assamese family, coming to Inthong was like going to another planet. That incident reminded me of what Burling (1967: 219) had written a long time ago: “No educated hill man can calmly accept the condescending way in which plains men sometimes refer to the hills as backward, as primitive and as lagging many centuries behind the more progressive and civilized plains.” The problem is that the plains men think along the same lines even today and it is reflected often in the mainstream discourse96 as mentioned earlier.

Many of my own family and convent-educated school friends living in Guwahati also had similar ideas. Most had not heard of the Tangsa before. The word ‘Tangsá’ sounded strange and exotic to most: “Are the Tangsa really Naga?” “Do they also eat monkeys and snakes?” the better-informed among them would ask me knowledgeably. Many would beg me to tell them more about my field experiences but were ready to swoon when I described the kind of improvised toilets most Tangsa households had 97 to them – “How can they live like that?” and then with even greater incredulity, “How did you manage to live with them?” As Van Schendel rightly observes, “Ignorance may not breed contempt, but it certainly breeds prejudice” (2005: 11).

And here it is not only the Assamese who are guilty of such misconceptions. During my time in the field, whenever I have met or visited some Nepali people also living in the area, they have never failed to be surprised, and at times, even upset, when I told them that I was staying at a Tangsa home. It was hard for them to imagine how that was possible, given how different the Tangsa food habits and everyday practices were. Then they would invariably invite me to stay with them, saying that since they were also Hindus like me, I would at least not have to worry about what I was eating etc.

95 On one occasion Phukan and a few young Assamese college teachers from Ledo had organised for a group of school-children from Malugaon to participate in an Asamiya dance-drama (for which Phukan had written the script) as part of a cultural programme staged in Ledo.

96 On the occasion of International Women’s Day one year, a Ladies group from one of the nearby towns rang me and expressed their wish to go and spend the day with Tangsa women to help them see how to lead a better life.

97 Sanitary facilities are still quite basic in most Tangsa homes, and the toilets are usually located in the backyard.
More or less the same story was repeated when I met non-tribal community leaders, Government officials or administrators in the field. When they heard what I was doing and where I was staying, they would express grave concern for my health (you need to eat and sleep properly in order to be able to do the kind of hard work you are doing), well-being (you can’t be sure whom to trust) and security (the area is so dangerous), and very solicitously offer to arrange accommodation in government guest houses etc for me. Some of them even went so far as to warn me about working with foreign researchers (you can’t know what their hidden agendas are). They were kind, very concerned and helpful, but I often had the unsettling feeling that we were talking in two rather different languages.

Of course not everyone was like that. In fact, I would not have been able to sustain my work without the help and understanding of a few friends and acquaintances, with whom I could discuss problems and who were always ready to do for me what I wanted them to, even if they were not always convinced about the need of doing so. Most of them were working with other minority groups or were involved in other social causes, so many were in the same boat themselves. They were genuinely interested to learn more about the Tangsa, and unlike many others, did not feel the need to ‘slot’ them immediately. They also understood my sense of frustration and disappointment at the reactions of many of my own family and friends.

Nevertheless, the more I saw and read about the Assamese attitude towards the tribal ‘other’, the more I worried about whether my Tangsa interlocutors would accept me at all. I have alluded to these problems already in Section 1.5.2.3. I was afraid that once they also came to know about my family background (and the fact that my mother was a politician and was once a minister in the union government), they would treat me like they treated Assamese officials – with respect and formality, but also with caution and mistrust. I did not want them to slot me before I had been given a chance. Because I felt it would be much harder to prove myself and to win their confidence if I had to carry the baggage of my background – I feared that it would be a lost case.

I knew I could not lie and that eventually they would come to know all, but I just hoped and wished that in the time it took them to find out I would have established my own relations with them in such a manner that it would not matter anymore. The more Assamised Singpho and the Nepali communities did not take long to figure out who I was, since they had much more contact with the Assamese world. I tried to play it down as much as I could. My only hope was that my Tangsa informants would take longer. The story continues in the postscripts of the chapters that follow.

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98 Over the years I have tried to figure out what grounds I had to worry about this, even before I had met any Tangsa. I suppose it was a general impression I had, based on my rather clichéd knowledge, that most of the Assamese I knew had this condescending attitude and this we-know-everything-much-better-attitude towards the tribals. The tribals, on their part, had understood not to expect too much from the Assamese, since they believed that Assamese did not really care about them or their fate.
Chapter 3  Getting acquainted with the Tangsa

Without a history, without songs and stories, a human being is not human.  

H K Morang, Nampong

They have as much history as they require.  

Scott (2009: 330)

As mentioned by Morey & Schöpf (under review), “[t]he ancestors of today’s Tangsa people have been roaming the eastern part of the Patkai mountains on the India-Burma border for centuries, but in modern times some of them have moved into the lowlands on the Indian side.” Hence, besides in the Tirap area of Assam (as I have discussed in the last chapter), the Tangsa in India also live in the Changlang District\(^1\) of Arunachal Pradesh, mainly on the western slopes of the Patkai (in the Miao, Kharsang, Nampong, Manmao and Changlang subdivisions). There are also many Tangsa (where they are called Tangshang or Heimi/Hewe Naga) in the Hkamti District,\(^2\) Sagaing Division of Myanmar. Recently all the Naga groups in Myanmar have been awarded a Naga Self-Administered Zone,\(^3\) with headquarters in the town of Lahe. Although they live in two different countries and are subject to differing political systems, the Tangsa living in India still believe that culturally they belong to the same ‘imagined community’ as their fellow clansmen in Myanmar.

In this chapter, I put together a descriptive account of some aspects of Tangsa life that will serve to give a general impression about the Tangsa and will also be relevant to the understanding of the main ethnographic chapters that follow. I include a section on the available literature on the Tangsa to help situate my work and build on work done by others. I also give a brief overview of the linguistic classification of the different Tangsa groups in Section 3.2, since the grouping is also reflected in their cultural traditions and therefore makes it easier to understand groups such as the Pangwa who are central to my work.

3.1 Survey of literature on the Tangsa

There is not much early literature on those Naga tribes who we call Tangsa today. Even Edward Gait (1905), who wrote at great length about the Nagas and the Singphos, spared just a single sentence for them: “[f]urther east, as far as the Patkai, there are various Naga tribes who are in complete subjection to the Singphos.”

\(^1\) Changlang was inaugurated on Nov 14, 1987 as a district; earlier it was part of the Tirap district. According to the 1991 census, there were 30,000 Tangsa in the district, out of a total of 92,891. In 2001, there were 20,431 Tangsa in Changlang District out of a total population of 125,422, while there were only 3,412 Singpho and 3,940 listed under (Any Naga tribe). The Tangsa population in Arunachal in 2011 was more than 36,000 with another 12,338 listed under Any Naga tribe. The Singpho population in Arunachal is only 5,616 while the total population of Changlang district in 2011 is 147,951.

\(^2\) Hkamti District or Khamti District (sometimes Naga Hills District). There are about 90,000 Tangshang living in Myanmar now according to Nathan Statezni (pers. comm., 03.07.2012).

\(^3\) This was officially declared on 20\(^{th}\) August 2010; cf. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Naga_Self-Administered_Zone (accessed 04.07.12).
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inoffensive” (Gait 2003: 377). Although several Tangsa tribe names are mentioned in the various tour diaries of several political officers of the area during British times, the term ‘Tangsa’ does not appear in them. They were referred to as the Patkoi Nagas and later also as the Rangpang Nagas. First mention of Patkoi Nagas are to be found in British records in 1835 (cf. Mackenzie 1884: 88). describes the Rangpang Nagas as “a people in no way impressive, living in unkempt hamlets” living adjacent to the Singphos in Naga country. In Mr. O’Callaghan’s 1923 Tour Diary, there is mention of the “Rangpang Mosang and Tikhak villages on the Patkoi slopes” (not clear whether Tikhak was also meant to be Rangpang or not). Furthermore, he writes, “[h]uman sacrifice was prevalent amongst the Rangpang Nagas (especially amongst the Ronrangs at Manmao).” They lived on the southern slopes and on the foothills of the Patkoi range in the basin of the Namphuk, Namchik and the Tirap rivers, that is, south and southeast of Margherita and Ledo. At the time of Sir Harcourt Butler’s slave release tours of Upper Burma in 1923-25, the Rangpang Nagas were branded as ‘slave capturers’ while other Nagas were declared as ‘slave traders’. Both the Burmese campaign and the Pangsha anti-slavery expedition by J.P. Mills of 1936-37 (Mills 1995) mention this (cf. Das 2014). The fact that the Rangpangs practiced human sacrifice is also mentioned in Butler’s 1925 account as well as by Mitchell (1929).

In the tour diaries of Political Officer, Tirap Frontier Tract, Mr. B.K. Borgohain (1952), the word Tangsa appears for the first time. “The Punyang people are Lungri by the Tangsa caste.” He then talks about burial practices of the Lungris and says that “the Lungris, like the Yogli and the Ronrug, bury their dead right under the chang [elevated platform] of their house, ... [while] the other Tangsas, viz. Mosang, Tikkhak, Moklum, Longchangs and Ponthai burn their dead.”

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4 More details about the Rangpang Naga will be given in Section 3.4.
5 Mackenzie mentions that the Patkoi Nagas first came to notice of the British because although the Nagas themselves were peaceably inclined, they were harassed and attacked by the Singphos. He then adds “From this point, notices of these Patkoi Nagas are few and unimportant, and in later years their very existence seems to have been lost sight of or to have been confusedly merged in that of the greater tribes to the west who are ordinarily communicating with the officials of Seensaur” (1884: 89).
6 Mr. T.P.M. O’Callaghan, Political Officer, Sadiya Frontier Tract, wrote a separate ‘Note on the Rangpang Nagas’, as part of the Annual Administrative Report for the year 1925-26 of the Sadiya Frontier Tract (Report 1926). The ‘Note’ is cited as O’Callaghan (1926) and is included as Appendix III. Mr. T.P. Dewar’s 1927 Report on his expedition to the Hukawng valley also contains a wealth of information about the practices of some Naga tribes, many of whom belong today under the Tangsa umbrella.
7 The Burmese Census of 1931 (Bennison 1933) lists the subtribes that performed human sacrifice. All were Pangwa groups (see Section 3.4). Since at that time most of the Pangwa were not yet in India, that is presumably why the Ronrangs were singled out.
8 Pangsha is what I refer to as Pangwa (see Section 3.4).
9 For more details, see Means (2000). See also Dewar (1927).
10 This entry is dated 2.1.1952. It is interesting to note how the Assamese Hindu Borgohain projected the Hindu caste system perhaps subconsciously into the tribal world.
11 Note that although the Tikhak have been Buddhist for a long time, this suggests that these groups have been cremating their dead also traditionally.
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Post independence, some attempts were made by the research department of NEFA to write about the various tribes living in the region. Various articles on Tangsa language and culture appeared in the Journal Resarun of the Department of Research. The efforts of Research Officer Parul Dutta (1969) resulted in the first ethnography to my knowledge on the Tangsa (or more specifically on five of the Pangwa groups). Thereafter, nothing more substantial than a couple of paragraphs in sundry compilations about tribes in the region appeared. 12

The first Ph.D. on the Tangsa was awarded from Gauhati University in 1987 to an Assamese, Chowdhury (1987), who had worked with the Mossang Tangsa in Arunachal. To my knowledge, four Ph.D. and a few Masters Dissertations have been written so far on the Tangsa, mostly from the Rajiv Gandhi University at Itanagar. A few compilations have appeared in recent years, notably, an edited volume Traditional Systems (2005), and a monograph by Rao (2006).

There is some amount of literature in Asamiya about the Tangsa strewn in newspaper and magazine articles. A few older Tangsa (such as Kenglang Kengsang, Nong Tikhak and others) have also written about their own people. There have been some very recent and learned attempts from within the Tangsa community to write about themselves. The best efforts in this direction are those by Morang (2008, in English translation) and Simai (2008). The latter, however, is just about the Tikhak, one of the Tangsa subtribes. Apart from these, sundry newspaper/magazine articles written in Asamiya by journalists like Rajiv Ningkhi and writers like Dibyalata Dutta, Christian literature on the Tangsa and allied groups and a few research publications of researchers, notably our team-members, have also added to the pool of knowledge available.

As far as I could ascertain, although there is some literature on the Tangsa population living in Arunachal Pradesh, for instance Simai (2008) and Rao (2006), this present work is the first detailed study of the Tangsa in Assam. Moreover it is surprising that most of these authors, as well as many authors writing about the Nagas, such as Van Ham and Saul (2005), almost completely ignore the Christian element, which is a big reality in the lives of most Tangsa I met in the field; I have discussed this already in Section 2.5.1 and will do so, also in later chapters.

Literature on the Tangsa (Tangshang/Hewe) people living in Myanmar is also scant and not easy to come by. Statezni (pers. comm. 8th Sept. 2012) has shared with me a short write up on the ‘Tangshang Naga Migration History’ as told to him by a Burmese Tangsa interlocutor Shumaung. 13 A few accounts about the Nagas contain some mention of the Tangsa; (cf. Saul 2005, Van Ham et al 2008). Also some accounts of researchers, such as Goswami (2012a). working on the Naga independence movement and the various NSCN groups contain some mention of the Tangsa, especially since, as mentioned in Section 2.5.2.1, Khaplang, the leader of NSCN(K) faction, is himself a Heimi Naga from Myanmar. For a general overview of the ethnic diversity in Myanmar, see Gravers (2007).

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12 Some linguistic analysis was done by Dasgupta (1978: 80).
13 Shumaung’s information is based on a book in Burmese containing this migration history. I believe that our interlocutor Aphu Tyanglam in Kharangkong has a draft version of the same book.
3.2 Linguistic classification of the Tangsa groups

Just like the term ‘Naga’, the term Tangsa is also a ‘cluster-label’ (Dasgupta 1997: 367) adopted by Indian administrators post independence to club together about 35 different trans-Patkai ‘tribes’ who had come into India from Myanmar but were too small in numbers individually to merit a separate listing of their own.14 The Political Officer Mr. B.K. Borgohain (in Barua 1991: vii) of the Tirap Frontier Tract, claims that the word was coined by him and accepted by the tribe and government for official use during his tenure.15 Tangsa elders have recounted to me that a meeting of the leaders of the different Naga groups living outside the Naga Hills area was called by the government in which they were told that since ‘they wore clothes and were less aggressive’, they were different from the Nagas, and hence they should have a different name. They were asked to choose a name for themselves to replace Naga, and the elders agreed upon the word Tangsa which literally means ‘children of the hills’.16 One motivation for this was to keep the Tangsa separate from the Naga who had already started their struggle for sovereignty by then (cf. Barua 1991: 37, Fn. 1).

According to Bhagabati (2004b: 179-80) the term Tangsa is only a ‘formal label’ since the traditional societal situation in the hills was never one which offered any scope for the Tangsa to act as a sort of corporate functional entity. The smaller units or the so-called sub-tribes were on the other hand, meaningful social universes, each possessing most of the characteristics of a tribe, such as cultural and linguistic homogeneity, territorial contiguity, a common pattern of social organisation though not organised as single political units under any sort of centralised leadership or chiefs.

However, I shall often also use the term ‘tribe’ to refer to the ‘sub-tribes’ as defined above; they will further be classified into different groups, like the Pangwa. Although the Tangsa people are tribal, Tangsa is not a name of a tribe, today it is more of an ethnic label for the different tribes that are now included under the Tangsa umbrella.

As mentioned above, the word Tangsa means ‘children of the hills’ (or ‘people of the high land’), from tang ‘high land’ and sa ‘child’ (Dutta 1969: 1). An alternative reading of the word suggests that Tangsa could mean ‘people who do sacrifice’ from tang ‘to sacrifice’, because some Tangsa groups performed human sacrifice until recent times.17 It is worth noting here that when talking amongst themselves most Tangsa do not refer to themselves as

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14 A label is a cluster label if within one presumed community/people there may be several communities/peoples. A similarly diverse group of varieties in the Tirap District of Arunachal Pradesh got the name Nocte in an analogous way (cf. Morey unpublished).

15 However, Sebastian (1999) claims that the word Tangsa has been used by other British administrators even earlier than that.

16 One elder told me that even a fine was threatened to be imposed on them if the Tangsa persisted in calling themselves Naga.

17 Although I have not heard anyone explaining the choice of the word ‘sa’ (or child) as a diminutive, many have clearly made a distinction between the more ‘civilised’ Tangsa and the ‘wilder and more aggressive’ Tangwa (‘wa’ meaning father) groups including some Naga groups about whom I shall say more presently.

17 There is mention of human sacrifices being performed in 1929 (Report 1936: 3), and also in 1938-39 across the Patkoi range in the unadministered area of Burma (Report 1939: 1). The last mention I have found is in the Burma Report (1942: 2) where it is stated that human sacrifices were carried out in 1940-41. Bhagabati (2004b: 180) reports the last reported case of human sacrifice is said to have taken place in 1942.
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Tangsa but mostly as Hawa (Hewa, Hewe, Hiwi, Heimi, Haimi),\(^{18}\) which is possibly an indigenous term for the whole group or for some part of it.

The term used in Myanmar, Tangshang, appears to be etymologically unrelated. Statezni (unpublished) has reported that “according to interviews with Tangshang leaders in Myanmar, in April 2003, the name Tangshang was inaugurated at a mass meeting in Nanyun town. The name Tangshang is derived from Tang Nyuwang and Shang Nyuwan, two siblings in the oral history. All the Tangshang are regarded to be the descendants of these two siblings.” According to interlocutors in India, however, the term Tangshang applies to a wider group, including the Nocte, Tutsa and Wancho (living in Changlang and Tirap) whereas Tangsa refers to a smaller group. Yet another version goes that there are two groups amongst these tribes, the Sangwa who are democratic (who have elected and not hereditary heads) and the Tangwa\(^{19}\) who have hereditary kings; together they are now called Tangshang (and this includes also the Naga who are called Tangshang Naga) – an umbrella term for the Naga living in Nagaland, Myanmar, Manipur, Tirap and Changlang.

Of the many Tangsa groups today, some – like the Ronrang, Tikhak, Longchang, Juglei, Muklom, Katoi, Yongkuk, Ponthai -- are to be found only in India while others – like the Kimsing (Chamchang), Tonglum (Cholim), Mosang, Longri, Langching (Locchang), Hakhun -- are to be found both in India and in Myanmar. Of Tangsa, Saul (2005: 28) says the following:

In Arunachal Pradesh, other groups or sub-groups such as the Muklom, Longchang, and the Havi are loosely gathered under the umbrella title of Tangsa, a term coined in 1956 and embracing thirty two identified sub-groups. The Tangsa are divided into two sections depending on their residence in India. The first group of settlers are known as Tangwa, while the later arrivals are known as Pangwa or Pangsa. Although it is possible that there are still villages in Myanmar that are directly related to Muklom and Havi, the Tangwa lived almost exclusively in Arunachal Pradesh and claimed a variety of different origins ranging from “just over the border” to the Hukawng valley in Myanmar. The Pangsa people, on the other hand, have most of their villages on the Burmese side of the border, where they are known as Ha Chat, a northern branch of the Heimi.

The names of these tribes can be confusing because each of these groups is known by a number of different names. Each tribe had a name which tribe members used for themselves (endonyms, linguists prefer to call it autonyms) which are usually different from the names exonyms that other groups call them by; these terms are often cognate but not identical. Ethnonyms include both endonyms and exonyms. Furthermore, some of these tribes also had

\(^{18}\) The term Haimi, also spelled Heimi, first appears in the literature in the Census of India 1931, which at that time included what was then called Burma, now called Myanmar (Bennon 1933). This was the first census of Burma to include the Naga; due to changes in politics, it has proved to be the only census to explicitly mention them (cf. Statezni unpublished). In the Burma Report (1942: 3) the term is spelt as Haimyes and are considered distinct from the Rangpans.

Another source states: The Heimi ethnic group belongs to the larger Tangsang Naga group including the Pangmi, Khaklak and Tangan ethnic groups spread over contiguous territories in Sagaing and Kachin States of Myanmar. In India, the Tangsang group consists of the Tangsa, Muklom and Tutsa in Arunachal Pradesh (N. Goswami 2014).

\(^{19}\) The term Tangwa could mean ‘father of the high land’, and according to some Tangsa elders referred to the forefathers of the Tangsa, who wore loincloths.
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simplified names that the British gave them, often called the ‘general name’ which is usually different from the endonyms. For instance, the group with general name Tonglum has endonym Cholim and exonyms Tyanglam, Tilim etc. The Morangs call themselves Mungre (Mungrey), the Ronrangs call themselves Rera and the Langchings call themselves Locchang (and more recently, Lauxchang). I shall normally use the general name unless otherwise mentioned to refer to both the people and the language.

3.2.1 Tangsa languages
According to Simai (2008: 1), “[i]n the Tangsa area, the dialect changes every five kilometres.” Not surprising, as linguistically, the Tangsa languages comprise a diverse group of linguistic varieties (see Dasgupta 1978, Morey unpublished). The Tangsa languages are currently listed in the Ethnologue under Naga, Tase, which is an alternate pronunciation for Tangsa. The nearest relative to Tangsa is Nocte which is also not a single language. Both of these, together with several other languages, make up the Konyak subgroup within a larger group sometimes called Sal (Burling 1983), or more frequently Bodo-Konyak-Jinghpaw (Burling 2003: 176). This in turn is a subgroup of Tibeto-Burmese.

Figure 3-1: Linguistic classification of some Tangsa groups

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20 According to some interlocutors, the general name is the Singpho/Jinphaw term for them, for some others it is the term the Assamese used for them which the British adopted, and in many cases the two coincide.
For the connection between the Tangsa and the Naga languages, see van Driem 2008.
22 It is the Kimsing pronunciation of Tangsa. The -ang final in most varieties corresponds to -a in Kimsing, Shanke and Langchung, and while the -a final is usually -i in those three, the words for son and father are irregular and come out as -e. So -sa, -se definitely means ‘son’ or ‘child’ (Stephen Morey, pers. comm.).
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Based on lexical differences (Barkataki-Ruscheweyh & Morey 2013, Table 4), the Tangsa languages can be broadly divided into a few clusters, as shown in Figure 3-1 above\(^{23}\), where languages which are similar to each other have been put closer to each other and have also been painted in shades of the same colour.

The Tikhak group (shown on the right bottom corner of the figure above) belongs to the same cluster as Longchang, Nokja, Yongkuk, (and also Kato not shown), and is reasonably well established (see Simai 2008: 25, Hastie forthcoming); the Pangwa cluster (shown in the middle) has many more language groups including most of those that we met in the field, like Ronrang, Tonglum, Juglei, Kimsing, Langching, Lungri and Mossang. The remaining groups represent a more divergent collection of languages including Ponthai, Moklum and Hakhun. These languages are not mutually intelligible; Hakhun is very similar to Nocte, and Ponthai close to Tutsa. There are yet others like the Thamkok and the Thampang which are linguistically very different, where not much can be said at the moment. Morey (pers. comm.) believes that the Tangsa languages can be viewed as a ‘dialect network’\(^{24}\) rather than a dialect continuum as there is no sense (so far, at least) in which there is a progression within the varieties.

As Morey & Schöpf (under review) report, ‘‘[l]inguistic diversity amongst the Tangsa is so high that most language varieties are confined to less than ten villages.’’\(^{25}\) Of the roughly 35 Tangsa groups within India, some of the languages vary so much that they need to use other languages to communicate not only with the outside world but also amongst themselves. Earlier the *lingua franca* of the area was Singpho which is being slowly replaced by Asamiya (in Assam), Hindi and pidgin versions of Asamiya, called Nefamese (in Arunachal) and Nagamese (in Nagaland). For more on Tangsa orthography, see Appendix IV.

3.3 Migration history and connection with other groups

Colonial sources do not shed much light on the migration patterns of the trans-Patkoi groups.

There is but little known at present of these Naga tribes and clans. The Hukawng Valley is a historical route of invasion of India from the South-East and these Nagas are possibly early arrivals, pushed aside by the Ahoms and Kachin tides of movement, having been left behind by some pre-historic conquerors of Assam. (O’Callaghan 1926)

\[\text{Note that these are only those groups in India that we have been able to collect data on. But even there,}\]
\[\text{some like Shangti and Lungkhi (Pangwa) are not included; Lungkhi and Khalak belong together. And this}\]
\[\text{doesn’t even begin to include the groups reported in Myanmar.}\]

Dewar’s (1931: 295) list of the Rangpan tribe included only the following groups as sub-tribes: Mawshang, Sangche, Langshin, Myimu, Hkatak, Gashan, Tumil, Longri, Sangtai, Saukrang, Mawrang, Dongai, Maitai, Sanri. The corresponding list for the Haimi tribe included Rangkhu, Lakai, Sanching, Longkhai, Rasa, Gaha, Samse and many others; Other groups like Gahki, Gakhun, Bontai are included under the Ku Wa tribe.

\[\text{As also evident in the title of our DOBES project extension (2011-12): “A Multifaceted Study of Tangsa – a}\]
\[\text{Network of Linguistic Varieties in North East India”}\].

\[\text{A person who does not understand any of these languages cannot even begin to imagine what this diversity}\]
\[\text{could mean, because to his or her ear, they would all sound the same. One can get a rough idea, however,}\]
\[\text{during a Baptist church service in a Tangsa basti when the congregation say their prayers aloud in their own}\]
\[\text{languages.}\]
Like the Naga, with whom the Tangsa claim common descent, the remembered ‘history’ of the Tangsa is entangled with their myths of origin and their lores of ancestry, struggle and conquest:

The existential identity of the Nagas is immersed in mythical lore -- how they originated, the location of their origin and why they come to live at different places or inhabit the geographical area called Nagaland and outside the state in some places in the adjoining states. There is no concrete “historical” or material support for the myths of origin; however, these myths have been accepted by people as an inalienable principle of their tribal history. Each tribe with its distinct language, social customs and dress codes has continued to live as an identifiable ethnic entity within the group collectively known as the Nagas. The viability and continuance of this principle can be illustrated, for example, among the Ao-Naga tribe regarding the clan divisions and adherence to exogamy. (Ao 2006: 6)

My account below is primarily based on interviews with Tangsa elders.  Although this method of uncritically using reported oral narratives as evidence can be accused of being based on ‘methodological poverty’ (cf. Huber 2012), I still believe that information obtained from oral accounts, especially when they are corroborated by more than one informant independently, can still point to important facts about their past. Moreover, the information I have (for example, about Ronrang migration in Chapter 6) bears out Huber’s main claim that migrations should be considered not so much as migration of entire tribes, but as micro-migrations -- small numbers of individuals or smaller-sized groups moving relatively short distances (Huber 2012: 98).

Many Tangsa elders speak of a place called Masoi-Shingra (supposedly in the Myanmar/China border), as the common place where most of the tribal people in the Northeast used to once live. They then moved to a place called Mumkhom-tan in the plains. Everyone gathered there and there was a fight with the Siam Khamptis, so they held a meeting on the banks of the nearby Han-nyu river to decide where they should go. They had no boats at that time and the river was very wide so they did not know how to cross it. At some point however they saw a whole pack of pigs crossing the river – guessing that the river must be shallow at that place, they followed and crossed the river, naming the place Tanai-wak-rap (meaning Tanai-pig-crossing, Tanai being the local name for the Chindwin river).

Their migration stories speak of different places of origin and different routes of migration for the different tribes. For example, the Mossangs believe that after crossing the Tanai river, all Mossangs stayed in a place called Sangkal (in Burma) from where they split into groups which followed different paths to come into India. Some of course stayed back so that there

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26 Based on interviews with Aphu Tyanglam and Phanglim Kimsing over extended periods of time during the field seasons 2009-10 and 2010-11. See also Dutta (1969: 4-7), Morang (2008).
27 Morang’s 2008 book is titled Tangsas – the Children of Masui Singrapum. ‘Pum’ being the Singpho word for hill. Note also that other groups like the Singpho also claim the same place of origin (cf. Sadan 2012: 257).
28 The Ronrangs go one step further backwards and start at a place called Rokachung (or Hookachung) where man and animals were created by the Supreme Being (Traditional Systems 2005: 151).
29 One version of the migration story of the Ronrang is described in Ronrang (1997: 5); another is described in Dutta (2011).
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are Mossang people still in Myanmar. Tangsa elders believed that there were essentially three rasta (Hin. paths) through which the Tangsa came into India, the Pangsa road (also called Ra-thun-pan-sa rasta, before the pass was built), the road via Ranghill to Manmao called the Ranglom (or Nyap-ket) rasta and the third was into Changlang with the Mukloms called the Lunglam (or Walako) rasta. The route of migration is an old one, however, migration from Myanmar into India is still continuing till the present day. As already mentioned, the Tangsa have lived and moved about in the Patkai hills on what is now the India-Myanmar border for a very long time, but in the last several hundred years there has been a progressive movement of Tangsa people down to the plains of Assam from the hills. Different groups have moved into the plains of Northeast India at different times, mainly in search of cultivable land. The Tikhak, Yongkuk and Muklom appear to have arrived several centuries ago, see Simai (2008: 24ff) for more details, while the Juglei and Mossang also have been in India since at least 1900 and probably before. Others like the Cholim and the Ronrang have arrived in the first half of the 20th century, and the Hakhun even more recently. Some Mukloms claim that they have been on the plains for a long time, and that they were the original inhabitants of the Kharsang area (now in Arunachal). However there are not many Moklum to be found in Assam at present.

3.3.1 Connection with the Naga

Much is known and has been written about the different Naga tribes living in Nagaland and in Myanmar, for example, Hutton (1921), Von Fürer-Haimendorf (1939), and more recently, Van Ham et al. (2008), Oppitz et al. (2008), Von Stockhausen (2014) and many more. The Tangsa have traditionally and still today been clubbed officially under the ‘Other Naga Tribes’ category. Interestingly however, in Nagaland, even among Naga elders and the educated elite, not many were aware of the existence of the Tangsa, leave alone know that they were related to the Naga. In Assam and Arunachal, while some Tangsa were happy to acknowledge the Naga connection, others denied it vehemently. This interesting situation illustrates how exonyms such as the term Naga are differentially accepted or recognised by different group members and how relative and context dependent such constructions can be. I was advised by my field interlocutors not to bring up this topic while talking to strangers. It was not until I had asked this question many times that patterns began to emerge; those Tangsa who did not want to be associated with the negative connotations of being ‘Naga’ like their being aggressive, or their wanting to secede from the Indian union, were wary of admitting the Naga connection, and this was the case with most of the educated and well-to-

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Interview with Lemkhum Mossang, 03.01.12, Manmao. For another reading, see Rao (2003). The Mossangs are supposed to have taken the first two of the three paths into India mentioned above. According to some, those Mossangs who went with the Mukloms and followed the third path call themselves Lungphi today.

Proof of this fact could be easily seen from the fact that many Tikhak and Longchang elders we met were born in the area included in present-day India while elders we met from most of the Pangwa groups were born in Burma and had moved to India during their lifetime.

As mentioned earlier there have been occasions when some of these groups have receded back to the hills. See Appendix II for more details of this phenomenon.

Haksar (2013: 84, 87) describes exactly the same ambivalence with regard to whether the Tangsa are Naga.
do Tangsa as well as with the Buddhist Tangsa like the Tikhak. Others, especially those who wanted to project their common (Baptist) Christian religious identity as well as those who wished to claim a common heritage with some Naga groups, were happy to hold on to this link.

As my Tangsa-father Aphu Tyanglam, about whom I shall say more in Chapter 4, explained so evocatively, “[t]he Tangsa and the other Naga tribes are like the five fingers in one hand, each a little different from the others, but all bound together.” Given the similarities in cultural symbols and in some of the traditional practices as well as in their migration history, it is plausible that the Tangsa tribes are related in different and various ways to some Naga tribes. The Tangsa claim that they were the first to start wearing a lungi (Ass./Hin. ankle-length cotton wrapper) instead of the lengti (Ass. short loin cloth) and were supposed to be more docile and less aggressive than their Tangwa cousins in the hills. In any case, all these tribes had probably lived in close proximity to each other in the Patkai hills and were even possibly hunting the same wild boars and horn-bills, the teeth and feathers respectively of which adorn both Naga as well as Tangsa hats (cf. Waddell 1901).

Most of the tribes belonging to the Pangwa subgroup of the Tangsa did not have hereditary leaders but had rich and powerful village chiefs (called Lowang/Lungwang in Mossang). Barua (1991: 289) goes one step further by arguing that it was perhaps precisely because the Pangwa groups saw the dangers and problems of having hereditary kings (as their neighbouring communities, such as the Noctes and Wanchos, did) that they decided to have a different system. This view supports Leach’s (1954) thesis that societies oscillate between autocratic hereditary systems at one end and democratic republican systems on the other. The villagers turned to their Lungwangs (Lowang) in times of need; and the richest amongst the Lungwangs would also perform human sacrifices (or at least buffalo sacrifices), see Section 3.4.1, every few years. For more on the traditional village council, not much of which is evident today in the Tangsa villages in Assam, refer to Dutta (1969), Elwin (1965: Ch. 17), Borgohain (1992).

I also saw no evidence among the Pangwa groups of the much talked-and-written-about boys and girls dormitories of the Naga tribes, which were believed to exist also amongst the Tangsa. A few of the older Tangsa men did remember seeing or even living in such dormitories in their youth, and spoke about the role these dormitories played in courting and

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24 The practice of wearing lungis may in turn have been borrowed from the Burmans as traditionally Naga tribes did not wear lungis.

25 Here my findings are at variance with those reported by Bouchery (2007: 116), who claims that “[t]he Konyak, Wancho, Nocte and Tangsa groups, who occupy the northernmost part of the Naga Hills, have both stratified lineages and paramount chiefs (Ang, Lowang, Lungwang respectively) whose authority extends over a territorial domain consisting of a group of allied villages, and often behave like true autocrats.”

Dewar (1931: 197), referring to peoples living right on the border of Kachin territory, contrasts Nagas, who have hereditary headmen, with those whose headmen were appointed by ‘selection’. Hence these Nagas were possibly not Pangwa Naga tribes.

26 For more details about the institution in general, refer to Nair (1985: Ch.5) where he calls them ‘bachelor dormitories’ and ‘virgin houses’ respectively. Nair (1985: 112) also remarks that the dormitory system is not functioning well amongst the Tangsa. Of course these dormitories still exist amongst the Wancho and the Nocte people in the Tirap and Longding districts even today.
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choosing their life-partners. Only one interlocutor told me about the martial aspects normally associated with the men’s dormitories. These dormitories were called ‘Papung’ for young men and ‘Likpah’ for young girls in Cholim. But they used to exist a long time ago – Aphu told me he has not seen a Papung, nor had his father, but he has seen Likpahs. The Hakhuns however seem to have had them till more recently (reinforcing the argument that they are actually culturally more akin to the Nocte and the Naga then to the Pangwa groups, which I shall discuss in more detail in Section 5.1.1).

3.3.2 Relation to the Singpho

Many Tangsa elders (in the Kharangkong area) spoke of how Singpho village chiefs had first given them land and allowed them to settle there. This shows that the Singpho had arrived in the plains much earlier than some of the Pangwa Tangsa groups at least. It is believed however that some other Tangsa tribes had come into the Tirap area before the arrival of the Singphos as some of them are said to have been conquered and subjugated by the Singphos (cf. Gazetteer 1980: 34). The Tikhak Tangsa had probably come at the same time as the Singpho, and had developed and maintained closer links with them over the centuries. It is not surprising then that most Tikhak living in the plains in Assam are Buddhist today, like the Singpho.

Relations between the Tangsa and Singpho were not always so cordial: as mentioned in the Gazetteer 1980, British records of 1836 allude to the fact that although the Tangsa of Namchik tried to maintain friendly relations with both the Dapha Gum and the Bisa Gum, the two Singpho chiefs, they were in need of protection. Consequently they were given arms to defend themselves against the Singphos. Bhagabati (2004b: 179) also alludes to fact that different sections of the Tangsa appear, in pre-British times, to have been under the strong influence of the Singphos since Singpho was a sort of lingua-franca among them, used for inter-tribal communication. But this influence did not last. According to Bhagabati, “the weakening of Singpho influence, as well as loss of social contacts with trans-Patkoi tribes are both developments of the post-Independence period.”

Today in Assam, there is not much difference, in terms of wealth and political influence, and in their economic situations, between the Singpho, the Tangsa or their other ‘tribal’ neighbours like the Tai Phake or the Naga Sema. So much so that, as already mentioned in Section 2.4.2, these groups (who are in this sense ‘equal in weakness’) have come together to

37 They are also mentioned in their traditional love songs.
39 This fact is borne out by comments made by Roy Burman (1961: 97): “In the past it had a bachelor’s dormitory called the Loo-pong, which fulfilled the functions of the Morung among the Noctes and Wanchos. This has entirely disappeared though there is still a girls dormitory in some of the villages.”
40 The old Singpho GB at Kumsaigaon, adjacent to Kharangkong, told us how his grandfather gave land to the Tangsa and showed us an old jackfruit tree that was the boundary of the land.
41 Sadan (2013: 184ff) claims smallness in numbers, their religious orientation towards Buddhism and loss of political and economic capital in Assam as reasons why Singphos have not been able to assimilate non-Singpho groups in recent years.
put up a united front against their Nepali and Assamese neighbours and to demand political recognition from the state.

**Hills vs. plains people**

For the Tangsa, the Singpho have lived in the valleys of rivers, while they have lived in the hills. But as already mentioned, both these communities claim to have originated from the same place Masoi-shingra-bum (see Morang 2008, Singpho 2000: 27). The Tangsa have distinct terms exist for hill people *ku-mih-se* (*Cholim*, hill-people-son) and for plains people *kyom-mih-se* (*Cholim*, plains-people-son). In song language, the Pangwa call the people from the plains *Shamsa*. This hills-plains binary shows up in various contexts such as in Wihu songs. Another instance is the story below that was narrated to me by different people at different times.

The story goes that once the Tangsa and the Shamsa brothers landed near the river. The elder Shamsa brother built rafts out of banana leaves and went down the river. The younger Tangsa brother called out to him but he could not hear as the voice was drowned in the noise of the water. But the younger one kept hearing what the elder one said – that is why even today the hills people understand the languages of the plains people but the other way around does not work. Similar stories tell how the different Naga and Singpho tribes lived together as brothers till they got separated, the Singpho using the rivers to go down to the plains while the Naga went back up to the hills (see Morang 2008: 25). The template of different brothers constituting the origin of different communities is well-known (cf. Wellens 2012). Interesting however, is the fact that in the narration of these tales of two brothers, the good or elder brother is invariably from the community to which the speaker belongs. This bears out the truth of Leach’s claim: “[e]very traditional tale will occur in several different versions, each tending to uphold the claims of a different vested interest” (Leach 1954: 266).

The somewhat unequivocal relation that some Pangwa groups share with the plains people can be best illustrated through the story that many Tangsa elders told me (at different times and places) to explain how the practice of doing human sacrifice became prevalent among the Pangwa groups. An extract from my field notes reads as follows:

The motif of the two brothers mentioned earlier continues with the Tangsa brother living in the hills and the Shamsa one living in the plains. The mother lived with the Tangsa son and this made

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42 Showing the relativity of the hills-plains binary that Leach had set out in his classic treatise in 1954. If the Kachins (read, Singphos) were highlanders in relation to the Shan lowlanders in Upland Burma, in relation to the Naga tribes they were valley-dwellers.

43 For instance, in Wihu song sung by Dangkam Maitai on 09.11.2011 (and recorded and translated by Stephen Morey) they say:

We fought with the Shamsa people of this world.
We pierced them like the leg of a mother elephant
We fought with the Shamsa people of this world.
We pierced them with an iron rod, like the leg of a mother elephant.

44 Since the Tangsa, while narrating stories, do not use the term Tangsa, it is not clear whether, when the Tangsa say Naga, they mean all the Naga tribes, or just the Tangsa subcollection within them.

Lotha (2008: 54) alludes to a similar story where the younger brother is the ancestor of the Kachins and the elder brother to the Konyaks. For the Angami version of this story, see (Wouters 2012: 43).
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the younger son jealous. The younger one had already started doing wet rice cultivation. One day the elder brother went to ask the younger one to give him some rice grains to plant. The younger one gave him some paddy grains but cooked them before giving so that they did not germinate. The next year the elder brother came to ask again. The younger brother again gave him some rice grains but advised the elder to kill his mother and mix the paddy grain with her blood before sowing. That is how human sacrifice came into Tangsa society.45

And that is how, they believe, they first began to sacrifice humans; that is also why they do animal sacrifice even today for greater prosperity.

3.4 The Pangwa group

About 20 of the Tangsa groups in India are clubbed together as the Pangwa (or Pangsa or Pawe), a term based on the word pang meaning ‘spread all over’. This group was also called Rangpang by the British administration.46 Amongst the Tangsa, only the Pangwa groups are believed to have performed human sacrifice in earlier times, although head-hunting was prevalent also among the Tangwa groups such as the Hakhuns as well.47 As far as can be ascertained, cannibalism was not practised by any group. The British stopped these practices amongst the Tangsa by imposing heavy punishments.48

The Pangwa groups are mainly those tribes that are still to be found both in Myanmar and India, and have entered India through the Pangsau pass via Nampong. Most of these people have crossed Myanmar into India in the last 100 years or less (except the Juglei who have been in India for a longer time). There are around 28 Pangwa groups, some are mostly in India, some mostly in Myanmar (cf. Morey unpublished). According to another writer, herself a Mossang Pangwa,

The Tangsa were those who had migrated from Myanmar to India long ago, including the sub-tribes of Lungchang, Muklom, Tikhak, Have, and Ponthai (Haqkhun). The Pangsa, in contrast, are those who were pang “left behind” in Myanmar, which includes the sub-tribes of Moshash, Motang, Kim sharing, Rongrang, Yogi, Longri, Shanke, and Longphi, in addition to the sub-tribes

45 As told by a Tangsa elder in Mannmao (06.1.11).
46 The term Rangpan/Rangpang first appears in the literature as a group of Nagas who raided settlements and waylaid travelers in 1875 (cf. Stateznki unpublished). According to Barua (1991: 345), the term Rang-pang comes from Rang which means sky or high up and pang meaning men of unknown character; the word then refers to people living higher up with unknown character, perhaps because they practised human sacrifice. Another interpretation is that Rangpang means ‘people descended from heaven’ as Rang means heaven (Sebastian 1999: 2); A third writer (Changmai 2012: 6) claims pang means dweller so ‘Rangpang’ means people dwelling on high ground or hill-dweller. Rangpang (in Burma) are also mentioned by Waddell (1901: 63) as belonging to the Eastern Naga group of Nagas. The same list also includes the Moshash (Mosseang) in the Eastern Naga list, mentioning that very little is known about the Eastern Nagas.
47 The Pangwa performed human sacrifice for primarily two reasons: either when a person was gravely ill, or as a sacrifice during a feast of merit. More details can be found in Appendix V. The Tangwa are more allied with the Nocte, Wancho, and Konyak Naga groups among whom the practice of head-hunting is well documented (Von Fürer-Haimendorf 1962).
48 The British Frontier administration banned and stopped human sacrifices completely around 1926 (cf. Ronrang 1997: 12). But Barua (1991: 161) claims that it was still prevalent till as late as 1952. For another description, see Dutta (1969: 77). The practice of head-hunting was also banned by around the year 1945 (cf. Barua 1991: 257). Many elders spoke of how Pangwa men were forced to work at building roads as punishment for having indulged in such practices.
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living exclusively in Myanmar. Thus, even though in some cases apparently all the members of certain sub-tribes (such as the Kimsing, Rongrang, Yogli, Longri and Longphi) have now moved to the India side, they are still considered Pangsa (Mossang 1983, cited in Bhagabati 2004b: 181).

Since two of the three villages where most of my field-work in Assam was based are majority Pangwa, most of the information in this work will relate to the Pangwa. However I will continue to use the general term Tangsa both in the title and as a general label for the various groups, first because my interlocutors were not all Pangwa, second because I agree with Bhagabati (2004b: 181) that the “distinction between the Tangsa and the Pangsa is considerably blurred today” and, third because recent political developments in Assam, like the award of a Development Council to eight ethnic communities including the Tangsa, have further established the term Tangsa in the official vocabulary.

Today, most Pangwa groups have embraced Christianity. The Pangwa languages are more or less mutually intelligible though there are a few like the Ronrang and the Locchang which most other Pangwa groups find hard to understand. However, they share a common heritage of the Wihu song and also the Sahpolo dance, and most elders claim that the song language of their traditional songs including the Wihu are the same or at least much closer to each other than the spoken language of today (cf. Barkataki-Ruscheweyh & Morey 2013). Culturally too, this grouping makes sense. For example, the Tikhak, Moklum and Longchang burn their dead while most of the Pangwa tribes bury their dead. Of course there are differences within the Pangwa group as well. For example, unlike most of the other Pangwa groups, the Ronrangs do not have the practice of paying bride-price at the time of marriage. However both the Ronrangs as well as the non-Pangwa Hakhuns have a war dance, while the other Pangwa groups do not have it.

Many Pangwa elders explained to me why their languages were distinct although their cultural traits were similar: Since they were head hunters in olden times, as head-hunters they did not want their enemies (who were often their neighbours) to understand what they were saying, so their languages became very different, especially the languages of those communities who lived close to one another and were often at war with each other. This is in line with Jacquesson’s (2008: 307) hypothesis in which he claims that amongst the Naga groups, relative high population density have implied a high rate of change and differentiation in their languages.

3.4.1 Tangsa (Pangwa) festivals

Many of our older informants told us that rich and powerful Tangsa chieftains (Lowangs) performed a kind of ‘feast of merit’ called the ‘Wangjang-kuh’, usually during the winter months, every few years, in order to demonstrate their wealth, to reaffirm their position within their community and to seek blessings for more wealth and prosperity in the future. The date for the festival was not fixed and would depend on when the harvesting work would actually end. It involved doing ritual sacrifice of a large number of buffaloes (as is evident from the

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49 The old practice of burying the dead under their stilt-houses, for fear that the enemies might come and steal the head, and take it away as a trophy, has since been discontinued.
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large number of buffalo skulls seen in Photo 3-1, as well as on the back cover), hence it was also called nga/noi-tang, (nga/noi meaning buffalo, hence ‘Great buffalo sacrifice’), and in some Tangsa groups, also of slaves bought for the purpose, accompanied by feasting, singing and merry-making lasting many days. Other informants claim that after human sacrifice was abolished by the British rich village chieftains started performing buffalo sacrifices instead.

Being primarily rice-cultivators, the traditional festivals of the Tangsa were based on the agricultural cycle. Festivals accompanied each stage of activity – burning and clearing the forests, sowing the seeds, weeding, harvesting, storing etc. But the fact that many Tangsa have shifted to wet-rice cultivation and indeed to other occupations, as well as the fact that many have converted to other faiths, means that most of these festivals are not celebrated any more. Shortage of time, difficulty in finding the ingredients required, the high costs of holding these events are some reasons cited by my Tangsa interlocutors for the decline. Consequently, the knowledge of songs and dances as well as of the rituals associated with these festivals have also declined, the orality of the Tangsa languages only aggravating the process. There are still many Tangsa elders, however, who know how to do augury and divination, and do so during the Wihu-kuh (Kouk) festival every year.

Photo 3-1: The arrangement of buffalo skulls from nga-tangs

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50 The buffalo skulls arranged in neat columns on the main wall of some Tangsa houses, one for each time such a feast was performed, on the wall (nye-khring/nge-khurung, separating the outer half enclosed area from the inner rooms and which is usually the side where the master of the house sits and presides over his household) is the only material evidence we have for these feasts having ever been conducted. I have not seen this, however, in any Tangsa home in Assam.

51 From written transcript of talk delivered by a Tangsa spokesperson at Margherita College in Nov. 2012.

52 The Hakhuns are supposed to have had twelve festivals, one for each month of the year.
As I shall discuss at much greater length in later chapters, a growing awareness, also amongst the Christian Tangsa, about preservation of their traditional culture in their efforts to construct and project their ethnic identity has led to a sort of agreement to celebrate two festivals annually, the Moul (Mol/Moh/Moe) festival in the rainy summer season and the Kouk (Kuk/Kuh) festival in the dry winter season. However, since most of the Christians already celebrate Christmas and New Year in the winter, the Moul festival has become the official festival of the Tangsa in Arunachal (it appears in the official calendar of festivals in Arunachal and the date for the official celebration is on 25\textsuperscript{th} April, although village level celebrations normally are held later). As I shall discuss in the next chapter, the Tangsa in Kharangkong celebrate the Wihu/Shawi-kouk on January 5 as their main festival.\(^{53}\)

While the winter Kouk festival is mainly seen as a sort of thanksgiving,\(^{54}\) after the harvesting has been completed, with a lot of feasting and merry-making, the summer Moh/Moul/Meh festival is celebrated after the sowing and weeding has been completed, to pray for a good crop and also for better luck with hunting (by ritually Honouring the skulls of animals hunted in the past). Animals were not required to be sacrificed at Moul while animals (at least a chicken) were ritually sacrificed in every household for Kouk. The Wihu/Wihau song of the Pangwa Tangsa was sung only during the winter festival, while the Sahpolo dance, (as in Photo 4-6 on page 109) which has assumed a pan-Tangsa character, used to be performed only during the summer Moul festival.

\subsection*{3.4.2 Some aspects of Tangsa everyday life}

The Tangsa, like the Singpho and the Assamese around them, are basically patrilineal. However, unlike the Assamese, and like many other tribal societies, the Tangsa world is more egalitarian in terms of gender. They also have a more sexually permissive society where it is possible for a man and a woman to live together even without a formal marriage and to also have children through this union. Like many other tribes in the region and in south-east Asia, the Tangsa prefer (asymmetric) cross-cousin marriages.\(^{55}\) That is, the most preferred marriage is when a boy marries his mother’s brother’s daughter, or a girl who can be considered to be

\footnote{Dutta (1969: 28) refers to this festival as ‘bihukuk’, perhaps inadvertently equating the Wihu festival of the Tangsa with the Bihu festival of the Assamese, as many other Assamese are also wont to do, see Section 6.4.2.}

\footnote{The concept of thanksgiving is not used here in the Christian context but in the general sense of a harvest-end festival.}

\footnote{Another such festival, called the Murung festival, also to do with fertility amongst the Apatani people of northeast India, has been comprehensively described by Blackburn (2010).}

\footnote{Typically a man’s universe is divided up into three disjoint sets – the sibling set X of his ‘brothers and sisters’ within which there could be no marriage (this includes all parallel cousins, i.e. sons of father’s brothers and daughters of father’s sisters), the set Y (of wife-givers) from whom he (and his brothers) can take (marry) girls; and the set of people Z (of wife-takers) into whose family he could give his ‘sisters’ in marriage; each set is a union of clans. This asymmetry also gives rise to a hierarchy: a man from the group X holds the members of group Y, of potential wife-givers, in much higher esteem than those of Z, of potential wife-takers. Amongst the Kachins, the group X is called kahpu kana, the group Y is mayu, and Z is dauma (Sadan 2013: 31) (see also Leach 1954: 74).}
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in that relation to him. This rule is common to all Tangsa (and also to all Singpho\textsuperscript{56}). Bride-price has to be paid by the groom in some, but not all, Tangsa tribes. For more on how marriages are fixed and clan/kinship rules that come into play, see Appendix VI.

\textbf{Photo 3-2: A Tangsa stilt house (\textit{chang-ghar})}

Although the rites at birth, marriage and death followed by the Tangsa today have to do with the particular religion they follow, some traditions from the past have persisted: rules for naming children,\textsuperscript{57} rules for matchmaking in view of clan linkages,\textsuperscript{58} and some of their earlier beliefs about the spirits of the dead, are some examples. As my Kimsing interlocutor summarised for me, all those traditional practices which do not come into direct conflict with Christian principles continue to be followed by the Christian Tangsa even today.

While land for doing swidden cultivation in the hills used to be held communally,\textsuperscript{59} today most Tangsa living in the plains and doing wet-rice cultivation possess land on an individual basis. The Tangsa used to live in stilt houses (see Photo 3-2), called \textit{rang-jim} (in Cholim and

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\textsuperscript{56}“From an analytical point of view the system is one of matrilateral cross cousin marriage, but it needs to be stressed that a Kachin, in marrying a girl from his moyu-ni, does not normally marry a true matrilateral cross cousin but only a classificatory cross cousin” (Leach 1954: 74) (see also Leach 1952).

\textsuperscript{57} For instance, amongst the Ronrangs, it is usual, even today, to have a part of the clan name included in the name: for example, people belonging to the Longti clan will have ‘long’ in their names – like Humlong, Wamlong, Longtu, etc. The Weti clan members have ‘wai’ in their names like Wai-tu, Wailam etc. The Morangtang all have ‘mo’ in their names like Mohen, Mogen, Morang, Molu, Molem, and so on. Hence, even today, it is easy to figure out the clan of a Ronrang person from his name. The naming practices of the Hakhuns are given in Appendix IX.

\textsuperscript{58} During marriage, the relevant clans (and not the tribes) have to be considered, even if the two people belong to two different Tangsa tribes, or is a Singpho. For example, the Lengto clan of Mossangs and the Nyamran clan of the Morangs are like brothers and hence they cannot inter-marry (they also have the same tiger story).

\textsuperscript{59} For an account of agrarian relations in the past, see Chakrabarti (2003).
Many Tangsa now live in Assam-type concrete houses (paka-jim, where paka is the Assamiya word for concrete) with asbestos sheets for roofing, sometimes raised (as in the case of Aphi Tyanglam in Kharangkong), sometimes not (as in the case of the houses in Phulbari and Balinong). Most Tangsa homes in India that I visited had electricity (although the power supply was very erratic) but very few had running water supply to their kitchens and bathrooms. But irrespective of the kind of house they lived in, almost all Tangsa I have met still cook over a wood fire over an earthen hearth. A tea-kettle to brew the strong black tea (phelap in Cholim, phalap in Singpho) that my Tangsa interlocutors drink almost all the time sits on a metal tripod over the fire in the outer area. Besides tea, rice-beer (chai in Cholim) is the other drink that is very common amongst the Tangsa.

While the women are largely in charge of the children and keeping the home fires burning (which also included working in the fields and gathering fire-wood), the men were in charge of burning and clearing the forests for cultivation as well as providing security for the village-folk. If stories are to be believed, in the past neighbouring Tangsa settlements were constantly at war with each other, over village boundaries or stolen cattle, and kept the men busy. But in the course of time while the chores of the women have remained largely unaltered, the wars and feuds have mostly disappeared giving the men-folk a lot more free time at their disposal. Many of my informants felt that this has led to a growing opium addiction amongst a section of the Tangsa men. More details about Tangsa food, shelter, clothing and other details of their everyday life are included in Appendix VII.

### 3.5 Life in the plains

From Section 2.3, it is clear that the Tangsa in Assam are a tiny minority group in an area of great ethnic diversity. But that diversity is matched by the great internal diversity amongst the various Tangsa groups in language and in their cultural traditions. According to the 2001 Census, there are 40,086 Tangsa in all in India.63

Table 3-1 gives the figures for the eight villages in the Tirap Mouza which has a Tangsa population of more than 50 persons in 2001. Note that there is only one village (Wara NC) in Assam which is purely Tangsa. In all the others, the Tangsa are in a small minority. Henceforth, by a Tangsa village I will mean a village where a significant number of Tangsa live.

Not surprisingly, one Tangsa elder in Arunachal described the Tangsa living in Assam as a ‘khichri samaj’ (Ass. a mixed/impure society), not only because many Tangsa groups lived together in the same village but also because they lived together with many other non-Tangsa

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60 This section as well as Appendix VII is based on what I have actually experienced during my field trips at different Tangsa villages in Assam and Arunachal.

61 The Baptist Church in Phulbari is an example of an Assam-type house, see Sketch 6-2.

62 Opium was considered to be a wonder-drug in the hills, because when used in sparingly it could reduce pain, cure stomach ailments and also provide stimulation for the last sprint, when all else failed.

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groups as well, such as the Nepali, the Assamese, and the Tea-tribes. Of the eight villages mentioned in the table below, I shall take a closer look at Kharangkong and Parbatipur (Phulbari) in Chapters 4 and 6 respectively.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name of village</th>
<th>Population</th>
<th>Tangsa</th>
<th>Nepali</th>
<th>Tea-tribes</th>
<th>Ahom</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Lakla Pothar NC</td>
<td>1352</td>
<td>250</td>
<td>957</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wara NC</td>
<td>221</td>
<td>221</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parbatipur</td>
<td>4280</td>
<td>200</td>
<td>3,345</td>
<td>250</td>
<td>250</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kharangkong</td>
<td>519</td>
<td>148</td>
<td>65</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>256</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kamba</td>
<td>734</td>
<td>142</td>
<td>275</td>
<td>310</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mullong</td>
<td>529</td>
<td>107</td>
<td>173</td>
<td>213</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 Toklong Gaon</td>
<td>510</td>
<td>95</td>
<td>180</td>
<td>90</td>
<td>103</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 Ninggam Gaon</td>
<td>338</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>239</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total population in the Tirap Mouza (2001)</strong></td>
<td><strong>62,967</strong></td>
<td><strong>1,299</strong></td>
<td><strong>32,132</strong></td>
<td><strong>10,323</strong></td>
<td><strong>5,829</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3-1: Population breakup of the Tangsa villages in Assam

3.5.1 Some of the changes

For many Tangsa groups, the move down to the plains from the hills have implied many changes to their life-styles. The traditional Tangsa chang-ghars were easy to build when the village moved to a new location. Unlike the temporary nature of their settlements in the past, most Tangsa villages now are fixed and more and more Tangsa live in concrete Assam-type houses. The gradual disappearance of forests from their vicinity also means that the Tangsa have to give up hunting and depend on markets to provide for their needs.

In terms of religion, almost all Tangsa were still practising their traditional beliefs when they first moved into India. Those Tangsa groups who came into India a long time ago (like the Katoi) have been Hinduised and have got assimilated into the Assamese population; those, such as the Tikhak (see Simai 2008: 70, for details) who came about a couple of centuries ago along with the Singpho and the Tai Phake are mostly Theravada Buddhists today. There are Buddhist temples in many Tikhak and Yongkuk villages. As stated in Section 2.5.1, a strong wave of missionary activity in the early 1970s, resulted in many Tangsa, mostly amongst the Pangwa groups, converting to Christianity. Besides the Buddhists and the Christians, in Assam there are also a few households left in Kharangkong where the old traditions are still practised (as I shall discuss in the next chapter). There is much more to be said in terms of

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64 Source: Office of the Circle Officer, Margherita.

65 Here the reference is to those Tangsa who have migrated into the region before the middle of the 20th century. There is migration from Myanmar into India going one even today, but most Tangsa in Myanmar are now Christian.
Getting Acquainted

religious diversity with regard to the Tangsa living in Arunachal. I postpone that discussion till Chapter 7.

Linguistic diversity amongst the Tangsa has already been discussed in Section 3.2. But, since the Tangsa languages are oral, most Tangsa learn to read and write in Asamiya, Hindi or English. The Tangsa living in Assam are forced to adopt Asamiya as their first language, when they study in government schools, while those going to private schools or those studying in Arunachal can choose to study in English in Hindi. As a result, many of the younger Tangsa are gradually giving up speaking their own languages even at home.

Despite the diversity in the languages they speak, what unites at least many of the Pangwa groups is their culture – their songs and dances, their ‘ritual acts’ (Leach 1954: 279) and their traditions – their life-cycle rituals, their festivals and their practices of healing disease, doing divination etc. But most of these older cultural traditions were associated with their traditional beliefs, and with the fact that they were originally hunters and rice-cultivators. But there are not many Tangsa left who still practise their traditional religion, not many who do shifting cultivation these days. Furthermore, conversion to Christianity (especially into the more strict denominations like Baptist Christianity) has implied that my Tangsa interlocutors have had to give up many of their older cultural practices (like making offerings to spirits as seen in Photo 0-1 on page ix) which were considered to be associated with spirit worship. As already discussed, even the few festivals that are still celebrated, like the Wihu-kuh festival in Assam and the Mol festival in Arunachal have undergone drastic change in their relevance, significance and cultural content; I propose to investigate these changes in detail in the following chapters.

Impact of ‘Modernity’

Infrastructural development has come very late to the remote areas of the Northeast India compared to the rest of the country, but it is slowly beginning to happen. Recent governmental efforts in that direction, mainly in the form of better roads and a better communication network, have made remote areas more accessible. Most Tangsa villages today have access to electricity, and also have some facilities for basic child and health care. Moreover, improvements in transport facilities and greater governmental presence and support have enabled the Tangsa to participate more actively as citizens of a democratic state. As I have already discussed in Section 2.4.2 and will give further evidence of in later chapters, not only are most Tangsa pro-state, many of them are actively involved in party politics and many others try to make the best of state welfare schemes and soft loans meant for members of ‘backward’ tribal communities.

With better access to and facilities for education, many more Tangsa are getting educated. The school and college educated Tangsa have better prospects for finding gainful employment; there are at least a few Tangsa with regular office jobs. This has meant moving away from the traditional occupations. As mentioned in the last section, even those who have remained agriculturalists have stopped doing swidden cultivation and have taken to wet-rice cultivation in the plains and also increasingly to tea-cultivation.

66 Asamiya is the official language in Assam, hence it is the medium of instruction in government schools.
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The mobile phone revolution in India and the move down the hills have brought my Tangsa interlocutors in increased contact with other mainstream Indian communities. Moreover, increased exposure to the pan-Indian and western culture through cinema and television has meant that the younger generation of Tangsa are slowly opting for the new ways over their own traditional life-styles. I shall discuss this in greater detail in the chapters that follow. In the words of a native Tikhak Tangsa, “The lifestyle of the Tikhaks has changed drastically” (Simai 2008: 128). He goes on to say that modern gadgets have replaced the old systems of counting, sending messages, weights and measures and the calendar, and that greasy food has replaced boiled food.

Thus, the changes have not been all for the better. Ongtang Thampfang, a Tangsa, has this to say about his own people:

The Tangsa are gradually discarding the old beliefs calling them just superstition. Educated youth have forgotten their culture; they pollute their society by speaking in other languages. The changes is so sudden and fast that they get very little time for adjustment from traditional way of living to modern life. So modernization has brought mixed effect for this tribe (Thampfang 1999: 21).

3.5.2 Conversion to Christianity

For my Tangsa interlocutors as for the other hill communities in the Northeast, there is a strong link between thinking of oneself as ‘modern’ and being Christian. This is possibly because most Tangsa link Christianity with the English language and with the West, both of which are thought of to be ‘modern’. Hence modifying slightly the title of a book by Van der Veer (1996), conversion to Christianity is seen by many Tangsa as ‘conversion to modernity’.

3.5.2.1 Reasons for conversion

For many Pangwa, the decision to move down the hills in search of land suitable for wet-rice cultivation, more or less coincided with their decision to convert to the Christian faith. The expenses that had to be incurred in performing the various rituals and sacrifices in order to keep the spirits in good humour were already a big strain on the finances of many Tangsa households.

Moreover shammas (healers) and dumsas (Singpho, priests) who knew their jobs were becoming impossible to find. Many plants and roots they needed for their traditional healing and rituals were simply not to be found in the plains, hunting animals was also not possible. Many told me that there was no choice for them but to convert after coming down to the plains.

67 For a comparative view, see the reasons for conversion amongst the Angami Naga in Nagaland in Joshi (2007: 549); see also Mephû-o (unpublished) for further instances of conversion and its impact on Naga society.

68 For similar stories, elsewhere in India, see Boal (1982: 194).

69 This view is seconded by Maipa Kenglang in her M.Phil. Diss. (2002: 42) where she writes: “Christianity provided an answer to the vast groups of Tangsas who found their traditional beliefs and customs too complex in nature and irrelevant to continue with anymore; had no other alternative but to abandon and embrace Christianity.”

It is interesting that not having a religion was never an option for any of my interlocutors. More about Tangsa cosmology and about their traditional beliefs is included in Appendix V.
In fact it was ‘less risky’ to become Christian, as the traditional rituals required strict observance of rules; many feared that if one did not follow them properly, then instead of healing it could even aggravate the problem. And with access to modern medicine and healthcare, most of it had also come to be seen as unnecessary. Although individuals might have different reasons for converting usually villages or families converted en masse as these units tended to remain together. This was confirmed by a Tangsa elder, who said that when most people of a village converted, single individuals did not feel ‘secure’ (whatever that might mean) to remain outside the church even if they were not entirely certain they wanted to convert. In any case, this is also a clear sign of shared group identity, as Bal (2007: Ch. 7) points out with regard to the Garos. 70

They also believed that in the plains they would be prone to attack by many new unknown ‘spirits’ -- a belief which sounds plausible considering that it is warmer in the plains and that many new illnesses like malaria and typhoid are prevalent in the plains, and they had already caused many hill people to suffer and die or return to the hills, as discussed in Appendix II. Another hypothesis offered was that the complete ban on human sacrifice imposed by the British had caused an imbalance amongst the Pangwa groups in the practice of their older religious practices, leading to many falling seriously ill because they had angered their spirits, 71 and there was no way for them to correct this imbalance except for quitting the system altogether. In other words, people convert because the previous relationships have become bankrupt. Converting to a completely different faith was seen as one way of regaining control over their lives. Endorsing this view, another Ngaimong interlocutor claimed further that since the other non-Pangwa groups like the Tikhak, Moklum and Longchang never practised human sacrifice, such acute imbalances were not created in their worlds by the ban and hence they were not under the same pressure to convert to Christianity (DoI: 16.02.12).

Some general reasons why Christianity seemed an attractive option for the hill tribes have already been mentioned in the beginning of Section 2.5.1. Moreover, the increased presence of Baptist missionaries at their doorstep who had come to spread the word of the Lord and also to show them the positive attributes associated with a Christian way of life -- a tidy and clean home, with better access to education, health facilities and better prospects for employment -- helped to gradually convince the people. In the words of one of my staunchly Baptist Christian interlocutors, “wars, opium and rice beer drinking were exchanged for peace, brotherhood and strict abstinence from all intoxicants. Old animosities and rivalries were buried, the converts joined their new faith with a sense of respect and fraternity for the others.” Some more reasons were cited by Mr. Molem Ronrang, former Executive Secretary, TBCA,

When there was illness, they had to do expensive poojas or had to fear the worst – so they converted. When lightning hit a house or a paddy field, the old religion required the people to

70 According to Dr. Nani Bath of RGU this was true for other communities in Arunachal as well (cf. Interview with newly converted village elder on 02.1.12).
71 Curiously, Dutta (1969: 77-78) referring to the ban on human sacrifice by the frontier administration says very much the same thing: “[t]heir belief is that nowadays they do not get good harvests, because they have abandoned this ceremony.” And again, “According to the Ronrangs, their condition became deplorable from the time they gave up this festival.”
abandon the house and the paddy of the whole field. When they became Christian they did prayers and then could use the house and the paddy of the field (except for a small portion where the lightning actually struck) again. Miracles and healing were some of the other reasons for people to be attracted to Christianity. Under traditional belief there were curses but these could be warded off by Christian prayer. Christians take recourse to prayer when in distress; and they stand by one another in times of need because all the Christians feel they are part of one big family. If one member is hurt, all the others suffer with him.

The reasons cited for conversion differed however, depending on whether one asked a Christian Tangsa or one who had not converted. For the non-Christians, the new converts got monetary incentives at the time of conversion as well as other gifts like piglets to rear, tea-saplings to plant, mosquito nets, medicine etc. Also facilities for education and health care are better for Christians, as they have their own schools and hospitals. For the non-Christians, economic grounds were the main reason for conversion (see also Joram 2001). While denying payments of money to converts, one Presbyterian preacher admitted that the main reason for conversion is economic; however, he added that that did not mean that they were given money but rather that they were taught how to plant paddy (that is, do wet rice cultivation in the plains) and grow their own food -- in true Christian fashion.

Healing through prayer was also a very strong reason for conversion. Many told me that they had converted almost on their death-bed when the traditional methods of healing did not work but the prayers done by the Pastor and the grace of God did. Others simply could not afford the expenses involved in doing sacrifices when someone was ill, or when a new house was built. Now, after conversion, there was peace and less illness; their expenses had also gone down because as Christians, they needed to offer tea or just a prayer, I was told. Some reasons were quite dramatic: one Tangsa interlocutor had converted, against the wishes of the elders in his own family, because his family was being harassed by an Assamese ‘witch’ neighbour, with whom they had to share an official ‘government-quarter’. But there were some curious twists to the tale: some Tangsa Baptist interlocutors felt they had actually never converted! In fact, the stories of the deluge in the Old Testament was enough proof for many converted Tangsa to believe that their older practices, in which there are also stories of flood and destruction, were similar to those described in the Old Testament. Another Mossang Tangsa interlocutor told me that since the Tangsa never had an image of God, their old belief system was similar to that of the Old Testament where they spoke only of a creator without an image. Hence they had always been Christian, but had only not

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72 The Tangsa before they converted -- and the fundamentalist missionaries who converted them -- both believed in evil spirits, the devil or Satan, but animists and Christians differ in how to deal with them: the animists by placating, Christians by fighting them off with prayer.

73 For more about healing and conversion among the Angami Nagas in the neighbouring state of Nagaland, see Joshi (2012).

74 This interlocutor had a job as a forest guard and hence was officially allotted accommodation or ‘quarters to live in’ by the Forest department.

75 For instance, there is one described in Khimhun (2006: 17).
recognised it or known about the Lord till they came into the light. Now after having recognised Christ they have come to follow the New Testament.\textsuperscript{76} Some of those who had not converted had their own reasons for not converting: “the church is like a schoolroom – everyone is forced to follow the rules, do as they are told,” one Buddhist Tangsa woman said. Moreover, because it is forbidden to brew rice beer in Baptist homes, the men went out and got drunk cheap adulterated alcohol and fell sick; in that way, more money was wasted, and their health was also damaged, she felt.

\subsection*{3.5.2.2 Impact of Christianity}

Most of the Tangsa Christians in Assam are Baptists today. Baptist missionaries were the first they came in contact with in Assam; but over time some groups have also joined the Presbyterian Church, some have become Catholics while some others have joined smaller denominations like the Church of Christ and the Little Flock.

For many of the newly baptized, it was literally a completely new beginning. From all accounts, Pangwa society took to their new religion with great devotion and fervour.\textsuperscript{77} Traditional practices, including songs, which were supposed to be associated with spirit worship were summarily banned. The houses were cleansed of animal skulls and other symbols of their earlier beliefs. Valuable family heirlooms – dresses, gongs, jewellery, accessories like caps and items of warfare -- were burnt or destroyed. As Longkumer (2010: 146) reports about the Zeme Nagas,

> Traditional clothes, necklaces, beads, wood carvings, and so on were burnt publicly as a sign of shedding of ‘old clothes’ and taking on ‘the new body of Christ’. This symbolic Christian imagery not only affirmed the religious solidarity of the Nagas but it also led to the overhauling and indeed the loss of traditional culture overnight.

Prayer and modern healthcare took care of illnesses; thus they had driven out or neutralised the bad spirits, which were supposed to cause illness and misfortune. They embraced the good spirits in the Holy Spirit. What my Tangsa informants told me about the changes Christianity had brought in their lives sounded repetitive: earlier they had wars and enemies, now after becoming Christian they were all friends and brothers.\textsuperscript{78} Their homes had also become cleaner and there was a greater sense of responsibility for the community. There was a sense of equality and of mutual respect and a large social network, connecting them to other Christian communities in other

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{76} DoI: 02.01.12, Manmao. It is possible that Mr. Mossang was only repeating to me an argument that he had heard from a preacher or an evangelist earlier, since the same argument has been recorded before: “It is often said by Christian Nagas that ‘actually’ they were already Christians and believed in God before they received the true teachings from the Americans” (Oppitz \textit{et al} 2009b: 23).
\item \textsuperscript{77} Although some residues from their older practices still surfaced from time to time, as I shall discuss later in Section 6.2.2.
\item \textsuperscript{78} However there were many instances which indicated that this peace had not been internalised completely yet. One instance was the reaction to the publication of and the subsequent resistance to the circulation of Uddi Ronrang’s history of the Ronrang people, as mentioned in the end of Section 6.3.3.
\end{itemize}
\end{footnotesize}
Performing Ethnicity

states of the Northeast and beyond;79 moreover, most Christian denominations organised annual conferences every year where one could meet and interact with other Christians.

Furthermore, many of my women interlocutors had become articulate and more assertive after taking on responsibilities in the church. They had thereby gained agency, even within their own families and circle. As my Hakhun hostess in Malugaon told me:

Becoming Baptists is the best thing that has happened to us – the men have stopped wasting their time and money drinking rice-beer and smoking opium – not everyone, she hastily added, but at least many. We don’t have to spend money on sacrificing animals every time someone is sick and the church has brought us all together – it has given us a platform where we have learnt to become better people, to be able to take responsibility and to share our concern for others. Before we were like animals, only caring for ourselves – killing each other, going to war, sacrificing even human beings (DoI:9.01.2009).

In other words, just as in the Garo community in Meghalaya, “[t]he prevalent local perception is that Christianity saved [them] from barbarism” (De Maaker 2012: 135).

About the impact of Christianity on the Tangsa way of life, Thampfang (1999: 93), writes: “Christianity has given brotherhood and a sense of dignity. Christianity introduces a new kind of leadership and a new principle of social control among the Tangsas. The concept of sin and the fear of retribution become powerful instruments of social control in Tangsa society.”

3.5.3 The present scenario

The move of the Tangsa down from the hills, their conversion to Christianity and their first contacts with a modern lifestyle happened almost concurrently. The coming together of these three very crucial factors was like a watershed in their lives marking a clear break with their lives before. (For a general view of the changes, see Bhagabati & Chaudhuri 2008).

Considering everything, there has been a huge change in how most of the Tangsa live today, how they dress, what they eat and also in their expectations from their lives, from the state and from the people around them. While all this has impacted on the everyday business of living, conversion has brought about a change in their world views and also their opinion about how they had lived in the past. For a while many of the newly converted Tangsa had believed that their new religion could suffice also as their ‘culture’, but as time has gone on (most of the Tangsa converted after the 1970s), some have begun to see that religion alone cannot help them secure their ethnic identity.80 It is precisely this question of how my Tangsa interlocutors redefine themselves with or without their religious affiliations that I will look into in later chapters.

Moreover, creating a common pan-Tangsa identity is important if one wanted to continue to be recognised as a ‘Scheduled Tribe’, as already discussed in Section 1.3. And this was desirable because of the concessions and privileges that came with it. In recent years, a certain section of the Tangsa leadership has recognised the need to regroup and redefine themselves,

79 For example, contact with Korean Baptist missionaries through their counterparts in Nagaland.
80 An Ao Baptist elder I met in Nagaland echoed the same thoughts when he said: “a time will come when the Tangsa will realise that Christianity without their cultural value systems is meaningless. Religion is only part of our culture” (DoI: 21.11.2010).
also by observing the activities of other tribal groups in the area. Relative economic stability and growth of a middle class among them have also aided the process. Some Tangsa groups have adopted officially recognised strategies like forming societies and associations to work towards those goals.

**Societies and Associations**

Developments have taken place in two distinct directions with regard to forming registered Tangsa associations and societies in Assam. The Tangsa (Naga) National Council, like the Singpho National Council mentioned in Section 2.3.1, is the official representative body for the Tangsa in Assam. Aphu Tyanglam is its President. Tyanglam also formed the Tangsa Naga Cultural Society in 1987 (registered in 1990) and has been its President since its inception. I shall say more about Aphu and the activities of the Society in the next chapter. As will be clear Aphu’s efforts have been more towards consolidation, towards creating a pan-Tangsa repertoire of songs and dances, which can create a sense of cultural unity amongst the different Tangsa tribes and also be presented to the world as ‘Tangsa culture’. On the other hand, some Tangsa groups, noticeably the Langchings and the Hakhuns, who have a few strategically clever leaders, have started the process of forming their own associations for the welfare of their own tribe members. In this case, the tendency was towards fragmentation, of forming smaller more cohesive units based on the older tribal divisions.

Of course the phenomenon of political mobilisation through forming cultural associations is well known (cf. Colson 1996: 73). What is worth noting here is that while Aphu Tyanglam and his group are not Christian, most of the office bearers of these newly formed (Hakhun and Langching) associations are Christians (mostly Baptists). As such one gets a sense of growing urgency amongst the various Tangsa groups about trying to re-locate themselves in the new scheme of things in a way that not everything of their past is lost without making too many compromises with their new beliefs and their ‘modern’ way of living. I shall postpone further discussion of this theme to Section 5.3.1.

**Postscript to Chapter 3**

**3.6 My first introduction to the Tangsa**

*When I had first started working with the Tangsa, there were quite a few things about them that struck me as different. Their villages looked different from what I was used to seeing in a typical Assamese village: there were chang-ghars (Ass. stilt houses) and ‘Tokou’ palm trees, not mud houses and banana trees; they reared pigs, not cows; the sight of men wearing lungis (Ass. ankle-length stitched cotton wrappers for men) and not dhotis (Ass. loose cotton wrapper for men) or trousers and of women wearing mekhelas (Ass. ankle-length cotton wrappers for women) and blouses but not sadors (Ass. long strip of cloth normally used by Assamese women to cover the upper part of their body over a mekhela), carrying heavy logs of firewood in baskets resting on their backs was not a familiar one (see Sketch 3-2 on the left). Soon their difference in the timings*
Performing Ethnicity

of their meals, and their food habits, with the almost complete absence of sugar, cooking oil, milk and milk products from diet, made me feel the difference even more. Moreover, since toilets were always located away from the living areas and usually not close to sources of water, and with evening descending so early in ‘Tangsaland’, one had to get used to a different daily rhythm.

But that was not all. The Tangsa also had strong cultural differences from the Assamese community to which I belonged: as I have already mentioned, asymmetric cross cousin marriages were the ideal matches for the Tangsa, most of the Pangwa groups had bride-price, many groups buried and not cremated the dead. Moreover they had no special puberty rites, unlike the caste Hindu Assamese. I was also not used to people, especially women, drinking alcohol and rice-beer so freely. What was even more difficult for me to handle was the general permissiveness of their society towards pre-marital sex and a marked lack of inhibition of their women. The standards of decorum and propriety were different: for instance, although married Tangsa women often tuck their hair away under a scarf (tied like a turban) they usually do not use a scarf or sador to cover their bosoms, as Assamese women are often wont to do.

Photo 3-3: A Tangsa woman carrying fire-wood

Having had a pampered middle-class upbringing, I was always amazed at how hardworking most Tangsa women were. Although they are mostly confined to their homes, the women definitely contributed much more and played a bigger role in the affairs of the family. Of course traditionally they could not become village chiefs (Lungwangs), and even today they have to do most of the work in the kitchen, but still they were permitted to participate in discussions and in some cases did not hesitate to come out to the outer area to talk to outsiders and strangers.

When I first began to interact with them I realised that their Asamiya was not easy to understand, first because their variant was quite different from the standard Asamiya I was used to. Also certain Asamiya terms they used, such as ‘khub baru’ (Ass. meaning very nice), were quaint and almost obsolete in everyday spoken Asamiya.

Since I did not understand any of the Tangsa languages, I would often ask them in what language they were speaking (or singing) – initially I would invariably get the standard reply ‘in Tangsa
language’, which irritated me quite a bit, as it meant that I would have to ask again before they told me which of the many Tangsa languages they meant.81

There was a lot more confusion in store for me in the initial weeks: when one of my Tangsa hosts introduced somebody as his grandson or his daughter-in-law, I would immediately start trying to figure out, most of the time unsuccessfully, whose son or whose wife the person was. It took me quite a long time to realise that when a Tangsa man referred to someone as his son, he could mean several other people besides his own sons, for all his brothers’ sons were also his sons; see Appendix VI for more on this. When we sat down to draw up kinship tables, I would invariably get completely lost very quickly. For instance, the word eno (in Cholim) can mean younger sister as well as one’s younger brother’s wife or even one’s son’s wife,82 while the word aphu normally meant elder brother, but could also mean a cousin (father’s brother’s son) or wife’s sister’s husband. More surprisingly, a man’s mother’s brother’s daughter, if he did not marry her, was not his cousin but his maternal aunt! All that required some figuring out and getting used to.

Initially, as I have already mentioned in Section 2.6, I tried to play down the fact that I was Assamese as much as I could. I also tried to avoid contact with other Assamese as much as I could when I was in Tangsaland.83 Moreover, I feared that they would hold the fact that I was not making an effort to learn any of their languages against me, and construe the fact that it was only the foreigners who were actually making an effort to learn the language, as a sign of my Assamese arrogance.

With time, however, as the initial confusion settled, my worries also receded. I began to feel at home in Tangsaland, and grateful for their uncomplicated and unconditional affection. With time I also found out a little about what they thought of me. Many Tangsa found the fact that I often travelled alone to unknown places in the field so unlike what they imagined Assamese women from upper middle class families to be able to do that they attributed my ‘courage’ to my many years of living in Germany! And by the end of my fourth season with them, they had got so used to hearing stories of my latest trips and exploits that they had begun to refer to me (between them) as the ‘pagli baidew’ meaning the ‘crazy sister’ in Asamiya.

81 Sökefeld (2001: 536-37) narrates a similar experience he had in the field in Pakistan. “The local ethnic leader in Gilgit, Pakistan, explained why they did so in the following way: ‘Of course, we speak many languages, but they are all the same because they are fundamentally different from the languages spoken by the surrounding nations (i.e., Kashmir and Pakistan).’ The languages are the same - or identical - because they are characterized by a common difference distinguishing them from others that do not belong to this nation.” This might well be Tangsa explanation for it too.
82 Literally, the word means a younger sibling, and whoever stands in that relationship to you.
83 On the few occasions when I did run into some Assamese while in a Tangsa basti, they would invariably slot me either as a journalist (if they saw me walking around by myself with a camera in my hand), or as an interpreter/guide for my foreign project colleagues, if they happened to see us together.
Chapter 4  Kharangkong: the last bastion of the old world

If we do not know who we were, how will we figure out who we are?

Aphu Tyanglam, Kharangkong

The day begins early in the Tyanglam household; for Aphu even earlier, because he usually gets up before dawn and has a bath on the terrace with cold water (that one of the women of the family have fetched in a bucket from the tube-well behind the house the previous evening); he then does exercises: as long as it takes for the water to dry on his body, he claims. Then he switches on his transistor radio to listen to the Burmese news; that is also the wake-up-alarm for the rest of the household. The Tyanglam household is large, comprising at any given moment, not just of the immediate extended family (of the sons and daughters living at home and their families) but also nephews and nieces, relations and clan-relatives visiting from other villages and anyone else who just happens to be there.

While the women (primarily his daughter-in-law, assisted by his wife and daughters) hurry to light the fire in the inner kitchen to start the process of cooking ‘morning rice’,1 Aphu leisurely lights the fire in the outer sitting area, waits for one of his daughters to fill the kettle with water and then puts it over the fire. Then he seats himself in his customary place by the fire and waits for the morning tea (which usually has milk and sugar) to be made and served. While waiting, he plays with Cho-ong, his favourite grandchild. And if by chance I was still asleep when the tea was ready he comes knocking at my door. “Have you come here to sleep or to work? Get up, or else the day will be over,” he shouts through the closed door in Asamiya.

With good reason too because early morning, between morning tea and morning rice was the best time to work with Aphu. Being an early riser, Stephen usually spent those hours working with Aphu every morning, when he was there. And so Aphu expected me to do the same. At times he would even tease me saying he would inform Stephen how lazy I have been. Truth was that Aphu really enjoyed talking and discussing Tangsa culture and history with our project team. His view was that their older traditional practices were getting lost (or at least getting diluted and corrupted) because of constant interaction and intermixing of the Tangsa with other neighbouring communities, and because the Tangsa were obliged to learn to read and write in Asamiya, English or Hindi. Since he grew up in Burma, Aphu could read and write only in Burmese. But he could speak many of the different Tangsa languages, besides Singpho, some Asamiya and a little Hindi.

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1 Our team referred to the early morning rice meal as ‘morning rice’.
The first time I met Aphu Tyanglam, then in his late seventies, I did not understand much of what he said. He spoke in Asamiya all right, it was his very own special brand of it. What took me the longest to unravel was his repeated reference to some ‘kassa party’. Since he was a political leader of sorts, I initially believed this to be a reference to his political activities. It was much later that I understood that ‘kassa’ was his way of pronouncing the word ‘culture’ and his ‘kassa party’ was a group of young people from Kharangkong who he had taught the ‘traditional’ Tangsa dances so that they could go and teach other Tangsa their ‘kassa’.

Tangsa ‘kassa’ was clearly very important for Aphu. Therefore the arrival of our research team who wanted to (and had the wherewithal to) record and document everything Aphu could tell, was welcomed with open arms by Aphu. He was very quick to understand the aims of our DOBES project and offered his knowledge as well as his hospitality to the team. Besides providing us his house to stay and work from, he took it upon himself to help us in every way he could, by introducing us to others, and helping to translate our recordings made with him and also elsewhere and explaining to us what others had told us. Very quickly he became one of our main interlocutors, and his good voice and clear pronunciation in the Tangsa languages he knew made him very valuable for linguistic work.

Once the morning rice was eaten, the day began for everyone. The women of the house would vanish for the day, either to work in the fields or to collect firewood, after sending the children to school. Aphu would normally stay at home unless he had some work elsewhere. Since he was a local leader, on most days people from the area came to meet him with some request or the other. On some other days, he would help in the tea gardens, spraying pesticides or fertilisers on the patch of garden where they produced tea for sale.

Around 3 p.m. the women would return home to cook the evening meal, which would be served early, often before dusk set in. Sometimes, fodder for the pigs (mostly chopped stems of yam and the arum plant) would be cooked in the outer area while Aphu and the children often watched TV (if there was electricity) till it was bed time. When there was a power cut (and that was very often), Aphu spent his time either talking to people over his mobile phone (often till it ran out of power) or sitting at the kitchen hearth, talking to his wife and others, or simply playing with his grandchildren. Sometimes when he was in a good mood, he would even break into song, and sing old tunes that most others did not recognise. At other times he would tell a story or recount some incident from his past life.

It had its charms, this, sitting around the fire and listening to stories, for Aphu was a great storyteller. But sometimes it also made me feel very sorry for him, for on many occasions, before starting to tell us a story or sing a song, Aphu would call out to his grandchildren and to his grand nieces and nephews to come and sit down and listen to him; he even used his mobile phone

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2 Even when he pronounced words correctly, in some instances there could be confusion in meaning; for example, Aphu would say that a food item was mitha [Ass. sweet] to mean that something was tasty or delicious, even when the food in question was not sweet at all.

3 I interpreted the word ‘party’ in ‘kassa party’ to stand for a political party.

4 Most Tangsa families in Kharangkong have a separate patch of tea garden where they grow tea for their own consumption. They do not spray any chemicals on that patch.
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to call his niece and trusted assistant Chonja once. But rarely did any of them come voluntarily. They would usually find some excuse to not come.\footnote{A few admitted to me privately that they were rather fed-up at having to be constantly at Aphu’s beck and call.}

As I listened to the grand old man telling me about the terrible war between the serpent king and the water spirit, or listened to his singing the tragic story of the two lovers who could not marry as they were from different tribes, I often wondered if anyone would be left who could tell us these things after he is gone. Our project was in some sense about documenting ‘disappearing cultures’; I had been schooled to understand that cultures did not disappear. Perhaps they didn’t. But a lot would disappear in Kharangkong with the disappearance of Aphu Tyanglam. That much was clear.

Kharangkong is about three kilometres off the National Highway (NH 153) between Ledo and Jagun. The best way to get to Kharangkong is to turn off the NH 153 at Tin-Mile,\footnote{Tin mile literally means 3 miles along the Highway from Lekhapani towards Jagun.} drive past the Naga Sema basti of Longtong, up the part-metalled and part-dirt-track to Kharangkong. In the rainy season the road becomes impossible to use for cars. There is no regular public transport to Kharangkong from the main road. So on days he had to go out, Aphu would often ask a Nepali taxi driver from Tin-Mile, Rai, to fetch him in his ramshackle Maruti taxi. When Rai came, Aphu would insist that he come up to the front sitting area and have a cup of tea. Initially, to me it seemed quite odd that Aphu insisted that Rai sit at the same table with him and have tea. Back in my own home in Guwahati, I have never seen my mother do anything similar – drivers and gardeners do not sit in Ma’s presence, leave alone be offered a cup of tea at the same table! Aphu and Ma are about the same age, they both are involved in politics, and are public leaders in their own ways. Yet they were very different.

Rai, on his part, would always protest but give in quickly, because he knew that there was no saying ‘no’ to phelep (tea) in a Tangsa home. Rai was always polite to Aphu and called him ‘Baba’ (Ass./Hin. father). Aphu was a good client. But privately Rai confessed to me that he found the standards of cleanliness in Aphu’s house not entirely satisfactory and that he would prefer not to eat and drink there. Of course he would never eat a meal there, as he was a Hindu and he knew that the Tangsa eat all sorts of meat and hence one had to be careful. Rai also told me that one of the main reasons why he did not like to go up to drink tea was that he was tired of hearing the same stories from Aphu over and over again.

And he was not the only one. Almost everyone I met confessed at some point or the other that the main reason why they avoided the old man was that once Aphu caught hold of them at least a half an hour or more would pass before one could hope to be released – Aphu loved to hold forth and just waited for an audience to get started.

Therefore Aphu was very pleased when I asked him at some point to tell me the story of his life. He told me that he had even written down the main points, so that he did not forget them. He then went to fetch it – it was a single sheet of paper, densely written over in Burmese, from which he proceeded to tell me the story of his life. In the days that followed, Aphu told me much more
than I will recount below – detailed accounts of his life in Burma before he came into India, numerous other public, cultural and political activities that he had initiated or had taken part in and a lot more about his various achievements as a leader of his people and of the area. [Curiously, his version of his life-story did not include any information about his family, how many children he had, when they were born, what they did and so on.] When I questioned him about that he told me that his family was his private matter but as a public leader, he had to give me proof of what he had done for the public!

He had done it only for his people, he did not tire of telling me, but it was clear that he was also very proud of what he had achieved, and that he enjoyed talking about it. But he also had his moods, sometimes he was stubborn and obstinate, at other times, he would pout and be offended when somebody defied him, at other times he would rant and rave when his pride was hurt. But it was always easy to read him. Over the years I have learnt to be able to predict his moods and reactions, and to love and respect this man, who was the first Tangsa I ever met, and who I have come to regard as my Tangsa-father.

Both the village of Kharangkong and Aphu Tyanglam are very important to the understanding of the Tangsa in Assam: Kharangkong, because it is perhaps the only Tangsa basti left in Assam where there is still a community of people who still try to follow their older traditional practices as they have not yet converted (to either Christianity or Buddhism) and also because it is the home of Aphu Tyanglam, who has been, without doubt, the most important Tangsa leader in Assam, highly respected by all and considered by many to be one of the most knowledgeable Tangsa elders in India. As already mentioned Aphu is currently the President of both the Tangsa Naga Council, as well as of the Tangsa (Naga) Cultural Society, the two apex Tangsa bodies in Assam. Furthermore, as I shall discuss later in this chapter, Aphu has been the moving force behind most of all the recent efforts towards revitalisation and rearticulation of Tangsa traditional culture, as part of the process of constructing a pan-Tangsa identity, based on both their past in the hills of the Patkai range as well as their present in the plains of Assam.

In this chapter, I want to present first, a partial biographical sketch of Aphu Tyanglam (largely as told to me by him) – as an example of how a relatively uneducated and not-so-well off Tangsa young man from Burma came and settled in India and by the sheer strength of his personality and his involvement with various socially minded activities, rose to become a leader of his people. In Section 4.2, I will describe the festival of Wihu-kuh that Aphu organises every year in Kharangkong in order to arrive at an understanding of what ‘kassa’ means for Aphu and why he considers it to be important. Then, in the two following sections, I shall present a picture of the village of Kharangkong and also attempt to describe the Tangsa world as Aphu sees it and also how others around him see Aphu. In doing so, I will discuss the predicament of the Tangsa from Aphu’s point of view in order to understand the reasons behind some of the steps he has taken in his attempts to secure their future. I shall end this chapter, with a description of some issues involved in doing fieldwork with a person like Aphu.
4.1 Aphu Tyanglam: the tired but stubborn campaigner

4.1.1 A portrait of the man

Aphu Tyanglam was born in 1931 in Mandang basti, now in Myanmar. He had worked for a Burmese general for a few years where he learnt to read and write in Burmese as well as get some military training. He came to India (after having fought on the side of the Nagas against the Kachins\footnote{This probably refers to the incident in 1964 when thousands of tribal people from Burma had to flee to India after conflict with the Kachin Independence Army fighters. Earlier, the Kachin troops had formed a significant part of the Burmese army. With the unilateral abrogation of the Union of Burma constitution by the Ne Win regime in 1962, Kachin forces withdrew and formed the Kachin Independence Army (KIA) under the Kachin Independence Organization (KIO). For further details, see Barua (1991: 295). Also mentioned in Ronrang (1997: 24).}) in 1965 following his family, and settled in the Udaipur / Kharangkong area. Soon after he arrived in India, his mother got him married. Aphu’s wife Renya is Khalak (Tangsa) and comes from a village called Likphan in Myanmar, two days walk away from Mandang. Her family had also moved to India a little earlier. Like many other of our older interlocutors, Aphu started off in India as an opium\footnote{Aphu told me that in those days, he used to sell kapur-kani (opium rolled on cloth) at the rate of Rs. 30/35 per kilo (now it costs Rs. 6000/7000 per kg). He would carry around 10-15 kg of opium (kani) to sell. Once he was arrested and had to spend 15 days in jail. Kani was grown in Arunachal Pradesh and in the Naga hills in those times. Every village had a kani-mahajan (an opium-merchant).} -dealer. He came to live in Kharangkong only in the early 70s and established the Cholim\footnote{As already mentioned in Section 3.2, Cholim and Tonglum are cognate words, and are different names for the same ethnic group, Tonglum being the general name and Cholim more of an endonym. However, I shall refer to the basti as Cholim basti since that is how it is referred to by the Tangsa living there.} basti there, a little away from the main Kharangkong-basti as seen in the sketch map (Map 4-1) below (more in Section 4.3).

Soon he became involved with issues regarding the development of their village and their area, together with other leaders of the neighbouring Ahom, Singpho, Tai Phake and Nepali villages, playing a role in organisations like the Janajatiya Santi Parishad (see Section 2.4.2).

As already mentioned in Section 2.4.2, in 1980, when he went to Delhi as part of a four-member team to meet Mrs. Indira Gandhi, to demand autonomy for the hill tribals in the Tirap area.

He has been active with many developmental and welfare activities and projects that have been undertaken in the area, not hesitating to plead their case with the local administration whenever there was need. He has also played an active role in the maintenance of law and order in the village as part of the Village Defence Party (VDP). He also took a lead in setting up the Friday weekly market in Kharangkong behind his home, and helped many new settlers to get their names included in the voters’ lists.\footnote{Of course it was convenient, and also perhaps brought his immediate family some economic advantage, to have the market close to his house. And helping people to get their names included in the voters’ lists reveals how far-sighted he is, given that the question of illegal infiltration into the northeast across the porous borders is a very sensitive issue in Assam.}
He has 30 puras (about 23 acres) of land, part of which is in Hewe Ninggam (another neighbouring Tangsa basti also known as Tangsa Ninggam), part in Kharangkong. Most of the land in Hewe Ninggam he has given to some Nepali families (on a 50-50 sharecropping basis) to do wet rice cultivation; he and his family look after the tea plantations they have around their house. He also owns some pigs and poultry and also some ‘Tokou’ palm trees like most other Tangsa homes in Kharangkong. He also takes up small government road-repair contracts from time to time which he executes with the help of an Ahom man also living in Kharangkong.

He has six daughters and three sons. Although most of his grandchildren now go to school, none of his children except his youngest daughter ever finished school. Aphu’s eldest son died some years ago and the daughter-in-law lived with her children in a separate house in the basti. The unmarried daughters and the two younger sons with their families lived with him. Aphu’s two brothers (one elder and one younger) and a younger sister also lived in the basti in households of their own and, although I have never seen his sister visit Aphu, there is a lot of contact between the three brothers. Another family of a clan relative (comprising a widow, her unmarried daughter, Chonja, and son with his family) also live close by and are often seen in Aphu’s house. The other families living in the basti, although related to Aphu in some way or the other, do not have as much contact with the Tyanglam household.

His house is the only concrete structure in the Cholim basti of Kharangkong village – a rather ungainly structure on concrete pillars. As with most other Tangsa, his kitchen is still a bamboo chang (Ass. raised platform). A small concrete outhouse comprises a small toilet and bath, although the bathroom is rarely used and normally used to store the equipment and fertilizers for spraying the fields. A schematic representation of his house and surroundings is given above. His house is electrified but the voltage is very low and there are frequent power cuts. A deep tube well behind the kitchen is the source of water for domestic use. Behind the kitchen there is a lake, some tea gardens and around a few other changs, all belonging to Aphu. His widowed elder sister lived in one. The old chang-ghar in which Aphu had lived with his family before he built the concrete building was in bad shape. His second son with
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family used to live in it before they built a *chang* of their own nearby and moved into out. Beyond the older house was a huge plantation of ‘Tokou’ palm trees also belonging to Aphu. In front of the house is a relatively large field around which most of the other houses in the *basti* are located.

![Schematic representation of the house compound of Aphu Tyanglam](image)

**Figure 4-1: Schematic representation of the house compound of Aphu Tyanglam**

### 4.1.2 Conflicting loyalties

Politically, Aphu joined the Congress party\(^{11}\) in 1967 and has been a very staunch and loyal supporter of the local Congress politicians ever since. The highest official position he has held was President of the local village council, the Kumsaigaon Gram Panchayat, in 1992 as a Congress party candidate. His loyalty and persistence were rewarded when he was finally made the Vice Chairman of the Development Council,\(^{12}\) as mentioned in Section 2.4.2.

Despite the fact that he has been pro-establishment and an old campaigner for the Congress party for most of his life, he was nevertheless very much a Naga at heart and still nursed

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\(^{11}\) The Congress is the political party that has been ruling over India (except for short gaps) since it gained independence and which has had leaders like Jawaharlal Nehru and Indira Gandhi. The Congress party has also been the ruling state of Assam almost without a break till the 1980s when the student-led Asom Gana Parishad party came to power. The Congress is again in power in Assam at present (2013) and the local MLA (Member of the Legislative Assembly) who I introduced in Section 2.4.1 is also from the Congress.

\(^{12}\) He knows the local Congress leaders personally. The local Congress MLA has visited his home several times, even the Chief Minister’s son visited his home once to attend his son’s wedding.
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hopes that someday a united Naga state would come about. He had no doubt that the Tangsa were Naga, and that it was only shrewd government policy to separate the warring Nagas from Nagaland under Phizo soon after Indian independence from the ones living in relative peace in Assam and Arunachal that the term ‘Tangsa’ was coined in the first place. The following incident, taken from my field-notes, reveals how sensitive the whole issue is for him.

Once while recounting Aphu’s history to someone in Aphu’s presence, I said that Aphu had ‘migrated’ from Burma into India. Aphu flared up instantly and countered, ‘Be careful with your choice of words. You are Assamese and now you live in Guwahati; suppose someday you decide to move to Dibrugarh, would you say that you would have migrated to Dibrugarh?’ Seeing me shake my head, he continued, ‘Then why do you say that I migrated from Burma? We Naga people have lived on both sides of the Patkai hills from times immemorial. Just because someday some British saheb decided to draw some lines to divide up our territory into two different countries does not mean that we will not go and settle wherever we wish to within our area, regardless of whether it is now in India or in Burma. Do you understand that?’

Aphu’s reaction reflects the predicament of many other Tangsa, who find it difficult to accept the fact that their natural homeland in the Patkai hills now belongs to two different nation-states. Here was another proof of Van Schendel’s claim that: “borders not only join what is different but also divide what is similar” (2005: 9).

Some Tangsa are believed to have links with the outlawed Khaplang faction of the NSCN in Myanmar, see Section 2.5.2.1. On the other hand, since the other political parties in the area are either openly pro-Hindu (such as the BJP) or pro-Assamese (such as the AGP), politically the Tangsa as well as other small ethnic groups in the area have few options left but to align with the Congress with the hope that their interests will be secured. However their being pro-Naga and pro-establishment at the same time is seen by many as mutually incompatible since the Naga, who have been engaged in a long struggle for independence from the Indian state, are assumed to be anti-Indian-establishment by default.

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13 As Douglas (2013: 190) points out, such incidents also illustrate another important idea: the continuity of ethnic cultures across international borders which provides a counter-narrative to the dominant story of state formation and indeed of modernity itself: namely that once people are exposed to the conveniences of the modern state (technology, education etc.) they will assimilate.

14 Refer to Section 2.5.2.1 for more background on the Naga conflict.

15 He feels that all the Nagas should have been put on one side of the international border; since up to the Tanai (Chindwin) river people have eaten Indian salt, the border should have been drawn along that river, if he was asked, and the whole area should have been given to India. It is worth noting that in colonial times, the unadministered Naga Hills district of Burma was precisely the area lying between the Patkai hills in the west and north and the Chindwin river to the east (cf. Burma Report 1942: 1).

16 For instance, one eastern Naga leader recently said, “The British had no right to draw the borderline in the heart of Naga country” http://www.burmalink.org/british-right-draw-borderline-heart-naga-country-eastern-naga-leader/ (accessed 30.8.2014).

17 BJP stands for the right wing pro-Hindu Bharatiya Janata Party while AGP stands for the regional party called Asom Gana Parishad which had come into existence in the 1980s in Assam.
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Therefore, although Aphu’s pro-Naga credentials are beyond doubt, the NSCN is unhappy with him and some other Tangsa elders who have not converted to Christianity. Or for get too friendly with the Congress leaders. On the other hand, Aphu was beaten up by the Indian Army, some years back, when he tried to defend some boys from the basti the army had come looking for, suspecting them to have links with the NSCN. Other Tangsa leaders have told me that it is mainly due to Aphu’s presence that the younger and more hot-headed ones amongst the Tangsa leadership in Assam have so far refrained from resorting to violence to make their demands for political recognition heard.

4.2 The Wihu-kuh festival at Kharangkong

As already mentioned, Kharangkong is possibly the only Tangsa village in Assam where there are still a few families following their older traditional beliefs. The founding fathers of the village had however embraced Buddhism when they first came to settle in the area and came into contact with the Buddhist Tai Phake and Singpho communities of the neighbouring villages. As Buddhists, they began to follow the Buddhist calendar of rituals and celebrations and gave up celebrating their traditional Tangsa festivals till Aphu Tyanglam came along in the 1970s and tried to change that. Although traditionally there was no fixed

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18 Of course such practices are still followed by people living in some parts of Arunachal and also (at least) among the Donghi (Jiingi) subtribe in Myanmar.

19 For example, they celebrate ‘Pani-Bihu’ (Sangkyen in Singpho/Tai/Burmese) in mid April when Buddhists offer water to the Buddha statue to mark the New Year, and perform the Rains Retreat (Wesang) during the rainy season.
date for the festival Aphu Tyanglam unilaterally fixed the date for 5th January.\textsuperscript{20} Stephen and other members of our team happened to be present in Kharangkong for the first time during Wihu-kuh 2008.\textsuperscript{21} While they were there, Aphu announced that Wihu-kuh would be celebrated on a much bigger scale in 2009. What follows is a description of what I saw in Kharangkong in January 2009\textsuperscript{22} (which was a bit more elaborate, as I shall presently describe, than what happened in the years 2008, 2011, 2012 at Kharangkong, at which we were also present).

\textbf{Photos 4-2: The \textit{biri-chhung} and a \textit{men-ryo-chhung} at Kharangkong}

\textsuperscript{20} Since Aphu Tyanglam was perhaps the only person interested in celebrating the festival initially, his decision to fix a date for the festival was accepted without much dissent or discussion, although many Tangsa, especially those who have now converted to Christianity, have often said that it was very inconvenient for them to celebrate another festival so close to Christmas and New Year. Note that Wihu in Myanmar is now celebrated as a large festival, moving from one major location within the Tangshang area to another, from one year to the next. It is held on January 15, as far as I have been able to ascertain.

\textsuperscript{21} This is what my project colleague Stephen Morey (pers. comm.) had to say about that: “I hadn’t originally intended to be in Kharangkong on January 5th 2008, and hadn’t intended for Juergen and Palash to come too, but Aphu started telling me about that festival almost from the first day I was in the village. So he had already planned the festival as we recorded it in 2008. At the 2008 festival he was talking about a much bigger event in 2009, but he didn’t in the end have the funds to that.”

\textsuperscript{22} For another description of the Wihu festival in Kharangkong, see Morey & Schöpf (under review).
Wihu is the spirit of the earth (my Tangsa hosts told me that Wihu was their equivalent of the Hindu Goddess of prosperity, Lakshmi) and the festival of Wihu-kuh, meaning a festival in honour of the earth spirit, was traditionally celebrated in each Tangsa home in the Kharangkong Cholim basti at dawn by sacrificing a chicken while saying the traditional ritual prayer called rim-rim at the ritual post, (men ryo chhung in Cholim, see Photo 4-2), holding a bamboo khap (container, sunga in Ass.) containing rice-beer in one hand, thanking the spirit of the earth and asking it to bring greater prosperity in the future. The welcoming of Wihu, and hence by derivation also of guests, to a house is accompanied by singing of the Wihu song and the light dancing that accompanies it (as seen in Photo 4-1 above). For more details of the other rituals performed, see Appendix VIII.

Photo 4-3: Celebrating Wihu-kuh in Kharangkong

The rest of the celebration is mainly social, as visiting each other’s homes, meeting up with relatives, drinking and singing the Wihu/Shawi song together were seen as social practices aimed at maintaining family, clan, and community ties (as in the photo above). Anyone who

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23 “Wi” is the Tangsa word for grandmother and “kuh” means to gather or to assemble. The term “kuh” is a general term for festivals but traditionally the Wihu-kuh festival is also sometimes simply called Kuh.

24 While chicken sacrifice was done in many of the other houses in the Cholim basti in the morning of Wihu-kuh, many families in the main Kharangkong basti (which is closer to the Buddhist Tai Phake village of Ninggam) performed the same rituals but omitted the chicken sacrifice, and used cooked instead of raw meat for the rituals.

25 It is a specific inner post of the house, often located in the kitchen, at which the rituals are done.
visited a Tangsa home in the days that followed would be given at least a small packet of roast meat to eat and rice-beer to drink. Guests, also from other communities, who came from afar were often also offered a full meal with rice. There was singing later in the day when the older people would go to visit each other’s homes but that was more or less the end of the rituals that took place in most of the Tangsa houses in Kharangkong for Wihu-kuh.

However, a new ‘secular ritual’ – the flag hoisting -- had been introduced by Aphu in Kharangkong. So in 2009, at exactly 7 a.m., the Tangsa flag, specially designed by Aphu (as seen on the right in Photos 4-5), was hoisted in the field in front of Aphu’s house, by Aphu and Stephen in the presence of a few adults and children from the village, followed by a short step-dance by a few girls from the ‘kassa party’, all wearing the colourful mongnu khepa – the special cloth that they wear at festival time (see Photo 4-6) -- to the sound of drums and gongs. Aphu, also dressed in his traditional attire, made a speech in Asamiya in which he explained the meaning of the flag and the various symbols depicted on it. In the other years we were there, the flag-hoisting marked the end of the formalities.

But in 2009, the festivities continued in Kharangkong. Most of what follows has already been described in Barkataki-Ruscheweyh (2013) but is stated here for completeness. As the self-appointed host of the celebrations, Aphu had personally bought a pig and a cow and had them sacrificed at the biri-chhung (the sacrificial altar, see Photo 4-2) set up at the village boundary (hara-lim), in the morning of Wihu-kuh; he also invited (by sending out printed

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26 Many groups of Nepali young men, as well as some Biharis, also came to visit from the surrounding villages.

27 It shows the sun, the moon and the Naga hat with the wild boar teeth and the hornbill feathers.

28 In 2011, two traditional sports events did happen later in the field.
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invitation cards in English⁴) not only the entire village of Kharangkong and his relatives but also many Tangsa and non-Tangsa elders from elsewhere and government officials to attend the celebrations.³⁰

Around 10 a.m. the traditional sports competition began – one-legged race, sack race, blindfolded race, musical chairs, and pole-climbing (see first of Photos 4-5) and so on. The most surprising element was the setting up of an elaborately decorated replica of the ritual post, in the middle of the field, next to the flag post, at the foot of which a large container of rice-beer was placed. This had not been done ever before and has not been done since in Kharangkong. Aphu told me that setting up of this post was mainly symbolic, and was meant to show outsiders what they normally would not get to see, as the actual rituals for the festival take place inside people’s homes very early in the morning.³¹ In this manner the first step towards dissociation of the older ritual from its actual site of performance was made. The rim-rim, however, was not performed at this new outdoor post, although a few older Tangsa ladies later gathered around the post, and kept singing the Wihu song while drinking rice beer for a very long time.

Photos 4-5: Pole-climbing and the Wihu-kuh flag at Kharangkong

²⁵ The fact that the invitation card was printed in English can have many reasons: the most pragmatic being that it was easiest and also perhaps cheapest to get something printed in English. It also made the whole programme look more formal and official. To print in a Tangsa language would be problematic because (1) there is not really any standard spelling system in use in Assam and (2) each subtribe speaks differently. The other option would have been to print the card in Asamiya. But since the invitation card was sent out to many who did not speak (and most importantly read) Asamiya (like the Tangsa leaders in Arunachal), and since most of the Christian Tangsa could read some English, it was the obvious option. Moreover, perhaps a difference was sought to be maintained from the dominant Assamese community around them.

³⁰ Aphu later told me that about Rs. 40,000 (roughly 550 euros) was spent for the Wihu-kuh celebrations in 2009, most of which he had spent from his own pocket. Our team also made a donation. I was present when some Nepali men had visited Aphu a few days earlier to make a donation towards the expenses.

³¹ This is precisely the sense in which Shneiderman (2011: 207) defines performance: “performances take place in the open, in public domains with the express purpose of demonstrating to both selves and various others what practices look like”.

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Slowly the field started filling up with people, also from neighbouring villages, and the invited dignitaries also started arriving. A little stage (actually a small bamboo chang), as seen in Figure 4-2 and Photo 4-4, had been erected at one end of the big field in front of Aphu’s house where the dignitaries were ceremonially welcomed and from where they made their speeches. The public meeting, which was scheduled for 11 a.m. started more than an hour later as most of the invited dignitaries and government officials arrived late. The Sub Divisional Officer and Sub divisional Police Officer arrived much later, around 1 p.m. along with a large platoon of security guards. Others like the Singpho chief Bisa nong Singpho and a senior Assamese journalist from Ledo were already there. There were many speeches. Most speakers, including Aphu himself spoke in Asamiya, except for Stephen who spoke in the Tangsa Cholim language. The speeches were interspersed with ‘folk dances’, the term used by Aphu in his invitation card.

This was followed by lunch served in the field to about two hundred guests (mostly from Kharangkong and neighbouring villages). Tangsa elders and leaders, from the Kharangkong main basti and elsewhere, such as Gaobura Khejong (from Malugaon) and Lemo Rara (from Phulbari) who we shall meet again later, as well as Singpho, Tai Phake and Nepali leaders from neighbouring villages were present. During lunch, Lemo and a few others were seen busily trying to write a short press release about the festival to be given later to the press along with a few photos from my camera. Lemo told me that giving publicity to this event through the local media and press every year was important to strengthen their demand for the declaration of a local holiday on the 5th January, and also for requesting funds to hold the event in the future.

![Figure 4-2: Layout of the festival area for the Wihu-kuh celebrations in 2009](image-url)
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The menu was rice balls (cham-thop) rolled in nyap-shak leaves which then served as the plate, a mixed vegetable salad, fish, pork, beef, salad etc. and rice-beer served in bamboo khaps. Aphu left his VIPs on the terrace of his house to drink rice-beer and munch on roasted-pork etc. and joined the people seated on the ground in the field for the meal – which made him instantly popular with them. While the people were eating, two Tangsa elders, one from the neighbouring village of Hewe Ninggam and the other from Kharangkong, went up to the stage, took a microphone each and started to sing the Wihu song. Finally there was another round of dances including the Sahpolo when the dignitaries also joined in. The whole event ended around 3:30 p.m. There were endless streams of guests to the Tyanglam household that evening and in the days that followed.

4.2.2 Modifying traditions; (re) articulating culture

For Aphu it was important that the tradition of festivals which they had grown up with in the hills should be carried on. But it was clear to Aphu as well as to the others that it is not possible any longer to celebrate all the festivals that they had in the past in the way they had done while they were still in the hills. The reasons (as briefly listed in Section 3.5) are to do with their changed lifestyle after coming down the plains and the changed economic and social compulsions. According to the old Gaonbura of Hewe Ninggam (31.10.2009):

The old traditions we followed in the hills are gone because of religion (conversion), and also because we are becoming lazy. The younger people have become modern: they are only willing to do a short-cut version of the old rituals. It is also hard to find the things that one needed [to do the rituals], the dunsa (priests) are also not there any longer, things have become more expensive.

Moreover their festivals had to do with the swidden cultivation cycle which they did not practise any longer; they had to do with the fact that they were hunters, but there were no large forests left in the plains where they could go hunting; conversion to Christianity (and also to Buddhism) were also crucial reasons but even those who had not converted simply did not have the time and the resources to celebrate a dozen festivals in a year.

Therefore, the Tangsa living at Kharangkong, goaded on by Aphu, decided to celebrate the Wihu-kuh festival at least, every year, in their village. Moreover, since most others leaders in Kharangkong were practising Buddhists, it was left mostly to Aphu to decide the actual form of the festival. Aphu claims he has been celebrating the Wihu-kuh, in its present form, in Kharangkong since 1985.

32 Some men from the basti were in charge of cooking the cow and the pig that had been sacrificed earlier while the women cooked the rice and the vegetables.
33 See the next section for more on the dances performed.
34 For a more complete list of Tangsa festivals, see Morey & Schöpf (under review).
Surmising from what our team recorded in 2009, Aphu’s version of the Wihu-kuh festival combined elements of a secular government meeting (with flag hoisting and a public meeting), the ‘traditional’ Wihu-kuh festival (with the rituals in the house and the singing), and the ‘imagined’ traditional feast-of-merit called the Wangjang-kuh described in Section 3.4.1 (with Aphu hosting the festivities and arranging for the sacrifice of the pig and a cow followed by a community feast) to create a new kind of festival. But he called the festival Wihu-kuh, possibly in order to claim continuity with the older tradition; and also because it would have greater acceptance as a community festival than the Wangjang-kuh.

Many Pangwa elders, however, were confused when I referred to the winter festival as Wihu-kuh, following Aphu Tyanglam. The names for the winter festival differ with tribe -- as I shall describe in the next two chapters, the Hakhuns in Malugaon celebrate a festival called Seiju-kuh in mid December while the Ronrangs in Phulbari call their winter festival Shawi-kuh. While the Hakhuns do not have the Wihu-song, the Ronrangs are supposed to have only acquired it from other Pangwa groups over time.

In any case, Aphu Tyanglam has also brought in lots of modifications to the way the Wihu-kuh festival is celebrated today. We were told that in earlier times, among the Pangwa groups drums (and also gongs) could be sounded only on occasions when blood would flow, either because they were going to war or when a buffalo (or a human being) was sacrificed; but Aphu claims he campaigned among his people for these rules to be relaxed. Today gongs and drums are used as musical instruments accompanying the ‘traditional’ dances that are performed at Tangsa festivals. Moreover, although traditionally Tangsa dancers were mostly men, nowadays the dancers are predominantly girls and women. Furthermore, the Sahpolo dance, which was usually performed only during the summer Moh/Mol festival, was performed at almost every Tangsa festival we attended; so much so that it is fast becoming the Tangsa dance, a symbol for Tangsa ‘culture’, just as the Bihu dance is for the Assamese. 35

What then were the ‘traditional’ dances that Aphu had taught to his ‘kassa party’? Although Aphu felt that there was no longer any need to learn to sing the sad farewell songs that used to be traditionally sung during a human sacrifice, it did not mean they should give up all their other traditional songs and dances. But there were not many who knew them. By his own admission, Aphu had choreographed and taught his own daughters and a few others from the village the older songs and dances, some of which he knew from the hills, but modified and adapted to ‘modern’ times. Just as was the case with the Panglhabsol dance in Sikkim, when “a ritual specialist from Ralang was requested to teach the dances to a dozen young men from the town” (Vandenhelsken 2011: 87), Aphu also taught the dances to his ‘kassa party’.

Dances like the Sahpolo, 36 according to some Tangsa elders, in the form that one saw it at present, were added to the Tangsa repertoire only after they came down the hills; and the most recent innovation has been to set the Wihu song to modern dance (cf. Morey & Schöpf,

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35 Bihu is the main festival of the Assamese people; there are three Bihus. Rongali Bihu is celebrated in mid April to mark the Assamese New Year, and the Bihu dance, has become a cultural symbol for the Assamese.

36 According to Khapshom Juglei, the Sahpolo dance is also relatively new, first performed at the Mol festival in Changlang in 1969 (cf. Morey and Schöpf, under review).
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under review); Aphu Tyanglam finds it easy to improvise, and although we were told that there were strict rules about how and when to sing the Wihu song, Aphu had no hesitation, on at least one occasion, to modify the lines a little to turn it into a farewell song to bid goodbye to Stephen Morey. Moreover even the performance of traditional songs like the Wihu had moved first from people’s homes to the open field, (in front of Aphu’s house in Kharangkong) and later even onto the stage (in Phulbari in 2010, which I shall describe in Chapter 6).

This is precisely the principle of ‘emergent authenticity’ (Van der Berghe 1994 in Getz 1994) according to which older traditions and events survive in more modern forms while new ‘invented’ ones become an integral part of the community’s calendar. Without going into the debates over authenticity (Theodossopoulos 2013), about which I shall say more about in Section 5.4.2, and also over the invention of tradition (Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983) which deals with a somewhat different context (as already mentioned in Section 1.2.4), I wish to argue here that these new forms are still ‘traditional’ in the sense that, just like the Wihu-kuh festival that I witnessed in Kharangkong, they are based on older forms, either actual or simply imagined or perceived to be so. Linguistic analysis reveals that although the choreography is quite new, the words of the songs and the tune -- at least of the song named Wang-shya (see Appendix V) -- are demonstrably related to the more ‘traditional’ forms. These older forms have been “modified and adapted to ‘modern’ times” no doubt, but into forms which the older Tangsa can still recognise and relate to.

And this is important because although cultural memory can be unreliable, it can still unify and give something in common to hold on to, even though actual practice can vary. Moreover they are ‘traditional’ relative to the newer forms which are also to be seen at Tangsa festivals, forms which had either been borrowed from the omnipresent Bollywood culture (as we shall see in the next chapter in Malugaon) or altogether new forms that have been put together, such as the newly created Tangsa anthem where each verse is sung in a different Tangsa language (which I recorded at the Pangsau Pass Winter Festival in Nampong, 2009).

4.2.3 For what ends

For Aphu, celebrating the festival of Wihu-kuh is, above everything else, an assertion of his Tangsa-ness. The songs and dances are for him part of Tangsa ‘kassa’. So what did Aphu exactly mean by ‘kassa’? The fact that he uses his variant of an English word and not any Tangsa word is telling because it implies that ‘kassa’ (or what he understands it to be) is something external, defined by others, and is therefore not integral to his understanding of being Tangsa.37 Chanwang, my Nocte assistant and constant companion in the field, helped me to formulate the definition of ‘kassa’/culture in this context, while we were at the Dihing

37 Aphu therefore adopts the popular understanding of the term when associated with festivals, as spelled out by Chanwang Nocte, for instance.
Patkai Festival described in Section 2.4.1. In his words, “Song, dance and costume as well as language, food and living habits constitute a community’s culture.”

For Aphu, however, being Tangsa meant much more than just being able to perform their ‘kassa’, for it included not only those elements mentioned above, but also their rituals, their stories, their migration history and also knowledge about how their forefathers used to live in the hills. And it was very important for Aphu that the Tangsa should learn and know about all those aspects. As to why that was important, he said that otherwise there would be no difference between them and animals, “If we do not know who we were, how will we define who we are?” he told me once. But why this need to go back to the past? Chanwang helped me achieve clarity also about this: “Tribals have to look to their past to define their identity as in the present they all look the same as modern jeans-wearing, mobile-phone-wielding people.”

As already mentioned, traditionally, Wihu-kuh could be held anytime in December-January after the harvesting was over (see also Rao 2006: 195). One of the main reasons for fixing the date was that the Tangsa in Assam led by Aphu wanted to demand a local holiday for the Tangsa in that area on that day for the festival. They have made their demand to the local authorities, but it has not been granted since most of the Buddhist and Christian Tangsa living in other villages in Assam do not celebrate Wihu-kuh. For these and other reasons, the celebration of Wihu-kuh has been, by and large, restricted to Kharangkong and to Aphu’s circle of family and followers.

Photo 4-6: Sahpolo dance at Kharangkong during Wihu-kuh

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38 Karlsson observes much the same tendency among the Rabhas when he writes, ‘metonymically the dancing or the dress represents the entire Rabha culture’ (Karlsson 2000: xvi).

39 This reminded me of the Naga student in Mokukuchung who had given a similar pithy answer when asked to define culture: ‘culture means roots’.

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Celebrating Wihu-kuh every year is part of a bigger agenda Aphu has for the revival and preservation, and for ensuring the continuity of their cultural traditions; he believed that the Tangsa living in Assam were on the verge of ‘losing their identity’, by getting assimilated into the greater Assamese population. The other aim that Aphu had was to spread the word around not just among the non-Christian Tangsa but also among those who had converted. His argument was that since everyone eats rice, regardless of religion, and since Wihu-kuh is about inviting the spirit of the earth (who gives us rice) to the house to thank it for a good harvest and to ask for a better one next time, the Christians should have no problems with joining in to celebrate it. He had even arranged for Wihu-kuh to be held in a Christian Arunachali village (Longtom) one year, sometime around 2000.

In order to train more young people in the Tangsa dances, Aphu had sent a few from his ‘kassa party’ to Arunachal one year during a Moh/Mol festival. He believed that being able to put up a ‘cultural show’ was important not only for those who came to see but also for those who actually performed, since each of the dancers in Aphu’s ‘kassa party’ could at least now ‘perform’ a few Tangsa dances, (even though they perhaps did not understand the meaning of the lyrics, and even though they did not know how to sing the Wihu song) and hence it gave them an added reason to feel they are Tangsa.

Although Aphu was aware of the instrumental aspects of having an identity, for him, first and foremost, knowing about one’s own traditions had some intangible intrinsic value, which was more than enough reason in itself. But he felt that the younger generation did not share this view. Another elder from Phulbari echoed the same sentiments: “The young people are not interested in any of the old customs, they are busy making money; they do not realise that they will also need it someday.” As to why they might need it in the future, the answer was always the same: to tell their children what it means to be Tangsa.

But what were the older customs and traditions that they were talking about? In the hills, the celebration of Kuh comprised mainly the rituals performed at home, the singing of the Wihu song, drinking rice-beer, eating roast meat and visiting each other. But that did not correspond with the modern-day idea of a ‘cultural festival’ prevalent in the Northeast, which also included a component of entertainment. Moreover there were not many left who knew how to perform the rituals, nor many who could sing the Wihu song. And not many of the youngsters were too interested in participating in those older festivals, the problem aggravated by the fact that many had also converted to Christianity.

Hence, Aphu saw the need to suitably ‘dress up’ the traditional notion of a village festival in order to make it more attractive, both for those who participated and for the audience, and at the same time make it fit in better with other cultural festivals organised in that area. In other words, an official looking ‘cultural programme’ needed to be added. To achieve this, as already mentioned, Aphu came up with a few dances basing the steps and lyrics on older forms. The Sahpolo was there already, and it would be performed also at the winter festival; the drums, gongs and the colourful dresses would add festivity to the proceedings, the rice-beer and roast meat would be served in any case, and all of this would together give the Tangsa people living in Kharangkong as well as outsiders an idea about Tangsa
Gradually, various lay elements were added to the celebration, such as volleyball matches, the ‘traditional’ dances of various ethnic groups, which together were called the ‘cultural programme,’ and the market stands. The ‘neo-ritual’ was soon institutionalised through the creation of an official organising committee (Vandenhelsken 2011: 87).

And in order to make it look more official and representative, elements from secular festivals like the flag-hoisting ceremony and a public meeting were added (a cultural procession was also added later in Phulbari). Local administrative officials and political and tribal leaders were invited. This was done in order to gain visibility and legitimacy in order to be able to instrumentalise it for larger political ends; for, at the personal level, the successful organisation of these festivals gained Aphu recognition in a wider circle, ranging from the Tangsa people, representatives of other neighbouring communities to the district and state administration, as the undisputed leader and representative of the Tangsa in Assam.

Therefore, although Aphu’s exhorting his Tangsa people to know more about their past traditions was something he very strongly felt about and for which he had campaigned long and hard, there were also instrumental reasons which made him choose the path he took to transform the Wihu-kuh into the form it finally took in 2009 in Kharangkong. However, despite all his efforts, as the following sections and chapters will indicate, it is far from clear whether they will be enough to secure for the Tangsa their identity, in a form that Aphu would like them to.

4.3 The village of Kharangkong

The word Kharangkong comes from the Singpho words kharang which means dry cultivation (rangla in Cholim) and kong (meaning ‘slightly raised land’). The village of Kharangkong is located south of the Burhi Dihing river, and very close to the Buddhist Tai Phake village of Ninggam and the old Singpho villages of Pangshun, Kumsaigaon and Kotha, the Ahom village of Koyapani, the old Naga Sema village of Longtong as well as another old Tangsa village called Hewe Ninggam, as in the sketch map (Map 4-2) below.

Kharangkong is not marked on the 1927 British maps. But the now predominantly Singpho-speaking village of Hasak is marked as Hasak (Naga). Hewe Ninggam is perhaps the oldest Tangsa settlement in the area, followed by Kharangkong, sometime in the late 1930s or early 1940s. The Cholim basti in Kharangkong was established much later in the early 70s as already mentioned. By a rough count there are 37 Tangsa families in main Kharangkong (9 Mossang) and about 17 (9 Cholim) in the Cholim basti. But they are outnumbered by the 58 Ahom, 15 Nepali, 7 Adivasi and 1 Bihari families who live in the Assamese and Nepali bastis which came up much later around the older two bastis and are all mostly Hindu. Official records state the population of Kharangkong to be 657 in 2011 and 519 in 2001. Being a mixed village, the lingua-franca for the Tangsa population at least was Singpho (and increasingly also Asamiya).
4.3.1 Hindu-Buddhists: a convenient double-representation

The Singpho and Tai Phake living in the area around Kharangkong are Buddhists, the Tangsa are Hindu Buddhists, and the Naga Sema are Christian, according to Aphu. But who are Hindu-Buddhists? Aphu coined the term ‘Hindu Buddhist’ for those people living in the Cholim basti who continue to follow their traditional practices. But actually they are neither Hindu nor Buddhist. Though they put themselves down officially as Buddhist in the government records, most Tangsa living in Kharangkong still do animal sacrifice on festive occasions like the Wihu-kuh; so they are not strictly Theravada Buddhist in their practices. The Tangsa are certainly not Hindu, in that they do not believe in any of the Hindu gods and goddesses. But Aphu and many other Tangsa elders whom I met in the hills use the term ‘Hindu’, for lack of a better term, to mean a follower of the older traditions (possibly since like a section of the Hindus, they also performed animal sacrifices).

There are other reasons too for claiming to be Hindu-Buddhists. Earlier they had no proper name for their traditional practices.\(^\text{40}\) They certainly did not want to call themselves Muslim or Christian.\(^\text{41}\) They also wanted to assert their difference from the majority Hindu community around them (comprising mostly the Nepali and the Assamese Ahom). Moreover, Buddhism had already arrived in the area and was known to be a mild, non-demanding, non-assertive religion. They do exactly as Scott (2009: 319) predicted by “adopt[ing] a religious identity at variance with that of the core-state populations, whose culture they associate with their stigmatisation”.

\(^{40}\) Some Christian Tangsa told me later that their traditional religion could be called the ‘ajanti’ religion, the religion they followed before they came in contact with the world.

\(^{41}\) Of course this is no longer true as more and more Tangsa are converting to Christianity since the 1970s.
There were also historical reasons for adopting Buddhism. The Singpho village of Kotha, and the Tai Phake Buddhist village of Ninggam are very close to Kharangkong. A Buddhist monastery was built in Ninggam around 1960. In those days, the Tangsa leaders Nowang Mossang (also called Mossang Gam) and Sekhip Lungri from Kharangkong, the Singpho Kotha Gam of Kotha village and Aikya Chekhap of Ninggam were very close friends and they acted together on most issues. Following the example of the Singpho and Tai Phake friends and neighbours, the Tangsa in Kharangkong had also embraced Buddhism, see beginning of Section 4.2.

That Tangsa traditional practices can easily be combined with Buddhism is clear from the following excerpt from my field notes about a meeting with a Tangsa priest:

In the nearby Tangsa village of Hewe Ninggam I met one of the few remaining practising priests (dumsa) of the Tangsa traditional religion. He told me he is a Buddhist but that he still performs the duties of a dumsa (which he had learnt while assisting his father and other older dumsa in their work earlier) due to public pressure and on public request. People still invite him for house-warmings or when someone was ill, but those occasions are few and far between. No one else in the village knew those traditional practices, and the knowledge would die with him, he feared. Interestingly, he had pictures of both Buddha and Shiva hanging on the walls of the room of his house where he met us. When I asked him how he could be both a Buddhist and a dumsa, he told me that he was Buddhist because they were all Buddhists in his village and he did not want to go against his own people, but all of them still followed their old religion in their everyday life (DoI: 31.10.2009).

However, Aphu Tyanglam, as the foremost ‘Hindu Buddhist’, did not always make it easy for others to understand how the system could work. Since he was a Buddhist, he could not kill – so he got his wife to sacrifice the chicken on the morning of Wihu-kuh in 2009 while he sang the rim-rim and conducted the rest of the rituals in their house. He got his elder brother to sacrificially kill the pig and the cow; however he did augury with the chicken’s claws and the pig’s liver later (see Section 4.2.1). I have never seen Aphu visit the Buddhist temple in Ninggam. It did seem that the degree of Hindu-ness or Buddhist-ness that a Hindu-Buddhist demonstrated varied, depending on who the person was.

I had once asked the rather young Buddhist monk from the Ninggam monastery how someone could claim to be Buddhist when they still sacrificed animals for ritual purposes (DoI: 03.11.2009). The young monk did not seem too perturbed by my question, and replied, “Buddhism is not a religion that coerces anybody into doing anything. If anyone comes to ask me, I will surely tell him or her that drinking too much rice beer or sacrificing animals are both bad actions, but as a Buddhist each individual is free to choose his or her own actions, a

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42 A Singpho term in frequent use in Kharangkong; gam (means first son) and is used as a suffix for names.

43 Of course, many Tangsa who are Christian now still follow some of their traditional practices, as will be mentioned in Section 6.2.2. But none of them have continued as a priest (dumsa) after conversion. See also Spiro (1967: 3).

44 Aphu explained this to me by saying that since Phraa (the Buddha) was everywhere there was no need to go to a temple looking for him.
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person’s *karma* will reflect his or her actions – be they good or bad.” He went on to say that since there were so few Buddhists in India at present they were forced to make concessions about the practices of their followers, if they wanted to survive at all.

4.3.2 Mixed ancestries; Fluid identities

The villages surrounding Kharangkong (Tangsa, Assamese, Nepali) are Ninggam (Tai Phake, Bengali, Tangsa), Kothagaon (originally Singpho but now only 3 families left now, besides 35 Ahom families and 45 Nepali families), Udaipur (Nepali – very large), Pakhagaon (Tea-garden Hindu), Navajyoti (Assamese,66 Tea tribes and some Nepali). Beyond are the villages of Longtong and Koyapani, and the Sema Naga village at Longtong; see Map 4-2. So the ethnic picture of the greater area around Kharangkong was highly mixed to say the least.

Since there has been a fair number of inter-marriages across communities, the mixed ancestries of many of the people living there at present is not difficult to explain. And this diversity has been a feature, even at the time of the establishment of the village. The three founding fathers of Kharangkong were not all from the same Tangsa tribe – they were Langching, Lungri and Mossang. But that was not all. The mother of the Mossang Gaonbura of Kharangkong was Manipuri Hindu, from the neighbouring state of Manipur! That came about simply because a Manipuri family also happened to come to live in the village just like all the others, I was told.

Some ancestries were even more complex: one of our main interlocutors in Kharangkong has a Ronrang father and a Langching mother. Both his parents came from Burma; they separated at some point and the mother and child came away and settled in the Langching Tangsa village of Hewe Ninggam, where the mother married a Kachari67 elephant-catcher. Our interlocutor married a Nepali woman and had two daughters. One daughter married to a Singpho and lives in Miao. The other married a Sema Naga man from Hasak. Very confusing all this, but why did our interlocutor call himself a Langching? Because he has always lived in the Langching village (of Hewe Ninggam), he told me simply.

From this and the many other examples it is clear that tribal affiliations are not as watertight as they might be believed to be. What is more, changing membership from one Tangsa group to another was not only not difficult, but it was actually also the norm in certain situations, especially when a family or two of one Tangsa group came to live in a village where the majority community was from another group.68 The bigger Tangsa groups, like the Mossang,

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65 Today, the maximum number of Buddhists in India is to be found in the west Indian state of Maharashtra due to conversion of large numbers of Dalits (untouchables) to Buddhism in the second half of the twentieth century.

66 By this I mean Asamiya-speaking people who are mostly Ahom and Sonowal Kachari in that area.

67 A plains tribal community, belonging to the larger Bodo-Kachari group.

68 I have recorded many examples of this: in the Ronrang village of Balinong, a few Thamkok families have become Ronrang; in the Juglei basti of Kantang, many Morang (Munre) families had become Juglei. There were even instances of Nepali men becoming Ronrang after marrying Ronrang women. Another interesting case is that of the Tangsa Lungphi – while some Lungphi claim they are a Mossang clan, others claim they were Tikhak (cf. Simai 2008: 27).
the Juglei and the Yongkuk, had demarcated areas in the hills which were supposed to be their territories (*khels*). Permission to settle in a village in the territory of one of those groups implied or required adopting the ways of the group. The new settler families quickly learnt the language and soon also changed their names. And this is prevalent also in other ethnic groups of the area as Ramirez (2013: 279) reports about the Karbi community he works with:

49 The adoption of individuals or groups originating from a different ethnicity is far from being a marginal phenomenon and is often institutionalised. ... As people move from one community to another, they adopt new cultural features and a new surname, but on a broader scale, prescribed alliances and relations of exogamy are preserved.

And while this routinely happened amongst the different Tangsa groups, the degree of difficulty varied – the closer the groups were traditionally and historically, the easier it was. While Tangsa women, on marriage, routinely adopted the ways and language of their husband’s group, it was also not uncommon to find examples where women from non-Tangsa communities became Tangsa on marriage. Instances of non-Tangsa men (from other neighbouring tribal communities like the Nocte and Singpho) becoming Tangsa were less frequent although not unknown.

As Burling very aptly comments, ethnic boundaries are neither “permanent nor unambiguous. Rather, the boundaries are contested, constructed, negotiated, imagined. This allows ethnicity to be changed” (Burling 2012: 60-61). The Tangsa case also confirms what was observed by Leach (1954) about the neighbouring Kachins and the transformations that were possible in their social structures and the flexibility that was inherent in their cultural patterns and practices.

4.4 Looking behind the curtains

4.4.1 The grey zones

The first impression one gets of the Kharangkong main *basti* is striking: the houses are large and look well-cared for, the tea-gardens are lush and green and well-tended; and the pigs and fowl look fat and well-fed. These images are proof of how hard-working and enterprising Tangsa women in general are and how much pride they take in taking care of their homes and surroundings, but not of the general level of wealth or education in the village. There are a few enterprising families in the main Kharangkong *basti* who are reasonably well off (because they have a lot of land which still yields good crops) and whose children are studying in good schools and colleges, and who are well on their way to a better material standard of life, even though it was not clear whether they would return to the village to live off their land like their parents or would prefer to go away and find employment elsewhere. But apart from these few families, the others are not doing as well, even less so in the Cholim *basti*. The older generation is mostly illiterate. Most of the younger children attend the primary school more than a kilometre away at Koyapani. The middle-aged population have

49 For more, see Ramirez (2014: Chapter 3), Bal (2007a, Ch. 6).
all had some education. But not many amongst the adults in Kharangkong have finished school. Many had given up already after primary school, those that made it to high school stopped at Class IX or X, as they were just not able to clear the end-of-school public exam.\textsuperscript{50} The situation with the youngsters is not very much different.\textsuperscript{51} As a result there was a very high drop-out rate at the local village middle school, and Kharangkong is still a largely illiterate society. The standard reason given for this by many was that since one would have to work in the fields and had no chance of ever getting a job, they saw no reason to study further. Being a soldier in the army was the only job that seemed possible, for which not much education was necessary. And since they earned enough from their palm tree plantations, their rice fields and their tea gardens, the status quo continued.

When I spoke to Aphu Tyanglam later about the low educational levels in the village, he had a lot to say: “Unless the parents themselves become responsible nobody can do anything. When most fathers go to play cards and drink every evening and are addicted to alcohol and opium,\textsuperscript{52} when the mothers remain uneducated and do not know what is good for their children, then there was no way to stop the downward slide. In such a situation nothing can be done to help anyone,” he said and continued. “They will just squander away their lives like that, or become ‘terrorists’\textsuperscript{53} because they wish to imitate all the fighting they saw everyday on TV,” he concluded. That was Aphu’s opinion; there were many others in Kharangkong however, who argued that if Aphu had really shown the way, like a true leader, then Kharangkong should have and would have done much better.

Opium addiction, mentioned already in Section 3.4.2, is still prevalent to a very high degree; drinking of alcohol and rice-beer is also common, especially amongst men. It is not uncommon to find Tangsa men in Kharangkong sitting around a fire, smoking opium all day while the women go out to work. Besides the impact on health, it was also a serious drain on the family resources. Gambling made things even worse. For these reasons, many in the neighbouring Tangsa village of Hewe Ninggam, were either sick or bankrupt or both.

\textbf{A vignette}: Although almost illiterate, one of our interlocutors in Kharangkong was very good with languages. He speaks perfect Asamiya, and is Stephen’s interlocutor for Langching. But he does not have any regular employment or work. On many occasions, I have found him in people’s

\textsuperscript{50} According to the present 10+2+3 system of education present in Assam, a student goes to school for 10 years: Class I to Class X, of which the first 4 years belong to the primary section. There is a public end-of-school examination called Matriculation at the end of Class X, after which there are two years of Higher Secondary Education before one can go to college to do a 3-year graduation.

\textsuperscript{51} Till 2010 they were only about 6-7 students who have cleared their matriculation exams at the end of Class X, exactly one who has cleared the Higher Secondary stage at the end of Class XII and only one who is going to college to do his graduation. As a result there are not many with regular jobs in the village except for the few who are employed as soldiers in the army.

\textsuperscript{52} Opium addiction is very widespread in that area amongst the ethnic communities like the Tangsa and the Singpho; for a historical account of the use of opium in the region, see J. Sharma (2012: 62ff).

\textsuperscript{53} DoI: 29.10.2009. On another occasion, Aphu had also explained why young men joined underground organisations: they did so only because they were poor and needed money and it was impossible to get a regular job without bribing someone, and they did not have the money to pay for bribes. On the other hand, the underground outfits paid quite handsome salaries to their cadres.
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houses, sitting in the outer area with other men (and smoking opium, I was told). He had some land but had sold it all little by little and was now almost down to this last plot. His two daughters also had not studied very far. Although married, his younger daughter seemed to be back home again with her father. She has a little booth in the market area where she sells bottled ‘sulai mod’ (locally brewed alcohol, which she buys wholesale from the market and sells at a profit).

A visit to the Kharangkong weekly market on Fridays reveals many of these problems. On the face of it, it was full of the usual vendors selling vegetables, provisions, clothes, shoes etc. That was the section where women were seen buying essential items of food and clothing. On another side however, there were a row of shops, all selling raw and roast meat, country liquor and with gambling and dicing counters set up in front. That was where most of the men gathered. They were playing for money. A few policemen were also seen on duty but they did not seem to be doing much. They even looked a bit drunk, and seemed to be enjoying the fun.

Another vignette: The women of the leading Christian family in the village had once told me that it was a blessing that their men don’t drink. However, soon afterwards, during a festival in a nearby village (on 17.11.2009), they put up stall to sell roast pork and whisky/brandy. “We are doing it only for the money,” they told me, rather unabashedly, seeing the surprise written on my face.

Finally, the proximity of the larger Nepali and Assamese communities (with their large and influential networks) has become a big threat to my Tangsa interlocutors in Kharangkong. When the Nepalis first began to arrive, since the Tangsa owned a lot of land around the area, they allowed the Nepalis to work on some of their fields on a share-cropping basis. But over the years some Tangsa have also (informally) sold their land to Nepalis when they needed money for some event (like an illness or a wedding). Most of my Tangsa friends have been no match for the more enterprising Nepalis, their inability to compete being aggravated by their relative illiteracy and deterioration in health due to addiction to opium and alcohol.

The Tangsa situation in Kharangkong is typical of other ethnic communities in the area such as the Singpho, where opium addiction is also prevalent. The relatively small population of these communities have also been a disadvantage. As a result, the ‘older’ tribal groups who had first settled in the area are now gradually losing out to the relatively new settler communities who have greater bargaining power, higher levels of education and are also more competitive.

4.4.2 Fissures and fault lines in Kharangkong

Ironically, although the tribal leaders wanted all the settlers to leave the area now, the first non-tribal person to settle in that area, an Assamese Ahom teacher from Sibsagar, Upen Konwar, was actually invited by the tribal village chiefs to settle there to teach their children.

54 The shopkeepers were mostly Biharis, Nepalis and also Assamese.
55 On one such occasion one man won Rs. 55,000/- and was dragged home by his mother before he lost it all.
56 When I asked government officials some other year about this I was told later that gambling was officially allowed by the government in the month after Diwali, the Indian festival of lights, which normally takes place sometime in the autumn. I visited the market on 30.10.2009 and also later.
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The first primary school was started in Kharangkong in 1955 with Konwar as the teacher. But those were different times. In the words of the present village schoolmaster, Toseshwar Gogoi, another Ahom:

In the 1960s Kharangkong, Ninggam, Kothagaon and the Sema Naga village of Longtong were much larger villages than they are now, and there was a very good system of village administration in place to resolve all problems, including judicial ones such as elopement or theft. Five puras of land was kept aside as public land and the produce of that land was put in public granaries, for distribution to the villagers in time of need. With increase in the number of people living in the area, the animals, birds, fish, even trees have disappeared (DoI: 06.01.2012).

And if all this were not problems enough, the Tangsa population in Kharangkong is physically divided, since the Cholim basti is not part of the main basti; but this divide has over time assumed other dimensions as it has spread to other factors beyond geography: the Cholim – non-Cholim divide implies that Cholim is spoken in the Cholim basti while Singpho is spoken in the main basti; this divide also has become a religious divide – while most Tangsa in the main basti are practising Buddhists, those in the Cholim basti are Hindu-Buddhists. But the most significant difference between the two bastis is the presence of Aphu Tyanglam in one and not in the other.

There are a few leaders also in the main basti, descendants of the founding fathers of the village, but they are younger, and just no match for Aphu. While they are willing to concede that Aphu has done a lot to make Tangsa ‘culture’ known to the world outside, their main objection was to Aphu’s style of functioning: he never gave others a chance, and tended to speak on behalf of the whole community. They resented the fact that Aphu presented himself as the one and only Tangsa leader. Of course the fact that the Mossang Gaonbura of Kharangkong (who became Gaonbura after his father, simply because he belongs to one of the oldest families still living in the village) was not exactly a community leader did not help in resolving these tensions.

Many Buddhists in the main basti had problems with Aphu’s interpretation of religious beliefs and Buddhist practices. For instance, they did not approve of the unilateral manner in which Aphu had handled the death of a relative in the Cholim basti recently – instead of calling the monk from the Buddhist monastery Aphu recited some ‘mantras’ (prayers) in Burmese and everything was over in one day, they told me. He also decided what to give with the dead, without consulting others. What he did was neither according to the old rules nor according to present-day Buddhist practice, they claimed.

If Aphu could not see eye-to eye with the Buddhists in Kharangkong because of his singular practices, he had a bigger problem with respect to the Christian converts in the village. One of the front ranking members of his ‘kassa party’ was banned from visiting the Aphu household after he joined the village Presbyterian Church. Such acts have only isolated Aphu further, as more and more Tangsa are gradually turning to Christianity. But for Aphu,

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57 The Presbyterian Church is controlled by the Mizo missionaries and has a much smaller presence amongst the Tangsa. In Assam they are mainly in Kharangkong and in the villages of Lakla near Phulbari and Mullong I near Malugaon.
his reasons for disliking Christianity were clear: it was a religion of rules (one must go to church every Sunday), of force (one must not drink rice-beer) and of ‘business’ (the church actually buys converts by giving them money and other things but the tithes one has to pay over the next years to the church eventually takes everything back and more). Moreover, according to him, the converts had no freedom and had to organise their lives as the church leaders told them to.

For all these reasons, in recent years, there has been a subtle parting of ways, for example, on New Year’s Day there are two picnic parties organised in Kharangkong – one in the main basti and the other in Aphu’s back-garden. Although there is a lot of contact among the people living in the two bastis and they still help and support each other, strong feelings surface as soon as Aphu gets involved. In fact, our team was not invited to a house-warming ceremony in the main basti once, despite the fact that everyone knew we were interested in recording such events, because we were staying with Aphu at that time and the hosts felt that if they invited us they would then have to also invite Aphu who would then come and tell everyone what to do. In many ways, Aphu Tyanglam has become the one single factor that plays a role in almost all that happens in Kharangkong at present. Furthermore, as will be evident in Chapter 6, his presence and his proactive role might be creating at least as many problems as it is solving for the Tangsa in Assam in general and for those living in the village of Kharangkong in particular. What will happen after Aphu Tyanglam is gone is hard to predict. But for the moment, there is a forced uneasy calm.

4.4.3 A proud but beaten man

In a sense, Aphu was already of the past. The younger lot barely suffered him, there would be no holding them back, once he was gone, one felt. Many things would change and that change had already started in the main Kharangkong basti. As already mentioned, many believed that Aphu had done very little for his own village. Many accused Aphu for the sorry state of education levels in the village. He did not value education, I was told, since he could not read and write himself -- that he could read and write in Burmese was not taken into account. Although many were scared of this proud Tangsa ‘Raja’ (king) as Aphu was sometimes referred to, it was always sad to see his helplessness when a letter (written in English or Asamiya) arrived in his name and he was not able to read it. And this inability did cost him heavy at times, for instance, he always seemed to make losses on road-repair contracts which he executed jointly with an Assamese man from the main basti. Of course his proud Naga sense of respect would make him explain it off by saying that he wanted to do the job properly irrespective of the costs.

58 One of the oldest families in the main basti was also contemplating converting to Christianity soon. Having to face Aphu’s wrath was one of the main reasons for their not having done so already.

59 Aphu had once told me that there was no use in learning Asamiya, the children should learn either Hindi or English. He had supported the setting up of a Hindi medium school at Tin-mile. The younger girls in Aphu’s greater family, however, have all gone to government-run Asamiya schools.

Only when it came to sending his grandsons to school that Aphu began to believe that education was important. And he sent them to an English medium school run by Presbyterians, at a considerable expense and even when it meant having to set up another establishment to make it possible for him to attend school.
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But after having seen Aphu Tyanglam in action all these years, one can sense the change – he is gradually growing old and losing his hold over his people. Many signs of this were evident. The first sign came when he was not able to prevent, despite his being so vehemently opposed to it, Christianity from coming to the village. Having all his life held the view that Christianity was responsible for the decay of Tangsa traditional culture, he had sternly forbidden everyone to become Christian. Yet it had arrived in his own basti in his lifetime. And the number of Christian converts from Kharangkong is going up steadily.

Then there was the problem regarding the organisation of the Wihu-kuh festival. Aphu’s wish was that Wihu-kuh should be celebrated centrally by all Tangsa living in Assam on the 5th of January every year, and that the location should keep changing. To this effect, he organised it in 2009 in Kharangkong and persuaded Tangsa elders in Phulbari to host it in 2010. And although Phulbari hosted it and organised a big festival as I shall describe in Chapter 6, Aphu annoyed everyone by not respecting certain agreements made earlier. Consequently, other Christian Tangsa villages were reluctant to come forward to host the Wihu-kuh. As a result, despite Aphu’s best efforts, this festival has not been held in a big way since 2010.

This has hurt Aphu very much. In a very emotional moment, he told me once that he knew that a time will come when every Tangsa would have become Christian, when all his people would only speak in Asamiya, but still he tried and did what he could, and went all over the place to exhort the Tangsa to do something about preserving their language and traditions, because he wanted people to remember that at least he tried. But he knew that many others did not agree with him and hence the battle would eventually be lost; but still that could not be reason for him to not do what he thought was right, and he would continue to do so till his last breath, even if it meant having to celebrate Wihu-kuh by himself in his own home only.

If he was upset that other Tangsa were no longer acting according to his wishes, defiance from within his own family hurt him even more. One by one, two of his unmarried daughters eloped within the space of a year, the first one with a Christian army jawan (soldier) from Arunachal and the other with a Mossang young man from Kharangkong. Not being able to keep even his own house in order has been a big blow to Aphu’s self-respect and also his standing in society. In his effort to recover face, in March 2012, Aphu got his youngest son (who is in the army) married in a traditional manner to a Mossang girl from the neighbouring village of Hasak. Even the news of his being made the Vice-President of the Development Council did not help much to raise the spirits or the hopes of the old man. “I am tired of having to do everything alone,” he told me, referring to his life-long campaign to tell the Tangsa the importance of remembering what it means to be Tangsa, “if others also don’t want it, then let it be.”

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60 This will be discussed in detail later. There were many reasons for unhappiness; for instance, the free flow of rice-beer in the strictly Baptist village of Phulbari at the behest of Aphu Tyanglam met with severe disapproval from village elders in Phulbari and also from the church.

61 In Jan 5, 2014, it was again held as a community festival in Malugaon, again due to the personal ambition of the village headman Mr. Hakhun, about whom I shall say more in the next chapter.
Before I end this chapter it is important to look back and work out why this one man’s experiences and reflections are important to the research questions under investigation. First of all, by taking a closer look at Aphu’s home, family and daily routine the intention was to convey an impression of how most Tangsa live in Assam at the present time. True Aphu is not a ‘typical’ Tangsa in any sense, but many Tangsa homes look like his. Furthermore, it is also important to understand Aphu’s personal biography and evolution as a Tangsa leader. Because, as the foremost Tangsa leader in Assam, at least for the present, Aphu’s understanding of what Tangsaness means or ought to mean, definitely impacts on current Tangsa representations of their identity; and also because by figuring out what his priorities are at present, one might gain some insight into how things might evolve for the Tangsa in Assam in the next few years.

Postscript to Chapter 4

4.5 Doing fieldwork with Aphu

For a long time Aphu Tyanglam mistook my being Assamese to mean that I was Ahom; perhaps it was because most of the Assamese who lived near Kharangkong were Ahom. He also asked me about my family — and I replied as truthfully as I could without saying more than was necessary. Every time I would visit, as is usual in Tangsa society, the first questions would always be about the well-being of my family. It never occurred to Aphu to ask me if my mother worked, and hence I did not feel the need to tell him more. By the time he came to visit me in Guwahati for the first time, I had already been working with him and the Tangsa for more than three years, and although he was surprised to meet my mother and to learn about her past career in politics (and he later jokingly accused me of not telling him the whole truth), it did not seem to make any difference anymore to how he or the others in his family treated me. That was a very big relief.

My German connection was also a source of confusion. Aphu introduced me everywhere as the ‘baideo (Ass. sister) from Germany’ because for him it was clear that I was German since I was married to one -- such were the rules of the Tangsa world. When I would protest he would reluctantly add that I was also ‘a daughter of Assam’. Although I called him ‘aphu’ (elder brother) I was quickly inducted into the family as a daughter and was treated as such.

But then, like a true concerned father, Aphu would insist that I call him every few days, even when I was not actually working in the area, and tell him my whereabouts and about my travel plans – I found it a bit of a burden at times, but I found myself reporting back to him every now and then as it somehow felt safer when I had told him. As mentioned already in Section 1.5.2.2, there were often reports of firing, army searches and police operations to uncover underground activities of various militant groups and there were a couple of very close calls, but fortunately, I never came face-to-face with any real danger even once during any of my field trips. One reason for this could be the fact that Aphu claimed to be on very good terms with some of the different
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factions of ‘ultras’ (or underground insurgents) active in the area, and that he had told them about the work our project was doing towards preservation of Tangsa culture and had asked them to leave me alone – in fact he even went further to say that he had requested them to keep an eye on me to see that no harm came to me. Although I have no way of verifying this claim made by Aphu, some incidents that happened during my stay in Tangsaland make me inclined to believe him.

Aphu expected me to obey him, just as he expected everyone else to obey him. When I was staying with him in Kharangkong the rule was that I could go anywhere I wished to during the day, preferably with one of the girls but also alone if no one had the time to accompany me, but that I should definitely get back home at dusk and not venture out anymore till the next morning. That given the fact that in winter dusk came very early to those parts of Assam (around 4 pm.) meant that I essentially had only half a day to work outside the home. So I usually landed up spending a lot of time chatting with Aphu and his family in the evenings.

That in turn, essentially implied chatting with Aphu alone, for he would seldom let the women speak up, in his presence. Aphu’s wife, Renya, was a rather frail-looking elderly woman who was always busy working and keeping an eye over everything. I slowly got used to Aphu answering for her. It was not that Renya was not capable of doing so; on the contrary, she knew a lot, and had a very sharp memory. Aphu would often ask for her help when he forgot something, for example, what the name of some village or some person was. But Aphu would just not let her speak for herself. And she actually allowed him to have his way. Of course that did not stop me from talking to her, often when Aphu was away. From what I understood, it was more out of habit and less out of fear or admiration that Renya allowed Aphu to answer for her. But that, in turn, allowed Aphu to continue to believe that he was the cleverest person around and the only one competent enough to talk to his ‘learned’ guests.

Aphu’s pride about his knowledge also created some other problems, for example, it made him a very possessive interlocutor. Since he believed that he was the most knowledgeable amongst our Tangsa interlocutors, he felt there was no need for us to go and talk to anyone else. Aphu was not happy when I expressed the wish to stay in the main basti and to meet other Tangsa people – “what more can they tell you that I have not told you already,” he would pout. He would be offended when I would say I was going away or when I would first go somewhere and come back and tell him about having met some other knowledgeable elder. He would then immediately tell me some story about him which would either prove that he had told me knew only what Aphu had told him earlier, or he would try to somehow illustrate that his knowledge was deeper.

And sometimes it was clear that he misunderstood some of our project aims: for instance, Aphu confided in me a couple of times (on 6.11.2009 and also later) that he was hoping that Stephen’s linguistic work would one day help the Tangsa to develop a common Tangsa language,62 taking words from the various Tangsa languages!

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62 Stephen Morey was not as hopeful, not so much because of the different pronunciation of words, but because of the different grammatical structures of the different Tangsa languages. A more common approach to orthography seemed more feasible and he was working towards that.
There was another problem in all this which came to light once when I was rechecking a story (associated with a particular song) with Aphu that he had already narrated to Stephen. Stephen had given me Aphu’s version but I had recorded the story again in another village from another interlocutor and found that there were significant discrepancies. When I asked Aphu if he could explain the differences he happily told me that the version I had recorded was correct and not what he had told Stephen! When I then asked him why he had told Stephen an incorrect story in the first place he told me that since Stephen had come from so far away (Aphu often referred to Stephen as Mr. Australia) and had asked him about that story he did not want to disappoint Stephen. So he had simply told Stephen what he had then believed to be the correct story. But on asking others later he had found out that he had simply mixed up two names (of characters and hence their stories). Of course, it was very honest of him to tell me this, but this admission made us worry about the general reliability of the data that we had collected from him.

Nevertheless, Aphu did know a lot and he was by far, also the most resourceful and supportive amongst our field interlocutors. Moreover, he was our first real Tangsa contact, and till date, also the most valuable. In terms of linguistic and cultural data, what Aphu has given us remains unsurpassed, both in qualitative and quantitative terms. After several years of working intensively with him, we have heard more or less all that he wanted to tell us, but for me his home is still my first stop every time I go to the field. And as I will describe in a later chapter, over the years my Tangsa father Aphu has not only helped me understand the Tangsa better but also my own Assamese people better.
Chapter 5 Malugaon: striking a fine balance

The modern does not belong to anyone, the modern is the same across tribes and people.

Nobody had heard of the Hakhuns, not even the other Tangsa groups, till they began to celebrate this festival. Now, because of this festival, at least the Hakhuns are known within Tangsa society.

Gaonbura Khejong, Malugaon

It is not easy to get to Malugaon from the railway station at Ledo. There is a walking track winding up the hill to Malugaon from there but I was not sure I would find my way. Also since the narrow dirt track went steeply uphill most of the time, it would be impossible for me to manage to get to Malugaon with my heavy luggage, without help. Theoretically it is also possible to go to Malugaon by car, but the road is very bad in patches, and it is a very long detour as one would have to go all the way along the National Highway as far as the Ledo Club before turning off the main road, climbing the steep hill before coming all the way back. Therefore I had called Limhang, the son of our main interlocutor Junglum in Malugaon, and had asked him to send someone to meet me. The Patkai Medical Stores, a pharmacy owned by a Bengali person, at the edge of the railway station on the other side of the track, was our usual meeting point.

Limhang’s son and one of his friends were waiting there for me. They knew me from last year. We started off immediately, after thanking the pharmacy owner. There was a little crowded stretch in the plains, with small mud houses and the odd concrete one, on both sides of the path. It was a Bengali basti, I was told. But soon the path turned away and led to a little stream. The boys crossed with habituated ease and waited politely for me to either make it on my own or ask for help. There was a dense bamboo bush on the other side, the last bit of shadow, before the skies opened up before us and the climb uphill started. The town was quickly left behind and the densely inhabited areas gave way to large open stretches of green tea gardens.

I chatted with the two boys; both were wearing stylish jeans and T-shirts – their hair had also been done up to stand upright in a very modern style. Limhang Jr. had a rather large and heavy watch on his wrist. He looked taller and seemed to have grown in confidence since I had last seen him the previous year. He was also more forthcoming in his replies. Yes, he was still studying in the boarding school in Lakla, close to Jagun at the Assam-Arunachal border. No, they were not having vacations; he had come home from school only for the festival, and would have to go back immediately afterwards. He and his friend had studied together when he was still going to school in Ledo. But his friend had stopped going to school after failing to pass his Class VIII exam. He now worked as a helper in a car-repair shop in Ledo and was already earning some money besides learning on the job. When I asked Limhang Jr. whether he was happy with his boarding school he did not reply. Yes, he had been promoted this year, he responded, to my next query.

I remembered the tough time the family had the previous year convincing Limhang Jr. to go back to school after his vacations. Limhang and his wife had decided to send him to a Christian boarding school at Lakla after they found out that he was getting into bad company and was
missing school and spending the day loitering about in the town in Ledo. Limhang Jr. had gone but was soon very unhappy with the rules and restrictions at the Lakla school. And he found his studies even harder than before since he had moved from an Asamiya medium school to an English medium one. After he had failed in his Class VII exams he had come home on vacation and had told his parents that he was not going back to school anymore and that he did not want to study further and that he would find himself some job or the other in Ledo, like most of his other friends from Malugaon. It required a marathon sitting, when not only his parents, relatives and village elders but also outsiders like me were roped into the discussion, before the boy could be persuaded to give his expensive new school another try.

As we neared the village I recognised some people from the basti; they recognised me too and waved. They were busy tending their patches of tea garden. Tea saplings had been planted all over the slope. Not all of it belongs to the village, Limhang Jr. told me, some Bengali families living in the area we had just crossed had also started growing tea. And the Marwari tea planter was still there. As I turned around to look back at Ledo it was astonishing to see how high we had climbed so quickly.

The village, when we finally arrived there, looked somewhat different from the previous year. At first I could not make out exactly what was different. But soon it was clear – there were just many more houses in the compound where Limhang and Junglum lived than there were earlier. With Limhang Jr.’s help, I worked out the new configuration of their family compound (see Figure 5-1 on p.132). It was all a bit confusing but there it was: as the days progressed I found out that instead of the 30 families that were living in Malugaon the previous year there were 45 living there that year. So the movement down from Myanmar continued unabated. “What can one do,” Limhang said, shaking his head when I asked him about this later, “after all they are also part of my family, I have to help them when they are in need. And the conditions in Myanmar are so difficult that it is becoming almost impossible for them to continue to live there.”

Limhang told me that he was having a tough time having to provide for so many extra people, but by all counts they looked much more prosperous than the previous year. There was much more furniture in the house – also a refrigerator in the front room. There were a few women crowded around the kitchen hearth, cooking; Junglum – Limhang’s seventy five year old father and the most knowledgeable man of the village – was not to be found; he was busy with the preparations for the festival, I was told; Junglum’s wife, who was slightly older than her husband, looked pale and unwell but went about her chores as usual, with a smile on her face. I could only nod my head to her by way of greeting as she spoke only Burmese and perhaps also Hakhun but no Assamese or Hindi.

Limhang had also built a concrete water tank next to the old rice mill, as the water connection had been extended all the way to Limhang’s house. To have running water at the turn of a tap seemed like a dream when one reminded oneself of how difficult it had been when the family had to carry water (in usually big plastic Jerri cans carried in wicker baskets) from the water tank at least 500 metres up the hill. That was a very big step forward.

"In trying to help others we have not been able to build the concrete toilet and bath that I had promised you last time," Limhang added. Well, that was fine, after all, being able to stay in Limhang’s concrete Assam type house in Malugaon was already in itself a luxury. The toilet was
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still rather basic but functional – a smooth curved piece of tin, placed on an incline leading to a hole at the back. They were easy to construct on slopes. The toilet however had moved from its position of last time to a little further away. Like always it was clean – Nyamlik, Limhang’s wife, was very particular about that, a 5-litre used plastic Jerri can served as the water reservoir. I also found a broken mug next to it. An empty sack served as a curtain as well as a door. No big surprises there.

I was shown into the same room where I had stayed last year but was rather surprised to find that Nyamlik now ran a little shop from out of the window of that room, so that the room was filled with little plastic jars containing toffees, cookies, biscuits, small sachets of shampoo, toothpaste, slabs of soap etc. “This won’t disturb you,” she said, “I don’t have many customers. There are so many small shops in the village now.” That was hard to believe; last time there was not a single shop in the village. I decided to go for a little walk of the village before it got dark.

On my way I saw quite a few new houses – some concrete Assam type, some bamboo-changs – at various stages of construction. Some looked even bigger than Limhang’s. The tiny bamboo and tin shacks along the roadside were shops; in the coming days I would see that these shops did good business during the day, selling tobacco, toffees and small snacks to the men carrying coal on their backs down the hill. Khothing’s sister’s lived at the end of the road. Her husband was dead, but her husband’s brother had taken her as his wife. Their new house also looked complete. It was a grand sprawling bungalow now. I had never met the man but wondered what he must do to be so rich. I also wondered whether she would let me bathe in her concrete bath-house as I had done last time.

The biggest surprise came when I saw the village church, completely rebuilt with bricks and concrete and freshly painted; the old mud and tin structure in which I had attended services last year had disappeared. The signboard told me that it had been inaugurated only a few months ago.

But the biggest surprise came when I saw the village church, completely rebuilt with bricks and concrete and freshly painted; the old mud and tin structure in which I had attended services last year had disappeared. The signboard told me that it had been inaugurated only a few months ago. I walked on. As I reached the school compound, I could see that the school building had also been extended. The Gaonbura and some other villagers were having a meeting in the school field. Some of them greeted me – a meeting of the core committee of the festival was in progress. When I congratulated the Gaonbura on the many positive changes in the village in the past year, he told me that things were on their way to getting even better.

Not wanting to disturb the meeting, I walked on, past the Pastor’s house, till I came to the Gaonbura’s double-storey wooden house. It looked more or less the same. On the other side of the road was the recently built Assam type house belonging to the Gaonbura’s brother. There was a large coal dump in front of the house – it was new and ugly.

Another time I walked on further along the winding road, past the Gaonbura’s house, leading to the coal mine, which is less than a kilometre away. The smell and feel of dust and the heavy grumpy atmosphere around an open-cast coal mine became stronger. The vegetation thinned out, no more trees, just straggling weed-like plants growing out of the pale, pulpy soil. Soon I came up to the ridge from where looking down one saw the mines. They looked dark and forbidding, even from the distance. One could see the layered formation along the steep edges. Big Volvo dredgers were at work, digging out the coal. Many trucks were stationed next to them to carry the coal to the coal loading station down at Ledo. There the coal would be loaded into train wagons and transported out of the region. The digging process created a huge pool, and as the dredgers
Malugaon continued to nibble away on one steep edge of the lake and spitting out the soil which did not contain enough coal on the other side, the lake gradually moved, literally. As a consequence the hills on one side got 'eaten up', while new unreal-looking pale hills sprang up on the other side. For what they 'spat' out was a totally barren, lifeless matter which had nothing of any value left in it -- it could support no life.

Map 5-1: Sketch showing Malugaon in relation to Ledo and the Tikak Coal Mines
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As I stood there, looking at the deep gorge created by the mine, a young man joined me – he was Bengali and worked there as a guard; he was not an employee of Coal India but of a private company that had been given the contract of digging and transporting the coal from the mines. When I expressed my surprise at finding a young Bengali working there, he informed me that there were lots of Bengali people working there – his father had come from West Bengal to settle in Ledo and work for Coal India in the eighties when the mines started functioning again after being shut down after the British left. As we chatted, he said that not only were there many Bengali people working there, there were lots of Telugu-speaking people from distant Andhra Pradesh also living in Ledo – they had also come to work in the mines and had stayed on. There was even a Telugu school in Ledo, he informed me. Just beyond the hill in front of us, behind the mines was the Tangsa basti of Rhan-rhing-kan; It was in Arunachal Pradesh but was not too far. He offered to show me the way if I wished to visit it someday. But the day was getting on, I decided to return.

On my way back to Malugaon, I met Lumren, a Hakhun who lived in Nongtham in Arunachal. He had just arrived in the village and had decided to walk up the road to accompany me back. At a certain point on the road, Lumren told me that he would show me something very pretty – we left the road and walked through the forests, climbing uphill for a while till we reached an opening, and then suddenly in front of us the view opened up; it was as if we had suddenly come out into the open from a tunnel – we were almost at the top of a hilly slope covered with lush green tea plants, when one looked up one saw the sparkling blue sky and between them a mountain range in several overlapping and interlacing layers. That was the Patkai range – the home of the Tangsa on the Indo-Myanmar border was somewhere there in the hills in front of me. The sight was majestic and sublime – to see those mountains that I had heard so much about, to have nothing between them and me – I looked on in silence.

And as we turned to go back to the road I gasped again, for in front of me was a view that extended for quite a few kilometres. In the distance, past the village, beyond the railway track and the town below, there were vast expanses of plains – mainly golden with paddy, green with tea at some places, dark and forested elsewhere – they were the fertile flood plains of the Tirap and the Burhi Dihing rivers. The rivers were too shrunken at that time of the year for me to be able to see them, but one could see their looped and wavy courses clearly – our land is so beautiful, I heard myself saying aloud.

The picturesque Tangsa village of Malugaon is located up the hill very close to the busy town of Ledo1 near Margherita. Malugaon is very close to the Assam-Arunachal border and not too far from the international border with Myanmar. There are two large open coal mines – the Tirap and the Tikak Coal Mines – very close to Malugaon (as is clear from Map 5-1 on page 128.

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1 As mentioned already in Chapter 2, Ledo is the starting point of the Stilwell (Ledo) Road; the railway was built in British times to carry the coal from the coal mines that they had set up around Ledo in the 1880s.
127). In fact, the Tikak mine is less than a kilometre away. The entire area has coal quite close to the surface. Most of the Tangsa living in Malugaon are Hakhun, which is not a Pangwa tribe (see Section 3.2).

In this chapter, I wish to describe the landscape around the basti of Malugaon and the livelihood patterns of the Hakhun people living there, in order to understand better the reasons that makes it necessary for them to negotiate their existence not only with their clan-relatives in Myanmar, but also with the Assamese living down in the town of Ledo, as well as with the officials of Coal India and the local state administration, including the police and army. The relation between the Hakhun and the Nocte people and issues related to insurgent activity in the area, informal trade in coal and opium as well as environmental problems related to living close to a coal mine will also be discussed. I will also describe and discuss a Hakhun festival in Section 5.3 in order to understand the underlying compulsions and intentions, to show that the much closer contact the people of Malugaon have with the plains and the state machinery have enabled them to work out more efficient strategies for survival and also to present themselves as ‘modern tribals’.

5.1 Hakhuns: the Burmese connection

The Hakhun are a Tangsa tribe with only about 110 Hakhun families in India (in 2010). Malugaon is the largest Hakhun village in India. I was told that about 80% of the Hakhun are still in Myanmar. Since most of the Hakhun in India today have only very recently migrated from Myanmar (many within the last 20-25 years), their links with Myanmar are still very strong; For instance, they prefer to use the term ‘Tangshang’ (see Section 3.2) which is more generally used in Myanmar, rather than Tangsa. It was pretty normal for people from Myanmar to come visiting their friends and relatives in Malugaon. Some Hakhun in Malugaon still played an active role in their ancestral villages back in Myanmar.

5.1.1 Similarity with the Nocte

Although the Hakhuns are non-Pangwa, the lingua franca of the village was Hacheng, a Pangwa language. There were some Thamphang (non-Pangwa) speakers in Malugaon as well (see Figure 3-1 on page 69). The picture was even more complex because, linguistically, the language of the Hakhuns resembled that of the Nocte community very closely, while it was

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2 There are also a few Hakhun families in Mullong 1 in Assam and Nongtham (only 3 Hakhun families), Febiro (6 families) and Rhang-rhin-kan (10-15 families) in Arunachal.

3 One of our interlocutors went to Myanmar frequently and played an active part in campaigning during election-time in Myanmar. Since he belonged to the kingly ‘Ang’ clan of the Hakhun, the villagers still looked up to his family for guidance and advice. Although he has been living in Malugaon for a while now, he is still a Burmese citizen.

4 Hacheng is the lingua franca of the entire Malagaon-Mullong hill area; Hakhun and Thampfang, although both non-Pangwa languages, are very different from each other. Thamphang speakers can speak Hakhun but not vice-versa – one more example of linguistic non-intelligibility between Tangsa groups.

5 This has been established as part of the work done by the linguists in our project; see, for instance, the work Krishna Boro (a student of linguistics from Gauhati University now pursuing his Ph.D. at the University of Oregon).
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almost completely unintelligible to most of the other Tangsa groups. Today the Nocte live in the Tirap district of Arunachal. According to Hakhun elders, the Hakhuns also used to live in the area around Khonsa, the capital of the Tirap district, about 100 years ago from where they had to flee to Myanmar after having a fight with the Wakka⁶ people also living there over the ownership of a salt-mine. In Myanmar, they lived in five bastis, the biggest of which was called ‘Nyuk nu’ and which exists even now, I was told. More recently, they moved downhill from Myanmar to Malugaon and to a few other places in Assam and Arunachal.

The fact that their traditional practices were also somewhat different⁷ reinforced the popular belief amongst the other Tangsa tribes that not only were the Hakhun not Pangwa, but that they actually belonged to the Tangwa tribes,⁸ which include the Northern Naga tribes like the Wancho and the Konyak. Of course the Konyak in Nagaland live right across the border to the Noctes and Wanchos in the Tirap (and the recently created Longding) district of Arunachal, so all the different strands seemed to fit together quite nicely.

In any case the Hakhuns at Malugaon, both in terms of their language and some of their traditional practices which we recorded, seem to be rather special and different from the Pangwa groups. For example, they do not have the Sahpolo dance, Junglum Hakhun did not know how to sing the Wihu song but said they had a similar song called Phon-tu-si.⁹ At the village organisational level, unlike the Pangwa groups who usually had elected chieftains, the Hakhun used to have hereditary kings (angs). However there seems to be no obvious connection between those ‘Angs’ and the present-day Gaonburas;¹⁰ the Hakhun Gaonbura of Malugaon does not belong to the kingly clan: he had inherited the job from his father.

Culturally and linguistically there were many reasons to believe that the Hakhun are more Nocte than Tangsa. However the Hakhun were officially included as a Tangsa group, and have over time internalised this and grown to accept that grouping. As Karlsson (2001: 25) observes, “Even if one can say that, for example, the Nagas and other indigenous people in Northeast India in some respect, have come to adopt categories, not of their own making, they have also subverted these categories and made them their own.” And the Gaonbura of Malugaon has been so successful in projecting himself as a Tangsa leader that he is one of the

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⁶ Wakka is a large Wancho village, about 64 kms from Khonsa. It is now a circle of the Tirap District of Arunachal Pradesh.
⁷ For example, although the Hakhuns were known to be head-hunters and would bring home the head of enemies they had killed in battle (and do certain rituals with it), according to the Burma Report 1942 the Hakhun did not perform human sacrifice. Moreover the male dormitories called Po seems to have played a more significant role in the life of the Hakhun earlier than they had for the Pangwa.
⁸ The Hakhun traditional dress is more like that of the Tangwa/Naga than that of the Tangsa. The men led by Junglum Hakhun dressed in lengtis and not lugsis for their traditional dances, and they traditionally use drums and gongs in many of their dances. Unlike for the Pangwa groups, it was not necessary that blood had to flow when the drums were sounded.
⁹ Much like the Wihu-song, the Phon-tu-si is supposedly a very long song and usually sung by two old men all night long drinking a little kham (rice-beer) and eating pieces of meat – it describes how to build a house, and also about various places and travels. Junglum could sing only a little part of it
¹⁰ There were no Ang elder in Malugaon till an elderly Ang couple came to live with his son in Malugaon in 2010 from Myanmar. But that does not seem to have affected the authority of the Gaonbura in any way.
three Tangsa members nominated to the newly-formed Development Council (see Section 2.4.2), although there might also be other reasons for this, as I shall discuss later.

5.1.2 Ongoing migration from Myanmar

Junglum Hakhun came away from Myanmar because of the atrocities of the Burmese army which started in 1976 to clear that area of insurgents. The rebels were hiding in the jungles but the army would come into their villages, burn houses, kill and eat the cows, pigs and other animals, and beat and torture the villagers; unable to cope with all that he ran away and came to India. The army would come in very year and create a lot of trouble, so many people fled to India. Junglum believes that the situation had improved since 2000, but the villagers are always supposed to be ready to provide the army with men whenever they needed any to do various things like transporting rations (the nearest town is more than two weeks by foot away from his village) and for other hard labour. It was still a very hard life there. So it did seem that there were quite a few reasons why the flow of Burmese settlers into Malugaon continued unabated.

Junglum Hakhun and his wife came to India in the 1970s, their son Limhang, who was born in Burma came to India as a young man. He married Nyamluk when she moved to India with her family in the 1990s. Nyamluk could read and write in Burmese, like Aphu, but had recently started learning to read in English by herself at home; she spoke reasonable Assamese, like her husband.

Junglum’s nephew, Yedim, described the route to go from Malugaon to his home in Vanruk in Myanmar: first by auto-rickshaw or bus from Malugaon to Margherita, then by bus to Deomali and Khonsa in the Tirap district; from Khonsa to Lajo by bus; then to Noklaw on foot; from Noklaw three hours uphill over the Patkai to the border and then finally to his village Vanruk downhill another four hours on foot. And he had done it at least once a month if not more often, to visit his children, but when his wife too fell ill, they all moved to Malugaon in 2011 because there were no medical facilities available anywhere near their basti in Myanmar.

In just the three consecutive years (2009-11) that I visited Malugaon, the number of houses in the compound where Limhang and Junglum live had nearly doubled. In 2010, a new chang-ghar was built right in front of Junglum’s original chang-ghar and Limhang’s sister’s family moved in there. Yedim had moved with the rest of his family into Limhang’s former kitchen

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11 Some stories that Junglum Hakhun told me about their head-hunting past is included as Appendix IX.
12 Daw/Do is a Burmese title for a woman. Some others in the village also still use Burmese titles, for example Junglum is usually addressed as U Junglum Hakhun. The dress for a Hakhun dance presented at their festival (with green and black stripes lungis) looked definitely Burmese.
13 Since the border is through dense forests there is hardly any border-control on that route. And since the nearest hospital in Myanmar from Vanruk was much further away, many had no choice but take this route to India when someone was sick.
14 All the Hakhun settlements in Burma are located close to the Indo-Burmese border.
15 According to the Gaonbura, there were less than 90 Hakhun families in India in 2009 and this had gone up to 110 in 2010. The Pastor told me that 12 new houses had been built in Malugaon in the year (2010-11).
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changing, which had been dismantled and re-done -- narrower, and also shorter at the far end --

Figure 5-1: Layout of the area around Junglum’s house, showing increase in the number of houses over the years (Green 2008-9, Yellow 2009-10 and Red 2010-11)

| House A | the *chang* where Limhang and family earlier used to live with Junglum’s wife, also kitchen; in 2010, Junglum’s wife lives in the front part, and Limhang’s cousin (with his wife and 4 children) live in the back part; Junglum moved back in with his wife in 2011; |
| House B | the concrete house where Limhang lives with his family; his nephew stays on the roof and runs the mill; |
| House C | Limhang’s new kitchen (earlier the kitchen was in House A); |
| House D | Junglum’s daughter’s *chang*, she lives there with her husband and 4 children; |
| House E | Junglum’s original *chang*; his youngest son also lives there, with family |

and Junglum and his wife lived there in 2011. A new kitchen had been set up in the *chang*-ghar on the other side of Limhang’s concrete house. The *chang* where Junglum used to live till 2010 was occupied by Limhang’s newly married younger brother, his wife and little child.
Malugaon

Limhang’s brother-in-law had moved in 2011 to the house across the road facing the rice mill. A schematic presentation is shown in Figure 5-1 in the previous page.

5.2 Politics of survival

5.2.1 Sitting on a coal mine: Ledo and Coal India

Originally the slopes of the hills on which the bastis of Malugaon, Mullong and Rhan-rhing-kan are presently located was a Tikhak Tangsa area and the village was named after Malo, a Tikhak community leader. The village of Rhan-rhing-kan still has a Tikak Gaonbura, although most of the Tikak people living along the hills have since moved down to the plains around Ledo. The village named Tikak16 nearby (as well as the mine with the same name) is also evidence of Tikak habitation in that area. Simai (2008: 21) states that Rhan-rhing-kan means ‘smelling or odorous mountain’ in the Tikak language. It was so named after Tikak elders saw smoke with a pungent smell emanating from the hilltop, long before the British had come to the area. The story goes that it was the Tikahks who first discovered coal in that area19 while they were clearing land for jhum cultivation by burning the undergrowth and noticed that some stones kept burning. So the Tikak Gaonbura took some of the stones and showed them to the British officers in Dibrugarh who gave him a reward. Later the British started mining in the area. However, the people living in the hills over the coal consider the coal to be rightfully theirs,20 the people of Malugaon told me.

As already mentioned in Section 2.1, in the 1880s the British established six underground mines in the area of which only the Tipong mine is still operational today.21 The Tikak and

16 The village is called both Malopahar and Malu/Malo gaon. Pahar means hill and gaon means village in Asamiya. The GB however, preferred to call the village Malugaon. Following general usage, I shall write Tikhak for the group name as well as for the language they speak and Tikak for the name of the village and the mine.

17 ‘Kan’ is a typical Tangsa word for mountain. In fact Rhan-rhing-kan, the next village along the hill from Malugaon, is in Arunachal. There were about 150 families in Rhan-rhing-kan (Hakhi, Longchang, Hacheng) in 2012. They were mainly Tikhak people there earlier but it is a mixed village now.

18 The Tikak village is actually an Ao Naga basti, and was earlier called the Kohima basti. At the time of World War II many Ao men had come from Nagaland to work in the road construction works, had got married to local tribal girls and had stayed on in the area.

19 Although I could find no official records corroborating this story, there is proof that some Rangpang (Pangwa) groups lived in the area around Ledo: A British administrative report of 1921-22 states: “Iron materials were no longer stolen by Nagas from the vicinity of the coal mines at Ledo and the blockade against the Rangpang and Yogi Nagas was removed during the year” (Report 1921-22: 93).

20 Unlike 6th Schedule areas of the Indian Union where the local communities have a claim over the mineral wealth of their land, it is not so in the Tirap area where it belongs to the government. There, the legal rights to extract coal have been leased out by the government to Coal India.

21 The six underground mines were located at Jaipur, Borgolai, Tikok, Ledo, Tirap and Tipong. Only three of them are operational at Tikok, (Ledo), Tirap and Tipong, of which only the last is still an underground mine. Tikok was started again as an open case mine in 1982, Ledo in 1984 and was again closed down, Tirap started in 1986. Tipong is not producing at the moment due to some technical problems. These mines are today under the Northeastern Coalfields (NEC) with Headquarters at Margherita, headed by a Chief General Manager, who is directly under the Director, Technical, Coal India and ultimately under the Chairman Coal
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Tirap mines were recast as open-cast mines and started operations from the 1980s. These three mines presently produce one million tonnes of coal per year. Since the ban on the plywood and timber industries in the early 1990s, coal mining is now the biggest industry in that area.22

The Gaonbura of Malugaon claims that the village has had to move five times in the last fifty years.23 The village, in its present location, exists only for about ten years. There was an earlier basti further up the hill24 which was destroyed in 2001 when the empty underground mining chambers of the old Tikak mine collapsed. There were 30-35 families living in that village then. Coal India gave compensation and took the responsibility of rehabilitating all of them, some were temporarily housed (and are still living) in Coal India quarters, many others decided to move and settle in the village of Rhan-rhing-kan,25 which is located just across the border in Arunachal, while 10-15 families eventually came to settle in the present location of Malugaon. The rest of the people living in Malugaon now are even more recent arrivals, and most of them are from Myanmar. According to a Coal India official, around 2005, there were at most 20-25 families living in Malugaon. The population more than doubled in the next five years, mostly due to migration from Myanmar. Official records state the population of Malugaon to be 317 adults in 2011.

The villagers have an uneasy relation with Coal India because of the sheer proximity of the coal mines although Coal India is their principal benefactor and descendants of about 25 ‘Naga’ employees who joined the mines during British times are still employed by Coal India. Many more ‘tribals’ are employed directly or indirectly by Coal India as drivers and machine-men.26 Moreover, in Malugaon the company also bore the expenses of running the village primary school, providing water reservoirs and free electric supply, and paving the main village roads. Moreover, unlike in normal villages of Assam, there were almost no power cuts in Malugaon. Confirming all this, the Gaonbura added, “We have now requested Coal India to pave all the roads in the basti.” He also said that half of the total amount of Rs.
8 lakhs (Rs. 800,000) spent on rebuilding the village church had been provided recently by Coal India. They had also provided for the extension of the school building and the renovation of the school toilets. Two new water reservoirs had been built in the village by Coal India so that by 2011, there was some kind of water supply to all houses.

A Coal India official told me that besides a lump sum payment they made every year in name of the village, the Gaonburas and secretaries of each village were each paid handsome amounts per month. When I asked how they showed all this in their records, he explained that as part of the Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) Scheme, Coal India was obliged to distribute 5% of its profits to people living within 8 kilometres of their area of operation. According to this official, when the company needed to acquire some land, instead of going into some long drawn out negotiations with the affected persons they would often just give the Gaonbura a lump sum say of about 10 lakhs (in INR) to be divided up amongst the villagers.

Moreover, it was not only in Malugaon that the Coal India was trying to buy their peace. The lower part of the neighbouring Tangsa village of Mullong I (which is at a higher altitude than Malugaon) near the adjoining Tirap mine had been relocated just in the last few months. There were two parts there, a Thamphang basti and a Hakhun basti with a Presbyterian Church in the middle. Now some of the 26 families from the lower part have relocated to the upper part even higher up, at the top of the hill, where there were some Thamphang and Lakki families from before. The church has been rebuilt with the help of people from Lakla; they have been compensated by Coal India and there is some understanding that the new boundary would be permanent and they have also been promised some more facilities.

This is what another researcher working in the Hacheng village of Mullong II had to say:

The coal industry was an ambivalent issue for the villagers. There were many people working in or for the mine, and they were sure happy about the money they could earn. Also the mine provided electricity and water, much more reliable than the government would have done. On the other hand the acquisition of the plots now being mined was seen more or less as a scam. It seems the land was bought by the British from the people living there, much undervalued, as they were using the ignorance of the locals of what the black stone lying everywhere on the ground was used for (E-mail: 20.5.2013).

These issues, however, did not seem to bother those living in the village of Lekhapani further down the National Highway from Ledo: those that I could talk to were quite enthusiastic.

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27 The villages of Malugaon 2 and 3 and Rhan-rhing-kan are in the Tikak mine area, Mullong 1 and 2 with the Tirap mine and Febiro with Tipong. All these villages get a so-called annual ‘compensation’ from Coal India besides a one-time compensation whenever new-land is acquired by the Company and also when the contracts with private companies are renewed. Besides, at least one person per family is included in the payroll of the private companies which have contracts to work in the mines. Therefore they get 3000-4000 rupees per month doing nothing.

28 That part of the basti existed in February 2012, when Stephen Morey visited the village; 3 houses from that basti have since collapsed in a landslide caused by blasting, and a few houses are right on the brink (Feb. 2014).
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about the fact that the Lekhapani Open Cast Mine would go operational soon, barely a kilometre away from their basti. Coal India has already built a community hall and had promised jobs, water, electricity and roads in their village.

In any case, the fact remained that those who were living so close to a coal mine, might have to move again any day. And that was not an empty threat as it had really happened to the villagers of Mullong I, as mentioned above. Knowing all that, why was it that more and more people were coming to settle in Malugaon? Nor did they seem to be bothered about the health hazards associated with constantly inhaling the coal-dust or the fumes from the coal fires. What is more, earlier they used to live in bamboo changs which could easily be dismantled and moved, but these days more and more concrete houses are coming up in Malugaon. “We cannot just stop living just because we might have to move someday,” the Gaonbura told me. “Moreover, the better the houses we have to leave behind the more compensation we will get for them.” Although this logic might sound rather perverse, it was quite sound as a strategy for survival -- they were making the best of the hen that laid the golden eggs while it lasted.

5.2.2 Insurgency, coal mafia and opium trafficking: Life in Malugaon

Most people living in Malugaon still do jhum cultivation in their fields further up in the hills, near the area where they used to live previously. But that could not be the only source of income in the village. For, economically, Malugaon today is visibly a village which is on its way up – there were signs of prosperity and affluence, and better infrastructure everywhere. As mentioned earlier, quite a few new houses – some of concrete, some bamboo chang-ghars – had come up. Elsewhere, chang-ghars were being replaced by brick and cement and constructions. Limhang managed to build a new concrete toilet in 2012. Most houses in Malugaon have at least a motor-cycle, many also have trucks to transport coal. Limhang has a truck and two motorcycles. The roadside shops were flourishing; there was just more money going around.

Compared to Tangsa youth in other villages, those in Malugaon looked surprisingly ‘modern’ -- torn jeans, big flashy watches, spiky hair-styles, a ‘cool’ attitude – with I-pods or MP3 players stuffed into ears playing western pop-music. Since most of these young men were school drop-outs with no visible sources of income, it was not easy to explain this new affluence.

Although nobody told me anything in so many words, the evidence was all around me. One of the village elders was arrested and had to spend a few months in prison when he was caught red-handed selling opium by the army who had raided his house following a tip-off. Many especially older people in the village still take opium, quite openly. The illegal trade of opium smuggled in from Myanmar had made some people rich, I was told.

Some others had become rich from the theft and sale of coal from the mines. Men, slowly walking down the hill, carrying heavy sacks of coal on their backs, is a common sight in

29 Till March 2014, environmental clearance had not yet been obtained.
30 The 25 Sector of Assam Rifles, a paramilitary force of the Indian state, under the command of a Brigadier, has its headquarters at Lekhapani near Ledo.
Malugaon

Malugaon. Coal, collected from the mines manually by such hired hands, was collected in the coal dumps in the basti during the day (like the one in front of the Gaonbura's brother's house); the sacks were then loaded in medium sized pick-up vans and transported to distant places during the night. The commotion created by these loading operations kept me up many nights.

Moreover some of the villagers have links with insurgents active in the area. In fact it is believed that the local area commandant of one of the insurgent outfits is a Hakhun from Malugaon, and that the area around the hills of Malugaon and beyond even up to the Kharsang and Miao in Changlang is under the control of this faction. Relations between the Coal India and the Hakhun in Malugaon had become very tense after the kidnapping and suspected murder, allegedly by the same insurgent faction, of the Manager of the Tikak Mines in 2003. As most of the Coal India workers are from outside the state, after the manager was killed, they were terrorised with fear that the same could happen to them. According to Coal India sources, the tribals exploited this fear to the maximum. They would sometimes way-lay workers, beat them up or throw stones to damage the costly Volvo machines used in the mines. According to the official, “[t]heir nuisance value has gone up in recent years since the insurgents arrived in Malugaon. So they have to be paid to not create trouble and this suits them very well – they need to do nothing to earn their living. And if they want more there is always enough coal to steal and opium to smuggle.”

However, although that new affluence had brought about an improvement in the housing and living standards in Malugaon, it had not created a greater awareness for education. Some well-to-do parents, like Limhang, have sent their children to boarding schools elsewhere. But left to himself, Limhang Jr. would prefer to roam the hills with his friends on his brand new motorbike. There were only two girls from the village who had managed to get as far as graduation. The highest educated amongst the boys had studied only till Class XII.

There is only one primary school in the village; when they finished with that the children have to go down to schools in Ledo. The headmaster of the primary school is the Assamese Phukan, whom I have already introduced in Section 2.6. He and his two Manipuri assistants lived down in the town of Ledo; they trudged up and down the hill everyday in order to keep the primary school going. He is the only Assamese I know who can actually speak a few words of a Tangsa language. But his opinion was clear -- as long as the Hakhuns continued to smoke opium, drink rice-beer, shelter insurgents and resort to illegal means of making money, there was no way forward. He told me that the children of the village were not interested in education as they saw their parents earning a lot even though they were uneducated. Easy money coming in from so many illegal sources had already and was going to ruin the village completely, he felt.

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31 According to a Coal India official, the link of the insurgents with Malugaon started around 2000, earlier there was no trouble in this area from any underground organisation.

32 As an example, he told me that earlier Gaonburas and Secretaries would be given some nominal sums like Rs. 1500 per month, which was very little compared to the Rs. 25,000 -30,000 per month that they are given at present.
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5.3 Culture as expedient

5.3.1 Hakhun Association and the Hakhun festival

As evident from the photo on the cover, the banner on the gate, beautifully decorated with hornbill feathers and images of wild boar teeth, leading up to the festival grounds proclaimed it to be the 2nd Tangshang Hakhun (Naga) Development and Welfare Association (THDWA) Foundation Day Celebration on the 8th November 2009. The venue was the play-ground of the primary school at Malugaon. They were celebrating the Foundation day for the second time in this manner; the first time was exactly a year ago, although the THDWA was formed already in 2006. The Gaonbura, in his welcome speech, however, claimed that they were celebrating the traditional Hakhun festival of Seiju-kuh which was the Hakhun thanksgiving festival for a good harvest, like the Wihu-kuh of the Pangwa groups; it used to take place traditionally in mid-December.

Lumren Hakhun, who is not from Malugaon and who I have introduced at the beginning of this chapter, is the President of THDWA. He stated their aims and objectives to be as follows: (i) to promote unity amongst the Hakhun people (ii) to preserve their older traditional dances and dresses, and (iii) to strengthen Hakhun identity. Organising a festival was a good way to achieve those aims, he added. His own personal hope was “to organise culture through religion” and one of the first steps in that direction was to show that it is possible to participate in a traditional festival in a suitably modified form even while remaining a devout Baptist.

He believed there was no need for forgetting one’s culture and traditions just because one had become Christian. Of course that did not mean, he continued, that one should start drinking rice-beer again or start fighting with one's neighbours, like in former times. So although, as Baptist Christians, they do not sacrifice animals any longer, they would set up the sacrificial altar in the festival area, and the ritual prayer that would usually have been said before sacrificing animals would be enacted by Junglum as a ‘performance’ at the festival. Junglum had also trained a band of dancers, who would perform some of the ‘traditional’ dances they had danced (and still dance today) in the hills in Myanmar (as seen in Photo 5-1). In this way the children would learn about their older traditions as well as get to see their traditional dresses, songs and dances, he told me.

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33 Seiju is the name of the month (December) in which the festival was traditionally celebrated.
34 This view is also shared by the Baptist Nagas in Nagaland: “One view is that the Festival educates the younger Nagas to appreciate their traditions and customs such as dance, clothes, ornaments, food, stories, or as one participant put it “how our ancestors once lived” (Longkumer forthcoming).
35 As Baptists, sacrificing animals was forbidden. He told me that he had heard and was deeply upset about Junglum Hakhun having performed an animal-sacrifice for our DOBES team to record in December the previous year (see Section 5.4.2).
36 The dances presented included dances like the Warria-bo (Hornbill dance), the Revan-bo (war dance) and the Sithe-bo (bridge-building dance); Wang-do-lam or ‘the king-making-song’ would usually be performed when some rich man in the village would sacrifice 7-10 buffaloes or mithuns and organise a big festival; it was similar to the Wangjang-kuh of the Pangwas. Unlike the Pangwa groups, drums were compulsory during Hakhun festivals. Most of their dances used gongs and drums.
It was interesting to see the support and involvement of the village Baptist Church in organising the festival. The Hacheng village Pastor was present all through the celebrations and the village church building had been converted into a sort of temporary green-room-cum-store where many of the rehearsals were held and most of the hired equipment was stored. As a committed Baptist Christian, Lumren Hakhun also made sure that their new religion would be in evidence in the festival cultural programme. Besides the prayer and blessing to mark the beginning and the end of the festivities, three songs, sung in Hakhun by a group of five girls (accompanied by a guitarist), presumably from a church group from the neighbouring village of Relang in Changlang, wearing conservative but ‘westernized’ outfits, were also included in the ‘cultural programme’. This group had been specially invited to perform at the festival.

Moreover, a few modern songs, composed by a girl from the village and choreographed by her brother, were also performed in some sort of Bollywood style, by a group of about twenty teenagers from the village (accompanied by a guitar and drums) dressed in colourful semi-traditional dresses. Similar events have been recorded at other festivals elsewhere; (cf. Vandenhelsken 2011: 85). And is even to expected, for as Shneiderman (2011: 203) explains, the presentation of “Bollywood-style number[s] […] carries the weight of ‘culture’ in the generic South Asian sense.”

Up to this point, there was no similarity of the ‘cultural programme’ on offer in Malugaon with that I had witnessed at Kharangkong earlier. But towards the end of the programme, two Tangsa elders from some other village came up and sang the Wihu-song; the Sahpolo dance

37 These songs had been especially composed for the occasion and were celebratory in content. Even though there were Christian allusions in the songs, they would not normally be sung in church, I was informed.
38 For another discussion of similar processes in Mizoram, see Zama (2006).
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which is fast becoming the pan-Tangsa dance, was conspicuous by its absence in Malugaon. Given the differences\(^{39}\) in the songs, dances, and dresses that were on show that day in Malugaon, one could surmise that the projected Hakhun ‘culture’ (or ‘kassa’, as Aphu would say) was somewhat different from what presented at Kharangkong.

The Gaonbura however, explained that the ‘modern’ dances and songs had been added only to attract the younger lot; they were not part of their culture or identity, because, “the modern does not belong to anyone, the modern is the same across tribes and people”, echoing what Chanwang had told me already. Only the traditional songs/dances/dress would define their identity. They would allow modern songs and dances to be performed only within the village, outside they would present only traditional dances as their culture. And Junglum Hakhun’s troupe was already going to various places\(^{40}\) to present their Hakhun ‘culture’ to the world.

But how traditional was the ‘traditional’? Junglum Hakhun had spent the day before the festival at Ledo market trying to find coloured plastic twine, small mirrors, large beads, and such other stuff for use as accessories; Nyamlik had cleverly produced very striking ear-ornaments for the dancers using cheap colourful plastic beads and tufts of paper. Since they did not have very much of their traditional ornaments any more, they were having to resort to ‘fakes’ – such as using a twisted metal rod to make bangles for the girls to wear, she told me, see photos below.

\[\text{Photos 5-2: Ornaments: some old, some imitated}\]

The Pastor felt that what they were doing at their festivals was “just an attempt to keep things from getting lost”; they were doing the best they could, but it was not much more than “poor imitations”. Earlier they would use ornaments made of ivory and beads, silver handled daggers and real shields. Wild boar horns and teeth, heads of monkeys and dogs, even tiger teeth had to be placed on the sacrificial altar, in olden times, he told me.

\(^{39}\) Another difference from the Wihu-kuh was that although there was some amount of drinking of alcohol in the evening after the programme got over, rice beer was not served, during the event.

\(^{40}\) Junglum’s troupe performed at the DPF Festival in 2011, as well as in the Phulbari festival in Jan 2010.
Lumren confirmed what Nyamlik had told me earlier: when they converted to Christianity, they were encouraged to burn their traditional dresses, head-gear and ornaments.\textsuperscript{41} So they would have to go back to the hills again to ‘find’ their traditional costumes and accessories. Once found, they would have to be 	extit{suitably modernised and then mass-produced}. That was what their Association planned to do, he told me. Moreover, their history would have to be written down, but first it had to be collected properly, by asking elders in Myanmar and also in India. Oral history must not only be collected, it would have to be carefully cross-checked, before anything could be written down.\textsuperscript{42} Lumren Hakhun continued. It was clear that Lumren took his job as President of the Association very seriously. There was so much work to be done, he added, that it had been decided to hold the Hakhun festival, in such a big way, only every two years.

5.3.2 Instrumentalising festivals

The Gaonbura and his group, however, had other plans, and went ahead with the festival also in 2010. Although I have no proof directly, perhaps there was also some pressure from the local leader of the insurgent organisation, who, from what I have been told, encourages and supports the organisation of these festivals, both financially and also otherwise. The format was roughly the same as in the previous year, but the emphasis was more on popular entertainment, on having fun, ending in drunken-revelry, much to the annoyance of teetotallers like Lumren Hakhun.

So why was the Gaonbura so keen to hold the event again in 2010, even though the Association had decided against it? “First of all, because a gap of two years is too long for the children and youth to remember the songs and dances they had learnt,” he claimed. But it was clear from the way he said it that there were other bigger reasons; and it did not take long for the Gaonbura, assisted by the Village Secretary, to continue: “Nobody had heard of the Hakhuns, not even the other Tangsa groups,\textsuperscript{43} till we began to celebrate this festival. Now, because of this festival, the Hakhuns are known at least within Tangsa society.” When I asked him why then they did not hold the festival in the big field down in Ledo town, since it was much more accessible and many more people would be able to attend, the Gaonbura told me, rather mysteriously, that they would hold it there once they were ‘ready’, but they were not ready yet!

\textsuperscript{41} This was contested and explained by Baptist church leaders as a misunderstanding. It could also be explained as a change in people’s views once control of the church passed to the hands of the people themselves.

\textsuperscript{42} Of course, this whole project of history writing is problematic. One can never get full agreement when a committee is assigned the task of writing a community’s history. On the other hand when we record and translate one person’s view (Aphu’s or Junglum’s in our case) we are also privileging it. There are no easy answers.

\textsuperscript{43} This refers to the situation amongst the Tangsa in India, particularly in Assam. The Hakhuns are fairly well known amongst the Tangshang groups in Myanmar.

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As far as their identity went, they want to be known as a “developed tribe who had come out from the darkness to light”. Earlier they did not know anything and celebrated their festivals only at home, they told me, now they wanted to celebrate it centrally at one place to show the government that they also exist, in the same way as the Biharis and the Asamiyas also exist.

There were a few voices of dissent to the above statements, noticeably from Lumren Hakhun who said that the festival was not just to show others their ‘culture’ and thereby to make the Hakhuns well-known, as claimed by the Gaonbura; it was also supposed to have some value for the Hakhun themselves – it was supposed to help them get to know themselves better. In response, the Gaonbura added that festivals should also be a record of their culture for later generations, since the younger lot was forgetting everything.

The Gaonbura had not finished: “The main reason for forming the association was to be able to make demands and claims from the government.” That was perhaps a hint that the crucial reason behind the decision to hold the festival again in November 2010 could have been the fact that the state elections were around the corner in April 2011. Besides the Tangsa leaders and elders, almost all the non-Tangsa VIPs invited for the festival in 2010 were politicians, journalists or Coal India officials. The politicians who attended the festival took it as a platform to campaign for the forthcoming elections (thereby instrumentalising the occasion for their own ends), besides praising the Gaonbura for having singlehandedly put up such an impressive show. The Coal India officials made many new promises of help to the village. The local media gave the festival some coverage in the local television channels. For the media-savvy and ambitious Gaonbura the festival was a big opportunity to demonstrate his organisational and leadership capacities.

The Gaonbura had organised the festival, in a form that was not only meaningful to the Hakhun but which was also recognised as a festival by outsiders; the Hakhun becoming, in the process, a ‘mimetic minority’ in the sense of Jonsson (2010). By doing so, the Gaonbura had demonstrated what a village head can do, almost single-handedly, for the welfare of his village and towards preservation and projection (read articulation) of the culture of his tribe; he had also proved, by getting so many important people to attend, that he was a modern village head capable of dealing with politicians, administrators and journalists on behalf of his people as well as a tribal leader of the Hakhuns. While projecting himself, he had also carefully nurtured his relationship with other Tangsa tribal leaders such as Aphu Tyanglam.

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44 The Christian overtones of this remark reveal the manner in which Christian missionaries working in the northeast have depicted the tribal past of the people. As Haksar (2013: 47) remarks: “the more fundamental versions of Christianity in vogue in the region call tribal history a ‘dark period’ and thus condemn traditional culture and society as being barbaric.” That according to Haksar is one of the obvious reasons why young people from the Northeast feel a deep conflict between their Christian and tribal identities.

45 This explanation is supported by the fact that no festival was held in November 2011, after the elections were over and Gaonbura Khejong had become a member of the Development Council.

46 In fact, the Gaonbura had even vetoed inviting some young college lecturers from Ledo College who were very interested in attending the festival, saying that there was no point inviting people who had no power or influence.
and Lemo Rara from Phulbari, as well as with Baptist church leaders, such as the Executive Committee Members of the TBCA.

Were these enough reasons for him to be included as one of three Tangsa members of the Development Council? The fact that Malugaon is very close to Ledo and the sub-divisional headquarters at Margherita must have certainly been a consideration -- since the Gaonbura lived so close by and was mobile (since he had a motor-bike), he could be summoned at short notice when needed by the civil administration. On the other hand, since he had good contacts with the local civil and police administration it was useful for the Tangsa to have him as their representative. Furthermore, the fact that a high-level insurgent cadre was from Malugaon perhaps made the Gaonbura an obvious choice for the government. Whatever the reasons were, the Gaonbura succeeded in getting what he wanted – recognition and political power.

Regardless of the personal ambitions of the Gaonbura, the people of Malugaon have a much more urgent and substantive reason for organising such festivals. It is the threat of displacement looming over their heads because of their proximity of the coal mine, their recent arrival in Malugaon and their illegal status there. Therefore they have to keep reasserting their presence (and inviting outsiders to witness their presence there) in order to make sure that if and when the time comes for them to have to relocate then there will be enough witnesses ready to vouch for them and ensure that they get suitable compensation. Holding a festival is a good strategy for a small community like the Hakhuns to be seen by others, especially by those who matter. This is a strategy of empowerment and of gaining and wresting back agency to themselves.

5.3.3 Different rituals; Culture on show

As already discussed, there were many pragmatic reasons, for holding a festival, both for the Gaonbura and also for the community. But was that all? Let me next look at the nature of the rituals and the ‘cultural programme’ presented in order to investigate that question further.

Basically three kinds of rituals were performed at Malugaon: the secular ones like hoisting of the festival flag and holding of a public meeting which we have already seen at Kharangkong, the Christian rituals comprising the blessing and prayer at the beginning and the end of the day’s events conducted by the Pastor and Lumren Hakhun, and finally the traditional rituals which were enacted by Junglum Hakhun (with two women assistants) at the sacrificial altar (kham-khit, see Photo 5-3), as part of the programme. Some characteristic material symbols of Hakhun-ness -- the hornbill feathers, the teeth of the wild boar, cowrie necklaces, their dresses and ornaments, their traditional bamboo mugs and cane baskets – were also on display.

This is precisely an example of the ‘ritualised celebrations of custom’ (where custom is the same as tradition in my context) in the form of the music, dance, ‘traditional’ dress – as dramatically enacted in art festivals, tourist events, and rituals of state (Keesing 1989: 233); as well as a kind of ‘objectification and commodification of culture’ as described below by Cohn (1987: 235):
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In the process of objectification, a culture is (at the level of ideology) imagined to consist of ‘traditional’ music, dances, costumes, or artefacts. Periodically performing or exhibiting these fetishized representations of their cultures, the elites of the new Pacific ritually affirm (to themselves, tourists, the village voters) that the ancestral cultural heritage lives on.

Although animal-sacrifice and drinking rice-beer are forbidden among the Baptist Christians, Junglum presented the rituals associated with the animal-sacrifice (which was an integral part of any village festival in olden times) as part of their tradition; the whole ritual was performed, including constructing the sacrificial altar (kham-khit), adorning it with all the necessary paraphernalia and symbols, and enacting the whole process right up to the point of pouring rice-beer over the ‘hypothetical’ animal, drinking to its painless release and praying for its soul (before it is sacrificed), all ostensibly for the younger generation of Hakhuns to witness. The striking point however, was the fact that, contrary to the Christian prayer during which every Baptist I asked told me they ‘really’ prayed, the traditional rituals were seen as just ‘hollow’ performance, without any performative force, even by the Hakhuns themselves. Hence there was a difference, the Hakhuns themselves admitted to, in the degree of efficacy or meaningfulness of the three sets of rituals: the secular ones were seen as enacted only to make the event look official and without any special significance by most, the Christian ones were necessary for getting God's blessings on the whole event and the traditional ones were considered to be empty rituals, done ‘just for show’, see Section 1.2.2.

In fact, it was precisely under the condition that the traditional rituals would be done only as performance that the church leaders had given permission for its enactment, in the first place. Just like the Ao Pastor mentioned by Longkumer (forthcoming), the Tangsa church leaders also believed that, “Christians performing in the Festival are merely acting; no one would go back and revert to their pre-Christian beliefs.”

Next, it is interesting to explore what aspects of their culture the Hakhun perceived they were presenting at the festival. After all, many, like Junglum Hakhun, sincerely believed that holding a festival was important in order to transmit their ‘traditional culture’ from the older

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47 It was hard to know whether Junglum Hakhun actually believed in the performative power of his actions, while performing the rituals, or if he also felt that he was only enacting them just for show, see Section 5.4.2.
to the younger generation of Hakhuns. But how much of their ‘traditional culture’ was on show at the festival? And how much of that was being transmitted? Presenting their ‘culture’, as a sequence of dances, had become a set routine exercise for Junglum’s ‘kassa party’; they had performed the same dances at so many places and so many times in the past, that they did not have to put in too much effort into reproducing them one more time. Although it was clear that the troupe clearly enjoyed performing, the impression they gave was that they were only playing at being ‘exotic’, at achieving some sort of ‘staged authenticity’ (MacCannell 1976) for the benefit of the audience. And since his troupe comprised a more or less fixed older group of adults, the aim of transmission to the younger lot did not seem to be really happening.

Moreover, the ‘cultural programme’ was not much more than a medley of some song and dance numbers from amongst what was possible to present without too much effort. The Christian group was brought in from elsewhere by Lumren Hakhun, Junglum Hakhun took charge of the traditional part and the village youngsters tried their best to add a few items to their own taste to the programme. It seemed as if it did not matter too much what cultural traditions they were presenting as long as they could establish that they had something to present (cf. Bräuchler and Widok 2007). This also explains the improvised and tentative quality of some of the numbers, especially those presented by the village youth. Given the enthusiastic response from the non-tribal guests who had come from Ledo and further afield to attend the event, the enactment of the ‘traditional’ rituals associated with the sacrifice and the ‘traditional’ dances that Junglum had got his troupe to perform were ‘exotic’.

This was also proof of their creativity, their versatility and their adaptability: they were able to create new forms and adapt to create Hakhun lyrics set to disco music choreographed in Bollywood style. Their being able to do so illustrated the fact that they are not ‘stuck in the past’, as one of them told me.
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and ‘tribal’ enough for the guests to be convinced that the Hakhuns have a distinctive ‘culture’, different from that of the plains-people. And as I have discussed earlier in Section 1.3, establishing their credentials as an ethnic group is important for them, and this is a status they do not wish to lose.

Although Baptist Christianity was part of their new modern image, there was very little participation from the people of Malugao in the Christian part of the programme, as the singers from Relang as well as Lumren Hakhun were all from Arunachal. So, how important was their religion, after all, to the organisers? Let me describe a telling moment which came almost at the very end of the festival; Lumren had delivered his vote of thanks and was reciting a Christian prayer to bring the proceedings to an end. At the same time, both Gaobura Khejong and another Tangsa elder were captured on camera, busy, with their backs turned to Lumren, giving interviews to a couple of reporters from the media. Later I found Junglum Hakhun foregoing lunch to give an interview to a press reporter.

This serves to support my claim that at Malugao, the Hakhun wanted to present themselves first and foremost as normal, capable and modern individuals who have learnt the ways of the plains people in terms of how to behave in public, how to handle the press and modern technology, how to conduct and organise big festivals and so on. Moreover, from the professional manner in which the festival was conducted at Malugao, it was not just their ethnic credentials that they sought to establish but also their modernity – a sort of indigenised modernity (Sahlins 1999b) or alternative modernity (Gaonkar 1999, Van Schendel 2011), which included their Baptist Christian present. As Brosius and Polit (2011: 1) remark, their efforts are to be understood “as actions through which they actively seek to create alternative modernities and useable pasts”.

Of course, conformism is always a part of any identity politics – in that sense the Hakhun effort to make their festival look like festivals organised by other communities around them is not surprising. For, “[b]asically, the ideas of those who dominate become the ideas of the dominated” (Babadzan 2000: 131). What is surprising, however, is the implied fact that they have actually already come that far.

They used the festival to show that they can still draw upon what they call their traditional culture; and that they are equally at ease with their new religion and the demands of a modern present (as can be seen from the photos of Junglum Hakhun on page 145). They did this, not only to claim brotherhood with the rest of modern India but also as a sort of declaration that although they could still boost of their uniqueness as an ethnic group, they were not ‘dumb’ or ‘primitive’ as tribal people are assumed to be by most non-tribals.
5.4 Fieldwork in Malugaon and its surroundings

5.4.1 Modern technology and community researchers

One of our young interlocutors in Malugaon, Khothing, who was training to be a Baptist pastor, felt so strongly the need to preserve and present their culture that he had actually joined Junglum’s dance troupe. He saw no contradiction in his roles as a Baptist and as a Hakhun. Khothing Hakhun is also perhaps one of our most skilled language assistants from within the community. Khothing speaks and writes reasonable English and is acutely aware of the need for language documentation and preservation. And since his parents and family were still in Myanmar initially, and he still held a Burmese passport, he would often walk over the hills, across the border to Myanmar. Early on in our project, Khothing was given a small video recorder which he took with him to Myanmar; over the years Khothing has made some amazing recordings of songs and dances of the Tangsa in Myanmar. Later on a laptop was also given to him and he started to write down the stories that he had recorded, both in English translation and in Hakhun, using the Roman script. While doing so, he felt the need to develop an orthography for the Hakhun language. Rather than adopting the Kimsing orthography of the Baptist Bible (which he knew as a trainee Baptist pastor) Khothing and Lumren decided to develop their own for the Hakhun language, which looks demonstrably different, with some technical guidance from Stephen Morey. In consultation with community elders, Khothing has been busily working on writing down the stories and migration history of the Hakhun in the last couple of years.49

Perhaps it is due to the proximity of the urban areas of Ledo and Margherita but Malugaon was also the first Tangsa village where community members themselves took on the job of recording their own festivals and other social events (like house-opening) using handy-cams handled and owned by someone in the village. Almost everyone in Malugaon has a mobile phone, and besides using these gadgets to call others or to listen to music, many also regularly use the inbuilt cameras to take photos of special occasions. Perhaps it is the greater exposure to the media via television and contact with journalists and reporters, but the Gaonbura once even told me that he wanted to invite the National Geographic to make a film on Malugaon!50

Khothing was also the first amongst our Tangsa interlocutors who we could reach over e-mail. But now technology has improved dramatically, even within the years that I have been going to the field, and internet is now so widely available and in use that many of our interlocutors are now also on Facebook. For example, my taxi-driver and assistant Chanwang Nocte, who has also been documenting information about the Tutsa and Nocte communities as well as transcribing in recent years, is very active on Facebook.

49 Khothing has since produced a couple of small books for the Hakhun community, introducing the alphabet and also a book of illustrated short stories (Tangsa Haqkun Likpuq).

50 During my last visit to the field, the Hakhuns were busy dubbing an English film (about Christianity) into Hakhun.
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They would normally use the Roman script to write in Asamiya to me, and in Singpho or some Tangsa language to Stephen Morey. Since the orthography used is informal and variable, often it is not easy to read, but like SMS communication over mobile phones, it is a sure sign that communication can happen over the written medium even if there is no standard script available for use. Recently the Tangsa have also started a Facebook group, and it has some very active members. There was lot of activity there, updates and comments, during the Assembly elections. There are also frequent updates of news related to the community, and often exhortations “for the Tangsa brothers to wake up and fight for their rights before it was too late”.

5.4.2 The paradox of authenticity

There were a few times in Malugaon when we, meaning the project team, were not really sure what was going on. For instance, once Junglum Hakhun (who was supposed to be a Baptist Christian but who did not go to church regularly and who still drank rice-beer and used opium) actually ‘performed’ the rituals of sacrificing a little buffalo on Christmas Eve for my team colleagues to document. His wife and a few others helped him in staging this show, although they were all practising Baptist Christians. He took great pains to explain the significance of each of his actions, emphasising the fact that rituals, when they are done, had to be performed properly and correctly, otherwise they could cause great harm rather than good.

I was not present at that time. When I asked him later about it, Junglum told me that he had done it only at the request of my colleagues and that it was just a show for their benefit and that it had meant nothing to him. He also told me that my colleagues had paid for the buffalo and the small group involved later cooked and ate it. But my colleague Stephen Morey had this to say about that episode: “The sacrifice that we filmed was certainly of a small buffalo. We didn’t pay for it, though we did give gifts to Junglum later. Nor did we ask for this to be done, in fact we didn’t know it would happen, though presumably we would have said earlier something like ‘if there is any ceremony we’d like to film it’.”

The only way to explain these different versions is that by the time I had spoken to Junglum Hakhun, he had, by his own admission, become a more ‘serious’ Baptist Christian; I also found out that he had been told off by a few people, including Lumren Hakhun, for having gone through a non-Christian ritual. Therefore his claim that it was ‘just for show’ was either how he explained that event to himself now or he said it simply for the benefit of all those other people who had disapproved of his actions, or both. But the incident showed clearly that there could be more than one layer of authenticity that can be attributed to the same act, and that time could make events, that were originally passed off as authentic, look more like a performance.

I shall use the term ‘authenticity’ here in the sense that, “authenticity encodes the expectation of truthful representation” (Theodossopoulos 2013: 339), where ‘truthful’ again means ‘genuine’ or close to how it was in earlier times which is again open to further interpretation.51 In any case,

51 Of course, authenticity is a difficult and contested term to work with. As observed by Theodossopoulos (2013: 338) there is always the danger of falling into the “trap of authenticity,” which he defines as “the contradiction emerging from deconstructing [analytically] the authenticity/inauthenticity opposition, while at the same time having to (ethnographically) engage with its meaningfulness on the local level.”
there is a paradox inherent in the issue of ‘authenticity’ of the performance of the rituals described above because a ritual from their pre-Christian past performed by a Hakhun person (Junglum) who had converted to Christianity, can never be ‘authentic’ or ‘genuine’, on the other hand, an ‘authentic’ ritual can never be performed ‘just for show’ by a real practitioner.

But it was also clear to some Tangsa like Aphi Tyanglam (who also relocated the ritual post from the kitchen to the open field ‘just for others to see’ during the festival at Kharangkong, as mentioned in Section 4.2.1) and Junglum Hakhun, that is only the ‘performance of authenticity’ and not authenticity itself which is required in order to display their difference and hence to maintain their ethnic status. So, that is what they offered the audience at festivals, as well as to researchers like us. In other words, my Tangsa interlocutors have understood, in their own ways, that authenticity is just a construction. Having understood that, they have also acquired the skills to present whatever level of authenticity is required for a given purpose (cf. instrumental authenticity, Banks 2013) thereby turning the whole concept on its head.

Although Junglum’s responses above left many questions unanswered, another incident demonstrates that as far as his integrity as a performer went, he would just not make any compromises. One time when I was there, we had arranged that he would come around 3 p.m. one afternoon and sing a part of the long Phon-tu-si song for us to record. He came on time but looked rather troubled and disappeared quickly, telling me that he had to go to the basti first. When he came back a couple of hours later, I asked him why he had kept me waiting for so long. The problem, he told me, was that he had forgotten a line of the song he wanted to sing, so he had gone to ask if anyone in the basti could help him. But nobody could, so he had come back, only to tell me that I should not wait any longer since he would have to go to Myanmar first to find some old man who could fill in the missing line!

Since I do not understand any Hakhun, I would certainly not notice if a line was missing; and in my desire to persuade him to sing for us right away rather than later I told him so. He looked at me, without understanding. How did it matter whether I understood any Hakhun or not; if he was singing a song he had to sing it right. End of discussion! After a lot of coaxing he finally agreed to sing the part he knew; and he went on to sing, from memory, non-stop, for a full 45 minutes.

5.4.3 Hakhuns and Coal India, and my friends in both

One thing I have never been able to work out is that in all these years of my attending so many of their festivals, my Tangsa interlocutors have never asked me to hoist a flag or make a speech, although as already mentioned, they have asked my colleague Stephen often to do the honours, whenever and wherever he has been present. Of course they have often invited me to sit on the

Theodosopoulos’ essay is an excellent overview of the debates surrounding the term. For more on the literature see, for example, Bendix (1997), Handler (1986) and Handler & Linnekin (1984).

In this sense, “authenticity is a form of cultural hybridity of the ‘traditional’ and the ‘modern’” (Longkumer forthcoming).

John Bradley mentions similar experiences in his book Singing Saltwater Country (2012), describing the long negotiations about missing lines in songs.
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stage and feted me with a memento, but I have never been asked to do anything. There are many obvious reasons one could think of for this – that Stephen is a foreigner, that he is a man, or simply that I was just too close to them to be considered a VIP. Perhaps they thought I preferred not to speak (and they were certainly right there). Whatever the reasons, the fact was that I was never asked, and I did not want to embarrass them by asking why not.

But of course my friend, Bolin, in Coal India, as a high official of the company, was an honoured guest, at every event in Malugaon. He kept away, on most occasions, but the Hakhuns knew about my link with Bolin. Of course I tried not to flaunt this connection, but I did not try to hide it either, even while I tried to make it clear that my connection to Bolin was personal, and had nothing to do with the fact that I was working with the Hakhuns or that he was working with Coal India. However, since Bolin had a lot to do with the Gaonbura and the others in the village, there have been occasions when I have asked Bolin for help. In the other direction, when they wanted to get in touch with me, the Gaonbura would often ask Bolin my whereabouts.

A mining engineer by profession, Bolin was a loyal and completely dedicated employee of the Coal India – his whole life seemed to revolve around his job, and what is more, he seemed to love his work, and spent almost all his time, even his weekends, in the mines. Having lived and worked in the area around Ledo populated by so many different ethnic groups, Bolin knew much more about the tribals than one generally expected from an average Assamese. His practical good sense and friendly unimposing manner also helped him to maintain good relations with them.

Since Bolin’s official quarters was very close to Malugaon, his home was a convenient base camp for me whenever I had work in the basti. Of course it was a bit complicated for me to change roles every time I would go up to Malugaon after spending a day at Bolin’s, or vice-versa. For these were two sides of the same story: while Bolin gave me the management and official stand on various relevant issues, I heard the Hakhun side in Malugaon. And often the positions were different: for instance while Bolin told me how much Coal India was doing for the welfare of those living on their hills, the Hakhuns felt it was much too little. While Coal India considered the informal trade in coal that was rampant in Malugaon as theft, the Hakhuns felt that they have every right to take what was on their land. And while the Hakhuns still considered those affected after the mining disaster of the nineties as victims, Coal India felt that they had done more than enough to compensate, and that if they were still complaining then they were just trying to exploit the company. It was hard to take sides. And at times I could also feel the simmering tensions between them. At such times, I thought it best not to ask too many questions.

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54 Fact is, I have never seen a woman – Tangsa or non-Tangsa – being given any official task in any of their events so far.

55 Ironically, although completely integrated into the Assamese society now, Bolin’s family had also had some ethnic roots. And this was an advantage at times; for instance, Bolin had no problems with eating pork or other kinds of animal meat, which most Assamese caste Hindus would hesitate to do.
Chapter 6  Phulbari: Christianity as a way of life

The Bible is to do with sin and going to heaven, but it does not tell you if you will be successful in a
deer-hunt today -- there is no contradiction if one follows the old rules in one’s daily life. As for
choosing partners from the right clans for a marriage – that is to do with family history, not with
religion.........................................................H.K Morang, Nampong

Even if we want to preserve our traditional culture, we cannot go too deep as it would mean getting
into all kinds of contradictions. .................................................Baptist Interlocutor, Phulbari

It was almost dusk when I arrived at Phulbari on the evening of the 23rd December. My hostess,
Timlin, had just got back from somewhere and everyone seemed very busy with various things.
There was also a power-cut. Normally there were only four people -- Timlin, her parents, and her
younger brother, Longrem (who was a graduate but was unemployed) -- living in the house. But
another brother (who was in the army in Manipur) and his wife (who is a teacher at Jairampur),
and the two college-going daughters of a distant aunt had also come visiting for Christmas, and
their house was full. The mother left for the Thursday evening ladies church service soon after at
5 p.m. and I was left chatting with the father and Longrem who told me that the youth wing of
the Phulbari Baptist Church had been very active the whole month of December. They have been
busy cleaning and sprucing up the village, putting up banners and lights besides practising
carols and organising the games and the cultural part of the services.

They had gone ‘carol singing’ till late the previous night and would do the same again that
evening. I decided to join them. It was a group of about twenty young men drawn from various
parts of Phulbari (but not all Tangsa – there were a few Adivasis1 and Wancho too). One of the
young men was dressed as Father Christmas, another had a drum around his neck, yet another
carried a strong and large plastic bag to carry back the rice and other things people would offer
them. They started around 6:30 p.m. A bright hand-held lantern showed them the way. They
began with the houses of the three Adivasi families living at the far end of the Lower basti
followed by the three Nepali families, who attend a Gurkha Church elsewhere. Then they came up
towards the Tangsa basti.

The following routine was repeated at every house. The group would stop before a house, gather
around in a circle in the front courtyard putting the lamp in the middle and start singing carols,
mostly in English but also a few in Hindi (but not in any Tangsa language, although at one
point, one of the group began to drum the Sahpolo beat (and a few others started humming along)
while walking through the tea-gardens between houses). They would sing 4-5 carols at each house
by which time the hosts would come out with the offerings: mostly a plateful of rice and some
money; they then would do a prayer for the well-being of the hosts. The hosts then offered the

1 The village church youth leader is an Adivasi, by which I mean belonging to the Tea Tribe, as defined in
Section 2.3.2. I shall continue to use the term Adivasi over Tea-tribe in this chapter because that is the term
more commonly in use in Phulbari.
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whole group cups of hot tea and some snacks – snacks like home-made pitha (Ass. rice-cakes), biscuits, bhujia (Hin. crispy savouries) etc. Each member of the group would take turns to shake hands with the host and his family and wish them ‘Merry Christmas’. Then they would move to the next house. This went on till well past midnight.

The next morning, as usual, the ladies started with their daily chores early; Timlin’s mother tending her cows and pigs, Timlin, who was very particular about keeping the house spotlessly clean, sweeping and dusting the house, and the sister-in-law, busy in the kitchen. As for the men, only Timlin’s father was up and was cleaning the front yard.

Photos 6-1: The Christmas tree and the decorated Phulbari Baptist Church

There was not much happening in the morning so after having my morning rice, I went for a walk in the village. Lemo Rara (who we met briefly in Chapter 4) was sponsoring the Christmas lunch for the whole village that year, while the Assistant Pastor was financing the New Year’s day lunch. While I was sitting in Lemo’s kitchen, a pig (weighing about 80 kg) was brought in by Timlin’s eldest brother. It would have to be killed and the meat got ready for cooking for the feast the next day. They had killed another smaller pig already the previous day to feed everyone who was helping out and all those who would help to kill the second pig that day. The pork had already been cooked, the vegetable-dish was being cooked in Lemo’s kitchen, the rice was being cooked elsewhere.

I passed by the church on my way back. The inside was being decorated by group of young girls with balloons, plastic flowers and coloured paper (see Photos 6-1), while outside a group of young boys were making a gate with bamboo and ferns to frame the cloth banner announcing Christmas. Around 1 p.m. tea and snacks was taken from Lemo’s house for all the young people working in the church. In the afternoon Timlin’s teacher-colleagues from the private English school where she worked came visiting, on her invitation, and were treated to a full meal. In all that bustle, Timlin missed the evening church service.

Attendance at the evening Church Service on Christmas Eve was not very high. As usual, the preaching was in Nagamese, but lines from the English Bible were also read out. The
congregation said their prayers aloud simultaneously in their own languages with their eyes closed and hands raised. When they sang, they all sang together in Kimsing, the language of the Tangsa Bible and Hymn Book.

On our way back, Timlin’s mother went to collect rice from Lemo’s house to cook the next morning for the Christmas lunch. As is the usual custom, the rice balls would be made by the ladies in their homes and would be brought directly to the church field where the lunch would be served. The rest of the menu would be cooked centrally in the church field where a temporary shed had already been put up.

On Christmas day, the day began even earlier for the ladies as they had to get all the morning chores done before the morning church service. Additionally, rice for the community feast also had to be cooked – Timlin’s mother was doing that over a fire outside, while her sister-in-law was making the morning rice for the family in the kitchen. Timlin was cleaning the house and one of the girls was chopping vegetables while the other was washing clothes. The men were not to be seen. I went around 9 a.m. towards the church and found the all-male-cooking-team eating their morning rice – they had cooked the waste bits of the pig for their morning meal, and would start cooking for lunch soon after. They told me they were up till 1 a.m. the night before playing badminton and had got up again at 4 a.m. to start cooking.

At the church people took their time to come, and the service which was supposed to start at 9:30 started only around 10:30. Attendance was very good. Everyone was dressed in their best – ladies in the traditional Tangsa attire, men mostly in freshly ironed trousers and shirts, and children in smart new dresses. There was a short message, after which the Gaonbura gave a welcome speech. Both the sermon and the singing were fairly routine – there was not much special that was on offer for Christmas. The service got over before noon.

The next event was the sports competitions where many participated. Lunch was served to about 250 people. Invited guests were mainly from neighbouring villages – the Nepali Gaonbura of Bishnupur across the main road as well as Aphu Tyanglam and a Singpho associate of his. The meal was rice balls, salad, papad, salt/chillies/lemon, dal, chicken, pork. Unlike in Kharangkong, where people ate sitting on the ground, in Phulbari everyone was seated on chairs and ate from benches; the furniture belonged to the village Church Committee. The young people served the food. It was around 2 p.m. when the last batch finished eating.

There was a church service again in the evening which I did not attend – I used the time of ‘load-shedding’ (power-cut) to chat with Timlin’s mother in the kitchen where she was cooking the evening meal – she told me about the hardships they had faced in bringing up the children, of their time when they lived in the hills in Manmao, of converting and moving to Phulbari and her past life. Timlin had got many marriage offers in the past but had turned them all down because the men were not Baptists. I found out later that Timlin’s sister-in-law, who is a Bachelor in Theology from a Theological Seminary in Kerala, had read the ‘Message’ at the evening service and that the village youth group had performed some entertaining numbers. At the end of the

2 But many in Phulbari did not understand the Kimsing hymns, as the language of the Ronrang Tangsa people who live in Phulbari is quite different from Kimsing.
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service many of the congregation including Timlin, went to Lemo’s house for a ‘Fellowship’ (a prayer-service) and were asked to stay for dinner, and partake of the heads of the two pigs which were being cooked. Since the 26th December happened to be a Sunday, there was the usual Sunday service the next morning as well, where the year-end expense-and-income accounts for the church were read out.

The village of Phulbari is located on the north bank of the Tirap river, about 10 kilometres from the border between Assam and Arunachal. Phulbari is the only Ronrang Tangsa basti in Assam, there being a few more in Arunachal – Balinong, Jorong and New Lisen close by in the Kharsang area and Mannao, Walaktoi and Longchang a little further away. Almost all Ronrang live in India today, there are hardly any Ronrang left in Myanmar, and almost all of them, except a few families living in New Lisen, are Baptist Christian. Culturally, the Ronrang are a little different from the other Pangwa groups.

Located very close to the busy commercial town of Jagun, Phulbari is very well-connected by public transport. As is clear from Map 6-1 on page 156, Phulbari comprises two parts, Upper and Lower, with almost all the Tangsa families now living in the Upper part. Both parts of Phulbari (as well as a much larger area called Parbatipur) are under one Tangsa (Ronrang) Gaonbura who lives in Upper Phulbari. In this chapter, I wish to introduce the Ronrang people living in Phulbari, in order to give an idea of normal life in the village and to highlight the special relation most villagers have with the village Baptist Church. This will also demonstrate how their lives and lifestyles have changed after conversion to Christianity. In Section 6.3, I shall describe the Shawi-kuh festival that was celebrated in Phulbari in 2010 and discuss Tangsa efforts towards ethnic consolidation, transcending religious differences. I end this chapter with a look at the attitudes of a section of the Assamese with respect to the Tangsa and other ethnic communities living in Assam.

6.1 Life in Phulbari

The establishment of Phulbari: A few Tangsa men had worked in the Ledo area as porters during World War II and after it ended they did not want to go back to the hills and decided to stay somewhere near Tin-mile in the village of Khongman. That entire area had been cleared during the war. But when the Nepalis were settled in that area after the 1950 earthquake (see Fn. 55 on p. 47) the Tangsa moved back towards the hills and established

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3 According to Stephen Morey, the original Ronrang village in Myanmar has been identified, on the old maps, under the name Rara.
4 The language is somewhat different; and they do not have the practice of paying bride-price. The Ronrang also have many war songs which have no equivalents in the other groups. Fish plays a big role in Ronrang (and also in Langching) marriages, and they have many stories about their relationship with tigers. Ronrang festivals were also different (cf. Traditional Systems 2005: 80ff); moreover, they did not always have the Wihu song but have acquired it over time. Hence although the Ronrang are considered to be Pangwa, they are somewhat special in many ways.
5 Khongman/Khongban is marked on the 1927 British map just north of the Tirap river, see Map 2-3. The place was possibly named after a Yongkuk man.
their village in Lower Phulbari in the early 1950s. There were 20-25 families in Phulbari then. Slowly others came down from Manmao and Lisen and the village grew. The basti was given an Assamese name – Phulbari, meaning ‘garden of flowers’ – in 1955-57, by the village elders. According to the present Gaonbura, Bimon Ronrang, his father was among the first ones to come and settle, some 60-70 years ago, in Lower Phulbari, which was then a dense bamboo (kakobah Ass.) forest. Another version of the story came from Onkham Singpho, who lives in Lower Phulbari and has a Singpho father and a Tangsa mother. He claims his father came from Titabor (near Jorhat) and ‘opened’ the Lower Phulbari village in 1950. Gradually most of the Tangsa families moved to (Upper) Phulbari where they live today.

**Photo 6-2: The first convert in Phulbari**

**The arrival of Christianity:** When Phulbari was first established, most of the inhabitants were still following their traditional practices (and a few had become Buddhists). As mentioned in Section 2.5.1, the forefathers of the Tangsa living in Phulbari came into contact with Christianity for the first time during World War II when many Bibles were distributed in this area. A period of acute hardship with food shortages and disease followed the war. Many Ronrang came to settle in Phulbari after World War II. By the time the 1950 earthquake occurred in the area, many were beginning to have doubts about the efficacy of their traditional practices. Many roads had been built during the War, so the area became more accessible and Baptist Christian missionaries came from Nagaland and from Burma.

By the time the village of Phulbari was established, Christianity had already arrived in this area. However, Baptist Christianity came to Phulbari only in the late 60s through the Sema Nagas. A Sema Naga Baptist evangelist, Yellowi Sema, baptised the first person in the village in 1968. Nya-pho, popularly known as Morangkam, is widely acknowledged to be the person mainly responsible for bringing in Christianity to Phulbari. He was amongst the first to come to settle in Phulbari, and first became a Buddhist.

Although Morangkam’s wife and sisters were among the first converts (see Photo 6-2), Morangkam remained Buddhist and converted only in 1973. Although missionary activity

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6 Taken from Souvenir 1997, published on the occasion of the Silver Jubilee of the Phulbari Church.
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started in earnest in the region from around 1972-73, most people in Phulbari converted only in the 1990s (cf. Ronrang 1997).

6.1.1 Village statistics

Phulbari (9-mile, Upper, Natun) has 55 families with a population of 220 (mostly Tangsa (Ronrang) with a few Nocte and Wancho families). Phulbari (Lower, Parbatipur Phulbari) has 60-70 Nepali families, 60-70 Ahom families, 10 families each of Marwari and Bihari, about 30 Adivasi families and 3 Singpho families with a total population of more than 1000. Both parts of Phulbari are part of Parbatipur village. Official records give the population figures for Parbatipur to be 4407 in 2011 and 4280 in 2001.

Map 6-1: Sketch map showing layout of Phulbari village

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7 Morangkam later left the Baptist church and joined the Baptist Revival Sect in 1996. In 2002 he joined the Little Flock, where he remained till he died in 2004.
8 As given to me by the Gaonbura in early 2012.
Nepali and Assamese are the main languages in Phulbari. Although most of the Tangsa living in Phulbari are Ronrang, many of the younger generation prefer to speak in Hindi or in Nepali. This can be explained not only because of the great mix of communities living in Phulbari but also because of the high incidence of intermarriage across communities: for example, there are at least two Nepali, one Sema Naga and one Mizo women married to Ronrang men, and one Wancho man with a Ronrang wife in the village.

Lower Phulbari is closer to Jagun and also older, therefore the Government High School, the Government run Anganwadi (kindergarten) and the Primary and Middle schools are located there. Moreover there are good private schools (run by the Baptists and Presbyterian missionaries) in Jagun and also in the Tangsa village of Lakla, both within striking distance of Phulbari. The nearest primary health centre is in Jagun where there are a few pharmacies too.

Phulbari has a Baptist and a Catholic Church, besides a Buddhist temple, a Hindu temple and a Naamghar; there are 43 Baptist, 15 Catholic, 10-20 Buddhist families and the rest are Hindu. Almost all the Tangsa families in Phulbari are Baptist Christian.

Among the Tangsa, there are 15 persons with regular jobs (including those in the army, many working in the forest department as guards etc) and about 10 graduates, and a single postgraduate. There are no science graduates, no engineers and no doctors as yet. After finishing school, most Ronrang go either to Itanagar (in Arunachal) or to Margherita for further education.

Most Ronrang families living in Phulbari have a tea plantation around their house in Upper Phulbari and some rice fields in Lower Phulbari, which are looked after by Nepali or Adivasi families living in the fields.

There is a brick kiln very close to the Baptist Church in Upper Phulbari. The land belongs to a Ronrang person from Jorong who has given it on lease to a Bihari gentleman who lives at 6-mile. The kiln employs about 50-60 people but they are mostly Biharis. A little colony for the workers had sprung up near it. The Tangsa living in Phulbari have very little to do with it – even their request to the owner that local residents be given a concession when they buy bricks has not been entertained.

Another example of Ronrangs (or residents) being disadvantaged in terms of local employment concerns the dredging of the Tirap river bed. The dredging of the river bed, with JCPs owned by non-Tangsa contractors, to collect stones, continues unabated. Furthermore, stones collected along the river banks by poor Ronrang villagers by standing in the water all day, were bought at very low rates by those contractors and carried away in trucks, for sale as construction material. For all these reasons, many in Phulbari felt that many people were getting rich from projects which were located in Phulbari, but from which the people living in Phulbari gained very little.

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<sup>9</sup> Apparently a Limbu man from the village had sold the land by the river to an Assamese Mr. Phookan who has a mill in 10-mile. And he has created a mountain of boulders by the river dredging them up with JCPs making the river bed very deep, and dangerous. One Bengali man who had gone to fish in that area is supposed to have fallen into a deep well-like hole in the river bed and had died last year.
6.1.2 Three faces of Phulbari

By way of introducing the reader to the people of the village, I present here three of our principal interlocutors, very different from each other but very special in their own ways, in order to give a sense of why we chose Phulbari as a field-work site in the first place.

**Vignette 1:** The smart, handsome and resourceful Lemo Rara was our main contact in Phulbari. Lemo is the present Phulbari GB’s paternal uncle. According to Lemo’s mother, the family had gone to live in the 6-mile area in 1939 and had moved to the Lower basti in 1950. About 50 years of age, Lemo spoke perfect Asamiya, had finished his higher secondary education and could read, write and also speak some English. He was very polite and diplomatic and, much like Manje la Singpho, knew very well how to make the world around him work. He was shrewd and sophisticated, and was often chosen to represent the Tangsa in Assam. Lemo has five daughters and a son. All his children had finished school. In fact, his eldest daughter was the only MA from Phulbari. Lemo’s elder brother Molem who lives in Jorong now, was the first Ronrang graduate. He then went to Bible College, did his Master’s in Theology and had held the post of the Executive Secretary of the TBCA till his retirement in 2011.

Lemo was a very active member of the church, and was perhaps one of the very few people in Phulbari who could really sing from the Tangsa (Kimsing) Hymn Book; he was also a natural leader of his community, who could think and initiate change. For instance, almost the first thing he told us when we met him for the very first time in Phulbari in 2009 was that the Ronrang were going to change the name of their community (and the language they speak) to Rera, since the term Ronrang was a British ‘invention’. Lemo was on very good terms with Aphu Tyanglam as well as with church leaders. He was the Organising Secretary for the Shawi-kuh celebrations that were held at Phulbari in 2010 (see Section 6.3.2). It was not surprising therefore that Lemo was chosen to be one of the three Tangsa members in the Development Council.

**Vignette 2:** In sharp contrast, the illiterate and much older Mohen Ronrang was essentially a ‘misfit’ as he belonged to another era and stood for a world that had almost vanished. Nevertheless he was my most important interlocutor in Phulbari. Although he looked more like 80, he claimed he was more born in 1918 in Lisen. He said he was sure of his age because it was in the year of his birth, that the British had sent his father to work (digging drains) as punishment for performing human sacrifices. Another calculation showed that he had come to Phulbari in 1959 and was born probably around 1925 which sounded more plausible.

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10 6-mile means located at a distance of 6 miles from Lekhapani along the National Highway. Upper Phulbari is approximately at 9-mile.

11 For example, Lemo went to Delhi in 2009 as the sole Tangsa representative in the ULFA pro-talks delegation for talks with the central government, in which the ULFA leaders demanded ‘regional autonomy based on a federal system’ for the northeast. He also represented the Tangsa community in a meeting held in Margherita College in November 2012.
Initially he had owned a lot of land in Phulbari but he gradually sold most of it (in times of illness and also to get his daughters married) and was now classified to be BPL (Below Poverty Line). He had only one *pura* of land left on which he had 80 betel-nut plants. He lived with his second (Nepali) wife in a tiny concrete BPL house given to them by the state. On normal days he still went out to work, either to the forest to collect firewood or to the river to gather stones from the river-bed. So he was happy when our team visited the village because he could earn some extra money as our interlocutor.

Very small in build, he was very fit and could begin to dance or walk to the next village at a moment’s notice. Although a little hard of hearing, his memory was prodigious. He claims he had seen it all, from British times and head-hunting, through many wars and difficult times, to moving to the plains and conversion to Christianity.

When we had first asked him about the songs and dances of the past, he had told us that he had not thought about them for more than forty years since he became a Christian and hence he was badly out of practice. But it did not take him long to get started. Over the years, he has told me many long, complicated and wonderful stories -- ancient stories about where they came from, from the time of the beginning of creation, the migration history of the Ronrang, about their life in the hills, the wars with neighbours, how they used to make gunpowder and salt in olden times; he also sang many different songs and narrated the stories around them and showed us many different dances, as well as demonstrated the different beats of the gongs (*namnu/rajo*); although completely illiterate, he rarely mixed up sequences or got confused.

I asked him once whether he was worried about telling us those old stories, and singing and dancing for us -- in fact doing exactly those things which were actually banned by the Baptist Church. He replied that he knew Jesus would forgive him because he was doing so only because he did not want their past to get completely lost.

**Vignette 3:** Surprisingly, the son -- Kamthoi -- of the person (Morangkam) who brought Baptist Christianity to Phulbari is not a Baptist. Kamthoi (born 1965) has a Nepali wife, and has made a name locally as a singer and entertainer. He joined another congregation called the Little Flock, along with his father. He did not learn music formally but since his father

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12 There were quite a few families classified as BPL also in Kharangkong. But people told me that the tiny concrete structures that were given to BPL families were good enough only for use as shed for animals or as granaries.

13 Referring to an Ao village in Nagaland, Von Stockhausen (2008: 67) writes:

> The population there had been forbidden for a number of decades to sing their traditional songs. Even love-songs were banned on account of their non-Christian origins. Since the ban has been maintained for a long while, there is almost no one left in the village who can still recall parts of the traditional songs. The oral tradition and thus the basis of the traditional culture has literally been hushed up.

14 More details about the migration history of the Ronrangs are included as Appendix X.

15 The Little Flock denomination has its HQ in Dimapur, Nagaland under a Sema Naga Pastor. They believed only in what was written in the Bible and nothing more or less. So they had no churches, they did not celebrate Christmas nor did they observe Good Friday, as they were not mentioned anywhere in the Old or the New Testament (as told to me by Kamthoi).
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was involved with the spread of Baptist Christianity in the village in the early stages, Ao preachers from Nagaland would come and stay in their house when he was a little boy. They would often bring their guitars along and sing together. Kamthoi learnt by watching them play and hearing them sing. He found it easiest to sing in Nepali and in Hindi, then in Assamese and finally in three Tangsa languages at least. He could sing in Morang (because his father was Morang), in Kimsing (his mother was Kimsing), and in Ronrang (because he lives in Phulbari).

Kamthoi represents a typical face of Phulbari today – a person with a tangled Tangsa background, who has married a non-Tangsa and has tried to gain acceptance and recognition from the people of that area – both tribal and non-tribal -- simply on the strength of something universal -- his music. Although he had not finished school, amongst our many Tangsa interlocutors in Assam, he was perhaps the one who understood our project aims (and also my worries about writing a dissertation) the best. He was ‘modern’ in his attitude to life, very modest and soft-spoken, but with a mind of his own. Aware of the fact that his music brings in very little, he helped his wife to rear and sell broiler chickens, while taking care of their tea-gardens and tokou palm plantation. As a member of the Little Flock he was serious about his religious practices, but did not feel the need to convince others to join the group, since he believed that religion was an individual’s personal choice. He was also quite interested in Buddhism, possibly having inherited his curiosity for other religions from his father. In any case, Kamthoi was quite open-minded in his attitude towards religion -- perhaps a symptom of the fact that he was a second generation convert.

6.1.3 A glimpse of the village

The first impression one got of Phulbari was of order. The village was incredibly clean and beautifully laid out: houses with pretty front and back gardens neatly arranged on both sides of a straight road, leading from the national highway at 9-mile all the way to the Baptist Church compound very close to the Tirap river. The houses were well-spaced out with lush green tea gardens and betelnut plantations filling the spaces. Most of the Tangsa houses in Upper Phulbari were of Assam-type (not chang-ghars), built with cement and bricks with asbestos roofs. Of course many still had their kitchen in a chang or a mud hut at the side or back and most houses still had no proper toilets or bathrooms. But some, like the house of revenue collector Shimo Ronrang, not only had proper concrete toilets with running water, but also a sink with running water in the kitchen.

The same is the case in the Ronrang villages of Balinong and Jorong. Bamboo and wood had become increasingly difficult to find as building material, was more expensive and needed more frequent repair -- hence they had decided to not build chang-ghars anymore.

One Assamese interlocutor told me that since bamboo and tokou palm groves have been replaced by tea-cultivation everywhere in the Tirap area, the tribal people who need both bamboo and tokou palm leaves to build their homes would have to either get Assamised and build Assam type houses or move back into Changlang and Burma in search of these raw materials. These thoughts were echoed by a Ronrang elder in Phulbari.
All these features reflected a move towards their wanting to live like plains-people. The concrete Assam-type houses (see Sketch 6-1 below) and way of living of most of the Tangsa in Phulbari was in stark contrast to the picture in Kharangkong. Most of the Ronrangs were educated, and many spoke Assamiya. They lived almost like the plains people around them -- their living rooms had chairs, sofas or couches, many also had dining tables which they used. Most houses had a TV and a refrigerator, cooking-gas connections etc. and many families had a private car or at least a motorcycle. There was not much opium or alcohol addiction to be seen in the village.

Sketch 6-1: A recently built concrete house in Phulbari

In any case, the difference in living standards, cleanliness, education and outlook to life between a Christian Tangsa village like Phulbari and a predominantly non-Christian one like Kharangkong is striking although it was hard to ascertain whether the differences were due to the fact that Phulbari was such a mixed village or because of the proximity to the semi-urban life in Jagun, higher levels of education, economic prosperity or simply because of the positive impact of Christianity amongst the Ronrangs.

The fact that the Ronrangs were among the first among the later Pangwa groups to come into India is borne out by the fact that most Ronrang elders I met were born in India while Aphu and his brother, as well as almost all the Hakhun elders were born in Burma. Moreover, as already mentioned, since they lived in the foothills, the Ronrang, along with the Mossang, were among the earliest amongst the various Pangwa groups, to come into contact with the people in the plains. There were at least three Ronrang kotoky appointed by the British to

17 Also evident in their adopting the very Assamese word Phulbari meaning 'garden of flowers' for their village.
18 (Cf. Ronrang 1997: 90). For an interesting discussion about the connection between Christianity, and the association between material cleanliness and moral uprightness, refer to Chua (unpublished).
Of course the Baptist village of Malugaon was not quite at par with the standards at Phulbari. This could be explained by the fact that Malugaon at its present location exists only for about 10 years.
19 The Assamese word kotoky or kotoki, in the meaning in which it was used by the Ahoms and later by the British roughly translates to, political interpreter. For more, see Mibang 1989. One just needed to be able to
assist in translating and mediating between the administration and the tribal groups. A culture of education had started rather early amongst the Ronrang compared to most of the other Tangsa groups. That is perhaps because the Ronrang had come down to the plains long before the other Pangwa groups, and because they had first settled in the Manmao area, where there were schools from very early on.  

Another factor to explain the difference was that as the only Ronrang village in Assam there was a lot of contact and competition between Phulbari and the older and more prosperous Ronrang villages of Balinong and Jorong in Arunachal. They wished to model Upper Phulbari along the lines of Balinong and Jorong. However the constant competition with the Ronrang in Arunachal, and the comparison with the non-Tangsa inhabitants of Parbatipur village (of which Phulbari is a tiny part) did not make life easier for the Ronrang in Phulbari. As already mentioned, the non-Tangsa population were exploiting the resources in Phulbari without giving the Ronrang their due share. Furthermore, since all the Ronrang villages in Arunachal are still almost purely Ronrang, they have been able to preserve their language much better than the Ronrang in Phulbari who have not being able to keep their language from getting corrupted with Nepali and Asamiya words. In addition, according to my interlocutors, there was a ‘dilution of traditions’ that resulted from marriages across communities in a mixed village like Phulbari.

Therefore many amongst the Ronrang, like Shimo’s son Simon, were convinced that it might be better if they too moved ‘behind the fence’, the allusion being to the Inner Line Regulations which are still in place in the hill state of Arunachal Pradesh. Simon believed that the Tangsa in Arunachal have a better deal, mainly because of the security of land and property—while in Assam they were slowly losing out to the more enterprising Nepalis and Adivasis. However, some Tangsa, like Aphu Tyanglam, argued that they were more secure in Assam at least at the present time, since it was believed that the NSCN leaders had told their ULFA friends not to bother the Tangsa as they were ‘their’ people. The NSCN did collect taxes from the Tangsa but they were not very high compared to the demands made by the ULFA.

sign one’s name and to calculate a bit (up to Cl. III) to be able to become a kotoky. When there was a case in the court the kotokys would be required to be present as interpreters.

Even when Parul Dutta was collecting material for his Tangsa monograph in 1959, a Ronrang person (curiously called Mr. Rifle), was his interpreter (Dutta 1969: Preface). One of the three Ronrang kotokys, Uddi Ronrang, father of two of our interlocutors in Phulbari, had in fact even written a history of the Ronrang people in the 1940s in Asamiya (see Fn. 46 at the end of Section 6.3 for more).

A Base Superintendent (BS) of the army was posted at Manmao and there has been a school in Manmao since the 1950s at least. Of course the schools then were all in Asamiya medium.

In the past those Ronrang villages might not have always been so pure, for example, we have evidence that a few Ronrang families living in Balinong were earlier Thamkok / Chamkok.

This inter-mixing of different communities seems to be a feature of most of the Tangsa villages in Assam.

This will be dealt with in greater detail in the next chapter.

According to a Tangsa informant, Rs. 150 is collected as ‘tax’ per house by the NSCN per year, but in recent years they have been forced to pay both the NSCN factions active in their area.

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6.2 Christianity in Phulbari

6.2.1 A Christian community

Apart from cleanliness, Christianity had brought other advantages to Phulbari too: the Ronrang had access to better education, better health care and a much better support network through the church. Christians have to learn to read, in order to be able to read the Bible and the Hymn book – that forced them to go to school; that also meant that everyone was expected to have some basic education. Moreover, there were some very good private English-medium Christian schools in neighbouring Lakla\(^\text{25}\) where they could send their children. In addition, when they finished the Class X Matriculation exam, they could go to study in a Bible school – that was an additional source of employment for Christians, and an incentive to finish school.

In any case, it was clear that the Ronrang considered it important to educate their children, and have been doing so for quite some time now. Consequently there are many Ronrang with regular jobs, and most Ronrang families seemed reasonably well-off, in contrast to the situation in Kharangkong. The other Ronrang villages in Arunachal were even more so\(^\text{26}\) except for New Lisen which is not Baptist Christian. Therefore, the connection between religion and the living standards of a village was hard to overlook. Not just Bible schools, other Christian organisations, like World Vision, also offered employment to quite a few people from Phulbari. Shimo’s son, Simon, worked for World Vision. Many of the village ladies were employed as teachers or helpers in the many Christian schools in that area.

If Aphu Tyanglam was the most important single factor defining and dictating the conduct of normal life and events in Kharangkong, it was Baptist Christianity around which events and decisions in Phulbari revolved. For the Tangsa in Phulbari, religion had become a part of their lives,\(^\text{27}\) most attended church regularly and participated in church events and activities and paid their tithes on time; and that was the case, not just for the older and middle-aged people but also, for the youth in the village as well.

The Phulbari Baptist Church was planning to celebrate its golden jubilee in 2018 in a grand manner. Building a new church building was part of the plans, since the present Baptist Church in Phulbari was a rather modest structure (see Sketch 6-2 below). There was a service

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\(^\text{25}\) The Tangsa village of Lakla is very much like Phulbari; however they have both Presbyterians and Baptists in the village, and the Tangsa languages are much more in use there than in Phulbari.

\(^\text{26}\) In the Ronrang village of Balinong, for example, there are 70 houses, and 83 families, all Ronrang, of which 42 people are in government service, so it is quite an affluent village.

\(^\text{27}\) Of course, this may sometimes lead to some degree of intolerance. I was told many stories of how marriages could not take place because of difference in denomination or religion, even if the couple belonged to Tangsa clans between whom marriages were allowed. But there were signs that those strict rules were gradually changing – one girl from the village had recently (Dec 2012) got married to a non-Christian Mising boy.
in the church every day of the week except for Monday.\textsuperscript{28} As already mentioned, the incredible language mix during such a church service has to be experienced to be believed.\textsuperscript{29}

\textit{Sketch 6-2: The Assam-type Baptist Church in Phulbari}

The Sunday services were almost always well-attended, and the singing of the congregation very enthusiastic. The discussions ranged from encouraging others to convert, and about setting up a Sunday School facility to making donations and praying that God gave everyone prosperity so that they could all donate larger amounts to the church. Guests were introduced and were invited to say a few words.\textsuperscript{30} Going by the numbers (and this is probably true in many other places of the world as well), the womenfolk in Phulbari seemed to be more serious about church attendance than the men, and also stricter about observances – Shimo Babu’s wife, for instance, kept a fast twice or thrice a week. Ladies generally did not miss church, no matter what other work they might have, and they also sang the loudest.

Besides the regular services, ‘Fellowships’ were often organised at people’s homes when congregation members came together to bless the hosts and prayers were said to ward off future danger or illness; Moreover, there were big occasions like when ‘Baptism’ was done, or when ‘Prabhu Bhoj’ (Ass. Communion) was organised in the church, once every few

\textsuperscript{28} The general services are on Sundays and Wednesdays, the only ladies service is on Thursday, for the youth on Saturday, for mothers on Tuesdays and general (only prayer) service on Friday.

\textsuperscript{29} See Joshi (2007) for a description of ‘less noisy’ Baptist church services amongst the Angami Nagas in Nagaland.

\textsuperscript{30} Unlike in Malugaon, I have been invited to speak a couple of times in the Phulbari church. On one occasion after a service, villagers told me they were unhappy with my Christian linguist colleague Stephen Morey, because when called upon to speak, he used the chance to tell the congregation about the need to preserve their languages. “He did not mention God even once,” the baffled villagers told me, “seemed as if he did not care. But we thought he was Christian.” When I checked this out with Stephen, he said, “I was only doing my job, I am not a priest, how I could I talk about God?”

Nothing special was expected of me because they knew I was not Christian. So they did not even expect me to go to church, although they were happy when I did. My hosts at Phulbari also imagined that as a Hindu that I would not eat beef and tried to avoid cooking it while I was there. They never discussed it with me openly though.
months. A ‘Revival’ group also visited the village, as and when they were invited by the village church. The Revivalists were a group of Baptist Church members who claimed special powers to see visions and to prophecy. They were usually invited by a village congregation in times when many church members stopped going to church. These Revivalists went to people’s houses to motivate them to attend church regularly and in more difficult cases used their special powers of prophesying to foretell what harm might befall the defaulters. Church services were held almost every day during the period of their stay in the village and there was a lot of singing and ‘revivalising’, I was told, although I have never been in Phulbari at such a time.

Besides the Baptists, in Phulbari, some 6-7 families (including that of Kamthoi Mungrey) had joined the Little Flock and they met at one or the other house of a follower for Sunday worship which was conducted in Hindi, English or Asamiya.

6.2.2 The residual beliefs

After a big storm created havoc and caused large scale destruction at the Dihing Patkai Festival grounds in 2011, Timlin’s father, a practising Baptist Christian, explained it to me by saying that the Tipam pooja, which was performed by a Singpho priest, had not been done properly. Many others in Phulbari and elsewhere were of the same opinion, and, as I found out later, this kind of belief was not rare. One other time, when a person from Phulbari died in a road accident, family members told me that very strong winds had begun to blow around their house even before they got the bad news. They sincerely believed that the spirit of the dead man had come to say good bye to them.

Furthermore, some Christians still believed in the effectiveness of curses based on deeds done during their non-Christian past. I was told by a Baptist informant from Balinong that there was still a kind of curse on a family in Phulbari because they had offered human sacrifices in the past. As a consequence of this curse, one of the brothers had lost a young son a few years ago, then another brother had died very suddenly, and the youngest brother had been having a lot of bad luck in recent times, including being kept in custody at the local police station for a fortnight for suspected links with opium dealers.

Furthermore, there seemed to be set procedures in Baptist Christianity to get rid of such curses – through prayer and fasting. Many still believed there were illnesses that could not

31 The Revivalists amongst the Baptists are not to be confused with the Baptist Revival Church, which is a different denomination; for more on the Revival Movement amongst the Angami Nagas, see Joshi (2007: 551 ff).

Some incidents reported to have happened during Revival sessions were disturbing: For instance, it is reported that in 1996 a young Baptist Christian girl, Komal Simai, from the Tikhak basti of New Kamlao in Changlang was burnt to death, in the presence of some senior TBCA church leaders, because one of the ‘Revivalists’ from the village declared Komal to be a witch; cf. Report of the Women’s Independent Enquiry Committee on the New Kamlow Religious Immolation Case, August 1996, in Sharma & Sharma (2006).

32 For more on the Dihing Patkai Festival, see Section 2.4.1.

33 An interlocutor told us that he has performed a ceremony for his ancestors, for the same reasons.
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be cured by modern medicine. There were special Prayer Centres for this purpose where the sick or family members could go and stay to fast and pray.  

From what I understood from discussions with my interlocutors, their older traditional Tangsa belief system was a complete way of life encompassing everything that was needed to make sense of the world around them; but Christianity fell short of that. In the words of one interlocutor, "The Bible is to do with sin and going to heaven, but it does not tell you if you will be successful in a deer-hunt today -- there is no contradiction if one follows the old rules in one’s daily life. As for choosing partners from the right clans for a marriage – that is to do with family history, not with religion." So they still depended on their older beliefs to resolve questions for which their new religion did not give any definite answers. De Maaker’s argument below supports that view.

Conversion, then, involves a process by which people convince themselves that certain assumptions about the superhuman are more persuasive than the ones that they previously held. This does not imply, however, that these previously held ideas become otiose. Rather, explanatory theories that gain ground do so because they merge with ones that preexist. And, until proven wrong or rendered obsolete pre-existing theories must remain valid. (De Maaker 2012: 159)

In that sense, the older belief system even complements the new religious beliefs of the Tangsa in order to give completeness to their world view. This confirms De Maaker’s view “that conversion is best seen in terms of cultural continuity than as a rupture with the past. In many respects, continuity prevails over discontinuity” (De Maaker 2012: 136).

6.3 Culture balancing the old and the new

6.3.1 The conservatism of Christianity

As already mentioned in Section 3.5.2.2, we were told at Malugaon (and also at Phulbari) that when the Tangsa had converted to Baptist Christianity in the 70s and 80s, they were asked to burn their traditional dresses, their heirlooms, their traditional items of war and other accessories. As Mohen told us, they were also asked not to sing their traditional songs.  

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34 A Catholic interlocutor however told me that the condition of many sick people who were brought to the Prayer Center and were advised to fast for many days, worsened considerably after a few days.

35 Mr. H.K. Morang, Nampong, 26.11.2009.

36 Many writers, including von Fürer-Haimendorf, have written about the lack of appreciation and understanding of the early American Baptist missionaries in Nagaland, for the valuable elements in Naga culture. See Kumar (2005: Ch.12) for instance for one account. Government officials such as Hutton and Mills and anthropologists such as Elwin and von Fürer-Haimendorf have accused the American Baptists of demoralising and destroying Naga solidarity by forbidding the joys of drinking and feasting, and the decorations and romance of communal life. However, latter-day American missionaries switched to a more realistic policy which supported preservation of all that was good in the old customs as long as it was not inconsistent with Christian teaching (as reported by Sir Rober Reid, a former British Governor of Assam, in 1944, and stated in Barpujari 1984).

Haksar (2013: 225) also confirms difference in attitude among different Christian denominations: "The Baptist Church allows the Garos to participate in thier traditional drum festival as long as they do not involve themselves in the rites and rituals but in the Khasi Hills, the Presbyterian Church forbids the Khasis from participating in any of the traditional festivals."
Given this, it was very surprising, and also a sign of the change in attitude, that a few Tangsa Baptist pastors were amongst the keenest to assist us in documenting traditional Tangsa life and culture. Some of them have since been very prolific in recording, transcribing and translating their stories and migrations histories. Christian missionaries have been the first ones to try to develop a script for writing in a Tangsa language.\(^\text{37}\) Admittedly it was for the express purpose of translating the Bible. However, the fact remains that the Church literature in Kimsing, Mossang and Juglei languages are almost all that exist at present (at least in India) in terms of written literature of the Tangsa. Therefore, even if Baptist Christianity has been accused of destroying and banning many elements of traditional Tangsa culture, it has actually been instrumental in the preservation of some of the oral languages.\(^\text{38}\)

Not only the pastors but also most of our Tangsa interlocutors were Christian. Many were respected church leaders and community leaders. Most of them have openly supported our efforts, as Mohen Ronrang pointed out, since they were very interested in having some record of their past. Therefore, it is not clear whether the ‘felt’ loss of traditional culture can be attributed only to conversion to Christianity or whether there are other factors as well. For as we have already seen in Kharangkong, the loss has more to do with the change in the Tangsa world which accompanied their move down to the plains and also with their coming in contact with and adoption of a ‘modernised’ life-style. Moreover, as was evident at the Malugaon festival, changes to and ‘loss’ of traditional culture have also occurred because the younger Tangsa are more interested in imitating Western or the pan-Indian Bollywood traditions.

On the other hand, Buddhist Tangsa villages in Assam (like Kamba and Tinsuti-Mullong) have also given up celebrating their traditional festivals altogether ever since they became Buddhist. The story was the same in New Lisen, the only Ronrang village in Arunachal which is not completely Baptist yet. The youngsters in any case, were not interested, the old GB told me, and sang only modern Hindi songs and other songs. They also did not have dance troupes who could present their traditional songs and dances, but the nearby Baptist Ronrang village of Balinong did have their own village dance troupe. In that respect, Baptist Christian villages like Balinong and Phulbari (which hosted the Wihu-kuh celebrations in 2010) had a lot more to show than the Buddhist ones, in terms of concern for their ‘traditions’.

The Executive Secretary of the TBCA at Nongtham listed some more ways in which the Church was helping to preserve ‘traditional culture’, which I reproduce here, in summarised translation, from my field notes

\(^{37}\) Khothing Hakhun, who we have met in the last chapter, is the best example of this.

\(^{38}\) One more ground in support of this view are the comments made by many of our Tangsa interlocutors to the effect that although the Tangsa groups in Myanmar are largely Christian (Baptist), the traditional Tangsa culture is still vibrant and alive there. Even young married women could sing the Shawi-shi (Wihu-song) there contrary to the situation in India. The Tangsa students union in Burma were making Tangsa dresses (in fact, the dresses worn by a section of the ladies at the festival in Malugaon – long skirts with a white stripe in the middle – have been brought from Burma). There is a ‘Yuja’ festival celebrated in Burma where the Tangsa sang and danced, and also sold their traditional dresses, I was told.
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Christians are involved in organising the winter festivals, but of course no rice-beer is allowed. The new generation is trying for the preservation of culture and to revive what is lost. Of course everything related to spirit worship has been abandoned. The TBCA has encouraged Baptists to take the tunes of traditional Tangsa songs, change the words and form new songs keeping the old tunes. The Secretary’s wife was trying to reinvent the traditional dress. She has brought samples of their traditional dress from Myanmar but has modified it a bit (by making the wrapper longer). She started a craft centre in Lakla where she trained Tangsa women to weave wrappers, jackets and scarves with traditional patterns. They are spreading the word about preserving dance and dress even through the Church and want to perform their traditional dances even in their annual conferences. They are trying to preserve and produce other traditional items like bags, hunting equipment and weapons of war, headgear and other items (DoI: 12.01.2011, Nongtham).

A senior TBCA member Wilson Ronrang said that at the TBCA annual meeting they have talked not only about standardising and promoting the Tangsa dress but also about encouraging couples to get married in the traditional dress in church. The motivation to do so, however, was not just concern for ‘traditions’; it was because poor Tangsa, who could not afford to buy western clothes to get married in, were resorting to eloping to get around the problem.

The TBCA was more proactive possibly because it is controlled locally by the Tangsa themselves. As Pruett points out, “the Baptist polity meshes happily with Naga tribal policy. […] Both polities are ‘congregational’ and solidly committed to the concept of local autonomy” (Pruett 1974: 60). In contrast, the Presbyterian Church is dominated by Mizo missionaries and most of the Catholic priests are from outside the state. This explains to a large extent the greater involvement and interest of the Tangsa Baptist Church in preserving their traditions.

Although much more rigid in the beginning, over the years the TBCA have come around to the view that their Christian religion and certain aspects of traditional Tangsa culture can go together. They could not, however, allow the older rituals invoking spirits to be performed

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39 As observed by Ketholenuo Mepfhü-o (unpublished) “One major project of the missionaries was to teach the Nagas the sinfulness of drinking rice beer. They felt that the Naga habit of drinking rice beer was an impediment to them becoming a ‘true Christian’. Abstinence from rice beer was advocated because rice beer was used on various occasions in the Naga society. It was used in rites during festivals which the missionaries defined as ‘devil worship’. The missionaries considered the Naga festivals as occasions where they propitiate the ‘devil’. Missionaries were very emphatic when it came to festivals and drinking. Total abstinence from rice beer, feasts and festivals was required from the believers. Abstinence from both rice beer and festival was made into a condition for Baptism and admittance into the church as a member. Furthermore he reports, abstinence from rice beer was supposed to make, especially the Naga man into a ‘real man’.”

40 Many other interlocutors confirmed this; some of our non-Christian interlocutors however told me that the original Tangsa mukhelo was white with stripes and short (knee-length) and called khesi. But the model created by the TBCA is purple in colour with white stripes and black square patches, taking the design from the Naga khepoh. It is called the khepoh-khesang.

41 Lumren Hakhun also demonstrated the same opinion at Malugaon. This is nothing new and has been seen elsewhere in Africa, see, for instance, Comaroff & Comaroff (1991, 1997). These aspects were also mentioned by the Head of the Baptist Mission Headquarters for the Ao Naga at Impur, Nagaland, when I visited there in November, 2010.
(for example, the *rim-rim* prayer at Wihu), since, as one pastor explained to me, “Now as Christians we believe that there is only one Holy Spirit, hence we cannot allow other spirits.”

“Therefore,” one young Baptist interlocutor from Phulbari told me, “even if we want to preserve our traditional culture, we cannot go too deep as it would mean getting into all kinds of contradictions.” It was interesting that they had figured that much out already. When asked what would be left of their culture if all the rituals were left out, he said, “Song, dance, dress and language will represent our culture”, shortening Chanwang’s list (see Section 4.2.3).

“They could not afford to do more,” he continued, “as some balance with their new religion also had to be maintained.” Nonetheless, he believed that it was possible to achieve such a balance and that striving to achieve it would be good for Tangsa society.

6.3.2 Tangsa Festivals and Baptist Christianity

As mentioned already in Section 3.4.1, the Tangsa in Arunachal have already made the first steps in that direction and had started celebrating the ‘traditional’ Mol/Moh festival in April/May every year, albeit in a modified form. Since many of the Tangsa in Arunachal are Christian, they kill (but do not sacrifice) animals for the feast and they drink tea instead of rice-beer. There is music and dance. As such the Mol festival is a secular festival which fits in with the Christian tradition. It has now become the official annual Tangsa festival (like the Singpho Shapawng Yawng Manau Poi) in the Changlang district.

Perhaps wishing to replicate that in Assam, the people of Phulbari, led by Lemo and Shimo Ronrang and goaded on by Aphu Tyanglam, decided to celebrate Wihu-kuh in their village. In doing so, the Tangsa in Phulbari were going almost the same path as the Garos:

> With the disappearance of the traditional sugsarek religion, sugsarek rituals had lost much of their relevance and appeal. Only in the 1990s, the Christian churches had revived its celebration in ‘a Christian way’, in order to bring Garos from different denominational backgrounds together, and to emphasize their distinct Garo cultural and religious (read: Christian) identity (Bal 2010: 24).

But there were other reasons too; the most important factor was Aphu Tyanglam’s continued request and insistence that Phulbari should host the festival, which Lemo Rara found difficult to turn down; moreover, since the younger generation of Ronrang in Phulbari could hardly speak their language, and had no idea about their traditional dress and customs, some of the village elders felt that organising a festival could be a way to get the youth interested.

While the Ronrang language might remain better preserved in Arunachal, the elders realised that to have a separate identity as Ronrang required more than just language preservation. As already mentioned in Section 6.3.1, the Ronrangs in Arunachal, although practising Baptist Christians, have already realised and started to act upon this, if the well-trained dance troupes from Balinong, or the efforts made by a group of Ronrang leaders to record and write up their

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42 Presbyterian elders in the Juglei Lungvi basti told me that they did not take any interest in the traditional songs and dances any more as they did not think it necessary. Also earlier the people would sing those songs during the Kuk festival when they would drink rice-beer; nowadays since they don’t drink rice-beer anymore that kind of atmosphere with everyone singing and dancing has also disappeared.
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history and traditional systems, are any indications. Phulbari took the cue and agreed to hold the Shawi-kuh festival, the traditional Ronrang winter festival, also on the 5th January 2010.

But it was not easy to agree upon how it would be celebrated: non-Christian Tangsa leaders like Aphu Tyanglam insisted that there could be no festival without animal sacrifice and the consumption of rice-beer; both were, however, forbidden in Baptist Christianity. However, Lemo Rara, used his incredible negotiating skills to make both sides agree that some rice-beer could be brought in from Kharangkong but only for ritual purposes; what is more he succeeded in raising the celebrations at Phulbari from the level of a village festival that it was in Kharangkong, or even a community level one that we saw in Malugaon, to that of a pan-Tangsa festival of the Tangsa in Assam. Aphu Tyanglam, on his part, despatched a couple of members from his ‘kassa party’ to Phulbari a week before the event to train the Phulbari youth to be able to perform their ‘traditional dances’. Consequently, a number of Christian young boys and girls from Phulbari wore traditional dresses and participated in the dances (see Photo 6-3 and also that on the back cover), many for the first time in their lives – Tangsa for a day.

More details of the Phulbari festival is to be found in Barkataki-Ruscheweyh (2013: 247 ff) and hence omitted here. In any case, the Phulbari event, in its scale and composition, had elements from both Tangsa festivals as well as a larger mainstream cultural events, and was a good illustration of an instance of ‘performance of identity’ (Longkumer forthcoming), where identity is taken to mean the cultural expressions of ethnicity, as seen in festivals like this one. Referring to this ‘performance of identity’ among the Nagas, Longkumer argues that in recent times the Nagas are also strategically using and mimicking these ‘exotic’ images to project and represent a distinct national identity through a revitalization of traditional culture. It permits the Nagas to articulate their histories, produce a certain image for external consumption, and participate in the production of their own image.
While the various elements of the festival programme can be thought of, at one level, as fabrications, ‘inventions’ and even manipulations, they are better understood by relating them to the politics of cultural performances at such festivals as well as the politics behind ethnic identity constructions of small communities fighting for recognition. Moreover, since the term Tangsa is itself of recent origin, attempts to give flesh, culturally, to the term must necessarily involve some amount of cultural innovation and reformulation or at least prioritisation or selection of some elements of their older constituent cultural traditions over others. As Roosens notes:

*Ethnic groups are affirming themselves more and more. They promote their own, new cultural identity, even as their old identity is eroded....To be sure, the process of acculturation will continue to cause many cultural differences to fade away. But new cultural differences will be introduced, sometimes in a deliberate manner* (Roosens 1989:9).

So what did they wish to achieve through this process? First, they wished to establish their uniqueness and cultural difference from other groups in the area. That is why it was important to establish their traditional dress, and their traditional songs and dances – to prove cultural difference. However, there was more to it than just construction of a unique pan-Tangsa identity. Let me discuss this in greater detail below.

### 6.3.3 Festivals for consolidation of Tangsa identity

Everything considered, the Shawi-kuh festival celebrated at Phulbari in 2010, was a huge success, because the primary objective, of mobilising all the Tangsa living in remote and far flung villages of Assam under one banner, was realised. According to the President of the Organising Committee the main reason for celebrating the festival in such a big way was that there were many Tangsa families scattered over several villages in the Tirap Transferred Area many of whom had no idea about their traditions and festivals. By celebrating Wihu-kuh/Shawi-kuh together a sense of unity was achieved amongst the Tangsa people of Assam, and they had become aware of their own ‘traditions’. He hoped that, just as the Moh/Mol festival in Arunachal had been given official recognition, they would also succeed in getting a local holiday in Assam on January 5 to celebrate the Kuh festival.43

Thus, at Phulbari, the step from mere construction to politicisation of ethnic identity was made; the Tangsa leaders, led by Lemo Rara, wished to use the festival not only to construct and consolidate a pan-Tangsa identity for the Tangsa living in Assam but also to instrumentalise the ethnic mobilisation of the Tangsa as a strategy to gain political agency and power.

At the end of it all, one message was clear to all my Tangsa interlocutors in Assam who were hitherto so deeply divided along religious, linguistic and also cultural lines: that it was

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43 These developments are similar to changes occurring in Nagaland reported by Aier (2004: 54-5): “the focus of the festivals have shifted from agro base to community base”. She goes on to say: “Today the festivals thus perform the vital role of connecting the present with the past while inculcating the spirit of communal solidarity and cooperation to work towards common goals.”

Some Tangsa leaders like Aphu and Lemo have understood the benefit of having such festivals recorded and also the value of having foreign researchers to document their festivals. I shall say more about this in Appendix I.
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possible to act together as one and present a common unified image to the rest of the world. Compromises needed to be made by everyone, some accommodation was called for, but it was still possible for the Christian Tangsa to project a common identity with the non-Christian Tangsa in Assam.

However, the above analysis begs the question: what was this common Tangsa identity that was projected at Phulbari? The old Tangsa image of drinking rice-beer and sacrificing animals was no longer acceptable, and even if some Tangsa would still like to project that image, the Baptist Christians have rejected that outright. The youth in Phulbari had learnt to dance a few Tangsa dances like the Sahpolo, and perhaps they would be able to recognise a Wihu song when they heard one the next time. Besides this, Tangsaneness amounted to some (still not so clearly established) differences in dress and ornaments, traditional Tangsa food, and in the display of certain material symbols of cultural identity like the ritual altar, the trade-mark Naga hat decorated with wild boar teeth and hornbill feathers, and some Tangsa hand-made artefacts such as baskets and bamboo mugs.

Like in Malugaon, what happened in Phulbari is yet another example of ‘objectification of culture’ (Cohn 1987: 224-254) through which a culture is reified and consciously used in the political mobilization of a community. However, as Cohn and others give examples of, even though culture in this form might not seem to amount to very much, it is roughly in line with what culture or tradition means to many other Indians as well; see Section 1.2.2 and Singer (1959: xiii). So in that sense it was not much different from what could otherwise be expected.

Both the Christian and the non-Christian hosts did put up a united common front to their guests. Fissures erupted, however, almost immediately afterwards, with the Phulbari elders and Baptist church leaders taking strong exception to the free flow of rice beer during the festival,44 abetted by Aphu Tyanglam. Given the unhappiness of the Church leaders, an event in this form would perhaps never be organised again in another Christian village in the future.45 That did not augur well for fostering internal cohesion and unity.

There were other problems too: although the Phulbari event was by far the biggest Tangsa event we have witnessed, and the Sahpolo dance was projected there and at various other fora as the Tangsa dance, it has not been internalised by the population at Phulbari, in the sense that at other village events, like the New Year’s day celebrations, the Sahpolo is not performed. But at Kharangkong, both the Wihu song and the Sahpolo dance are usually performed at other village events, for instance, the Wihu song was sung at the New Year’s Day picnic in the Cholim basti and the Sahpolo was danced at the Republic day picnic in the main Kharangkong basti. Hence while for the Tangsa living in Kharangkong both the Sahpolo and the Wihu song are “sharply tagged as ethnic and employed for moments when ethnicity needs to be performed: festivals, independence days, New Year celebrations and

44 Some of these Baptist Christian leaders however, had no problems with consuming rice-beer at the Wihu kuh festival in Kharangkong.
45 As reported in the Assam Tribune on 08.01.2014, the Wihu-kuh festival was celebrated at the Baptist Christian village of Malugaon on the 5th Jan. 2014, after a gap of 4 years.
moments of political motivation” (Douglas, 2013: 199), that is not the case for the Christian Tangsa of Phulbari (and also at Malugaon).

In any case, just celebrating a festival for a day once a year might not be enough to bring about unity amongst the Tangsa, divided as they are along ethnic, linguistic and also along religious lines. And while returning to the hills to try to rediscover their traditional costumes and also in an effort to try to retrace their migration history might be worthwhile things to do, they cannot help much in their project to construct a pan-Tangsa cultural identity, simply because, in the past the Tangsa tribes were not one but many different groups, many of whom were constantly at war with one another. However, as Karlsson’s observes, claims to peoplehood or nationhood always need to be based on a perception of a shared distinct culture (Karlsson 2001: 28-29). Unless such a shared perception can be created, the inherent differences amongst the different Tangsa groups might prove to be the Achilles’ heel to put paid to all the efforts at pan-Tangsa consolidation.46

Postscript to Chapter 6

6.4 The Assamese in relation to the Tangsa

6.4.1 Unusual data collection methods in Tangsaland

A young Assamese lady lecturer from Ledo has written her M.Phil. Dissertation about the Hakhuns of Malugaon without having visited the village even once. She has depended solely on Mr. Phukan, the Assamese Headmaster of the Malugaon primary school (who we have already met in Section 2.6 and again in Malugaon), to provide her with the data. Mr. Phukan was also the link some journalists and occasional writers based in Ledo and Margherita had to Malugaon since most of them found it hard to trek up the hill to actually visit Malugaon. Sometimes they would also request Gaobura Khejong to visit them in their homes in and around Margherita when they needed some input. Since the Gaonbura had a motorcycle and was often in Margherita for other reasons, he often obliged.

Some wrote occasional pieces on the Tangsa in Asamiya newspapers, based on impressions collected when they visited a Tangsa basti briefly to attend a festival or to attend a wedding. They wanted to tell their readers about the Tangsa, they told me. That was their reason for writing those pieces. Most of these pieces were usually began by describing Tangsa food, houses, clothing and so on, to establish their difference; then went on to give examples of their kindness and hospitality, and all that despite their being neglected and sidelined by the state and by

46Even within a single group history writing can prove to be tricky. To give an example: as mentioned earlier (in Fn. 21) the short migration history of the Ronrang written by Uddi Ronrang in the 1930s was published, with minor corrections of language as a book (Dutta 2011) by our project. However, even though nobody showed much interest in reading or checking the contents before it was published, once it was published, Lemo Rara told us that the book must not be distributed or sold. The reason he gave was that at some point the writer mentions some fights between two Ronrang clans; “since all those clans have converted to Christianity and live in peace with each other today”, Lemo felt no good would come out of reminding them of their bloody past feuds.
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mainstream society. While there was much truth in their allegations, there was a general inclination to draw quick conclusions (which served only to confirm set stereotypical images) in the writings of the non-Tangsa and a tendency to exaggerate or play down (depending on the context) in the writings of the Tangsa.47

“Your style of working is more similar to that of the missionaries,” more than one of our Tangsa interlocutors had told us, referring to the manner in which our project team functioned in the field. It took me a while to understand why we were not bracketed with other researchers. Over the years we learnt that most researchers from the nearby universities have very different ideas about doing field work or collecting field data. They mostly went on very short field trips, staying overnight at the nearest town if absolutely necessary.48 For all these reasons many of my Tangsa informants felt that the local scholars lacked the interest, the sincerity, the integrity and also the perseverance which they saw in the foreign scholars who came to work with them.

I learnt another method of doing fieldwork when I was staying with Manje la Singpho at the Eco Lodge. It was a Tuesday morning when Manje la Singpho’s phone rang: a young researcher from a nearby university was on the line. She introduced herself and said that she was working on the Singphos and was due to present a paper on Friday about Singpho fishing and agricultural implements at a conference in Shillong. As she did not have much time left and would have to leave for Shillong soon, she asked Manje La if he could kindly tell her something about such implements over phone right away!

At some point I wondered if I should try to establish direct contact with researchers at the local universities. Of course our DOBES team had a lot of contact and interaction with the members of the very active Linguistics Department of Gauhati University,49 and many students of linguistics of that department have worked with us in the field from time to time, but we had no real contact with any of the university anthropology departments in Assam. I had been put off trying to establish contact once when I was asked about the size of my research package!50 Another time a senior faculty member had (perhaps jokingly) asked if collaborating with me could get one a free trip to Germany. Apart from Prof. A.C. Bhagabati, no other anthropologist in Assam seemed to be really interested in knowing more about what I was doing in the field.51

47 For example, the village of Kharangkong is supposed to have been established as early as in 1802 according to a Tangsa writer, Komi Nokja, in Borun Bora’s 2012 Asamiya collection. However she gives no reasons for the choice of date, neither do the editors care to verify such details before such articles are published.
48 However, rarely are field visits longer than a week and the standard reason given for this is that college and university teachers can’t get away from their teaching duties at their respective institutions for longer
49 For more, see Appendix I. I have also had contact with the Folklore department in Gauhati University, and also with the Tribal Studies Institute of the Rajiv Gandhi University at Itanagar.
50 I was told research projects are usually understood in terms of the ‘package’, meaning the total amount of money that is available for it; the topic to be researched did not matter as much, I was given to understand.
51 This bothered me, I suppose, because as a ‘local’ it did not feel right to use Guwahati or Dibrugarh as just transit points on a field trip. I would be happier if I could tell someone there what I had done in the field, what I had recorded and what new data I was taking back with me to Europe. I cannot explain why nobody wanted to listen.
But even if others were not interested in my work, I was keen to know what others were doing. I was certain some work on the ethnic communities of the area must be going on in the neighbouring universities. So once, acting on a tip, I called up a young lecturer who was part of a 2-year UGC major research project to write a descriptive grammar of the Tangsa language. When I asked him about the Tangsa languages he said that they believed that there was one Tangsa language and what the Tangsa actually speak were different dialects of that one Tangsa language -- their aim was to discover this standard Tangsa language and write a grammar for it. When I asked him where they had done their fieldwork he could name just a couple of places. In any case, they normally asked Tangsa interlocutors to come to them since they had no time to go to the field as they were busy with their duties at the university, I was curtly informed. When I told him about Stephen Morey and also offered to share our field-data with them if they wished to have it, he said that he knew about Stephen but politely declined the offer to share or discuss the matter further with us. They want to finish their own research and analysis first, so as not to get biased. I decided to leave it at that.

6.4.2 The arrogance of the big brother

As already alluded to in Section 2.6, it is well-documented that the ‘big brother’ attitude of the Assamese towards the smaller communities living in Assam, which some writers term as ‘hegemonic Assamese nationalism’, has caused disillusionment and resentment amongst other groups and have led to their progressive estrangement from Assam leading to its fragmentation (cf. Baruah 2001). It has caused and is still causing a lot of damage: in the words of the (ABSU 1987) for instance, “One of the most responsible factors [sic] as to why the tribals have become alienated from the mainstream of Assam is the attitude of the Assamese people. The Assamese people have never accepted the tribals as part and parcel of the Assamese community.”

Initially the clear sense of difference with which most Assamese I knew and interacted with treated the tribal population had taken me by surprise. The Tangsa, the Singpho, and the others were different -- they were ‘tribal’. But I was not sure what exactly being ‘tribal’ meant in that context till I met a young Assamese photographer on New Year’s Day 2011 in Phulbari. I was trying to gather a few of the nicely-dressed Ronrang ladies for a photo, when he came up to me and suggested that I should ask the Ronrang ladies to take off their watches and sandals before I took the photo!

I couldn’t help telling Aphu when I met him later than evening about the incident. Aphu reacted very calmly – instead of getting angry himself he tried to calm me down, by saying that different people would have different opinions and that there was no point getting agitated if someone had a different opinion from mine. As we sat there talking, he also told me that he believed most Assamese people still thought that the tribals were like monkeys sitting on trees eating bananas. His lack of surprise told me that he had possibly heard similar statements before, his lack of anger pointed possibly at some sort of resignation.

52 If they succeed, Aphu’s dream of someone creating a common Tangsa language, as mentioned in Section 4.5, might come true after all.
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In any case, that was the very first time I had heard him speak out against the Assamese. My other Tangsa informants were even more polite. There were not many occasions when I could get much insight into what they thought of the Assamese. But from their involuntary reactions and some of their accidental comments I could surmise that their general impression was that the Assamese (and the local Babus in the administration), although they might make a cursory show of interest, are not really serious about listening to them, or to make any real effort to get to know more about them.

I could also see good reasons for them to think that way. For, while in Tangsaland, I have often witnessed the absolute arrogance and total disregard for the local people demonstrated by some Assamese administrators and police officers. Most tribal people, on the other hand, treated them like royalty. One year, a young SDO, invited to the Wihu-kuh festival in Kharangkong as the honoured Chief Guest, spent all the time that he was not speaking into the mike to deliver his lecture, talking into his mobile phone, paying scant attention to what was going on around him. And when it was his turn to speak, he exhorted the Tangsa to do better, encouraging them by reminding them that they were not poor, since they were so rich at heart. The words of Kuhn, Kuhn & Galvin (1952) ring true even today: “The city dwellers who often rule the nation... cannot hide their sense of superiority from the people of the outlying regions.”

Other Assamese guests when called upon to speak at the same meeting made it clear that they knew everything better: a senior Assamese journalist spoke with considerable conviction about the connection between the Wihu festival of the Tangsa and the Assamese Bihu festival. The same gentleman had also remarked to me in private that he felt that there was very little difference between animals and birds and ‘those people’, referring to the tribals. And as proof of that he said that one such tribal person had told him that if they read and write and get photographed, their life-span would go down. Hence they did not encourage their children to study.

Mercifully, there were a few redeeming exceptions – like the old retired Sonowal Kachari school-teacher in Kothagaon who had spent all his life trying to educate Tangsa children, and who knew no other way to refer to the Tangsa but in terms of equality and respect. Of course he would not eat anything or drink a drop of water in any Tangsa home, but he wouldn’t in mine either for that matter, being a strict Vaishnavite Hind

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53 Like the Karens in Burma, the doctrine of shared poverty is adhered to for public image, but is not followed in reality by the Tangsa (Kunstadter 1979: 134).
54 See Changmai (2012: 16) for more. Bihu is the major festival of the Assamese and is celebrated three times in a year, once in mid April, another time in mid October and finally in mid January.
55 Van Schendel has usefully coined the term ‘tribalist discourse’, which points to the remarkable resilience of images of tribes based on the “presumption that all tribes share characteristics that are fundamentally different from, even opposite to, those of civilized people. Principal among these are ‘childish’ qualities that betray a lack of socialization: immoderately emotional behaviour (revelry, sensuality, extravagance, cruelty, fear of the supernatural) and naivety (credulity, incapacity to plan for the future)” (Van Schendel 1992: 103).
Chapter 7    The Tangsa in Arunachal:  
                                                                       ... when the Ronrangs moved further down to Jorong 
and Balinong. Slowly the bits of my jigsaw puzzle were beginning to fit.

Everything is much better beyond the fence.  
Simon Ronrang, Phulbari

“The Kuh festival is held on a different date each year. We shall be able to fix the date for this year’s festival at Renuk only after the construction of all the ‘new’ houses in the village is completed,” Lemkhum Mossang told me. “It will be sometime in February. I will keep you informed.” With 30 families, Renuk was one of the largest Mossang bastis in Arunachal and one where more than half the population had not converted to Christianity. I had been told that the traditional festivals were still celebrated in Renuk and was keen to attend the Kuh festival.

Lemkhum Mossang called me later to tell me the date of the festival. He also informed me that the local MLA, who was currently a Minister in the state government, would also be visiting Renuk on the day of the festival. Since the rituals would be performed very early in the morning, and the road between Mannmao and Renuk was very bad, we would have to get there at least by the previous evening. We arranged to go together. Though originally from Renuk basti, businessman Lemkhum was based in Mannmao, which was the administrative headquarters. But since Jairampur, closer to the Assam plains, had better schools he also had another house in Jairampur where his wife and children stayed during term time.

That was not unusual, many other Tangsa living in the hills have a second establishment elsewhere for their children’s education. On the appointed day, I arrived at Lemkhum Mossang’s home in Jairampur in my hired Maruti car. Seeing the small vehicle, Lemkhum looked a little sceptical, but the driver had assured me that he knew that area very well and had gone up and down to Renuk many times in that same car. As we started on our journey and the ramshackle Maruti began to smoke and reek of burnt petrol I was no longer so sure. We managed the 30 kms. to Mannmao in about 2 hours. Then after a brief stop at Lemkhum’s house we started out for Renuk. The 10 kms took us more than an hour to negotiate. We crossed the Ronrang basti of Shingwan on the way. There were at least a couple of places on that narrow and steep road, where I thought we would have to give up. But we made in just as dusk was falling over the very beautiful basti.

The Christians in Renuk were divided into two denominations -- Catholic and Hrega Baptist. A huge Catholic church was being built in the village. Renuk has a Primary and a Middle school, the nearest High school was in Mannmao. Before they settled in Renuk, the Mossangs now living in the basti had lived in Borsatam (which presently has only 9 families), then in Sarasatam; from there they had moved to a basti 3 miles uphill from their present location (where the village was also called Renuk) before coming down to the present location in 1979. This was originally a Ronrang area, and the Mossangs moved in when the Ronrangs moved further down to Jorong and Balinong. Slowly the bits of my jigsaw puzzle were beginning to fit.
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Lemkhum’s brother was the Gaonbura of the village. Two articulate and friendly lady Gaon Panchayat Members were entrusted to show me around, as Lemkhum had to get things ready for the Minister’s visit. I told the ladies how pretty and peaceful I found the village, they didn’t seem too convinced – “Look’s nice if you are visiting here for the first time,” they told me, “but you would get bored very quickly here – this place is so cut off from everywhere else. That is why only school drop-outs are left in Renuk now. Whoever could get away have left the village and gone to bigger places.” There was no mobile phone connectivity in Renuk but there were 3 wireless land line phones installed in the homes of three village leaders. That was their only contact with the world outside.

First we went to the brand new house of the Circle Officer (CO) of the Manmao Circle, where they had arranged for me to stay. Wathai Mossang, the CO, was a young man; he had cleared the state civil service exams only a few years back. His elderly parents lived in the adjacent chang. His quiet and reserved father had studied till Class VII. In 1955, he had become a teacher at the Primary school in Reema, 7 kms away. But it was a dangerous and tortuous trip to Reema everyday through dense forests in those days, he told me. Wathai’s grandfather had performed the last Nga-tang (Great Buffalo sacrifice) in the family in 1966 when six buffaloes were sacrificed.

That implied that Wathai’s ancestors must have been rich and powerful Lowangs (village chiefs) in the past. Continuing the tradition, the Kuh rituals would be performed in Wathai’s parents’ house the next morning and they invited me to attend. But Wathai’s father did not know how to do the rim-rim prayer. There were only two people left in the village who still knew how to do that. Wathai’s father’s elder brother, the oldest person in the village, was one of them and would come and do the rituals in their house. Wathai’s wife was Tangsa but belonged to the Longchang community, and hence she did not know much about the Kuh festival. Wathai and his wife had recently embraced Rangfraism and one of the rooms of their new house also served as the Rangfraa temple of the village. His parents had also become Rangfraites that year. How could they then be doing all the rituals as before, I asked? No problem, I was told. Rangfraism was only a new name for the traditional Tangsa practices – nothing had changed.

There was a lot of activity in the village that evening. People were preparing for the festival as well as for the Minister’s visit. Every house had guests – mostly people from the village who were working elsewhere but had come home for the festival, or friends and relatives from other villages. After finishing their tasks, the elders in my host’s home gathered around the fire. At some point, Wathai’s mother and a nephew started to sing the Wihu song. They continued to sing till late into the night. It was spontaneous, and felt just right.

Hardly had we gone to bed that it started to rain – very quickly it got stronger, and it did not stop raining the whole night. The lightning, the loud thunder-bursts and the sound of rain...
splashing onto the new tin roof of the house kept me awake all night. In the morning, it was
impossible to walk the 10 steps or so from Wathai’s house to his parents’. I slipped and slid, and
got there, completely muddy, but on time to record the morning’s proceedings. It was not even 5
a.m. – they had started even earlier than usual to be finished and ready by the time the Minister
arrived. The rituals at the house post in the kitchen were similar to what I had seen Aphu do in
Kharangkong. A pig had been sacrificed and was being prepared to be cooked. “No way for
anyone to come here in this rain this morning,” Lemkhum said, when I saw him later.

“Very true. Will the Minister come?” I asked.

“He will manage – he has a sturdy 4-wheel drive all-weather vehicle. Maybe he will be a little
delayed, but he will come. However, many other Tangsa who had also said they would come will
probably not be able to, because of the weather.”

When the rain stopped around 8 in the morning, they hastily redid the bamboo gate that had been
erected at the entrance to the village to welcome the Minister, which had been shredded by the
wind and rain. When the Minister (who was not Mossang), his wife and their entourage arrived
around 10:30 a.m. the sun was up and things were looking up again. I had met the Minister and
his wife a couple of times before. The Minister was a Baptist, how could he participate in a
traditional festival? “So what, so am I”, said Lemkhum. “Our community festivals have nothing
do with our religion.” The Minister’s wife was Assamese. She had converted and become
Baptist after marriage, but had left the Baptist Church a few years back to found her ‘own’ church
in Jairampur; more about this later.

I was not sure what would happen when the Minister arrived – guessing from my experiences in
Assam, I imagined there would be a public meeting, with many speeches. But as it turned out, the
Minister visited the houses of some of the village elders in turn, and at every stop chatted with his
hosts, asked after the health and well-being of the elders, discussed their problems, drank some
rice-beer and ate some roasted meat (and also made gifts in cash to some families) before moving
on. There was no big formality, people were not bending over backwards to please the Minister,
they looked pleased that he had come to visit them on the day of their festival – that was all. This
was rather different from how a Minister was treated or behaved in Assam, and it was not even
election time! The hierarchies, which are so present in everything in Assam, were less obvious
there. Only two vehicles and just a couple of guards had accompanied the minister on the trip, --
that was unthinkable in Assam.

Around mid-day the whole village gathered at the lam-roeh, a place at the top of a hill, a sort of
village crossroads, where another ritual was done. The ladies were dressed in their traditional
best, most carried the special ritual baskets on their backs. Many were humming the Wihu song,
but only in snatches. The ones who really knew how to sing the Wihu song were all dead.

3 I had to remind myself of what I had seen during my visit to the Minister’s official residence in the state
capital in Itanagar some time back to be able to make sense of what I was seeing. Many Tangsa, mostly
students who were studying in Itanagar but also people who happened to come to Itanagar for some work,
actually stayed in the Minister’s house, for days or months on end. As the elected representative of his
people, as well as the only Tangsa minister in the government, he was expected to take care of the Tangsa
who came to Itanagar in just the same way as the Tangsa would stay with a clan relative when he visits some
other place. These unwritten rules were not official but were somehow understood and adhered to.
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Lemkhum told me. Everybody acknowledged the Minister’s presence, but celebrating the festival was what it was all about that day. The Minister made a short speech, wishing everyone on the occasion. That was all. No fancy garlands, no long speeches before or after.

As the afternoon sun got weaker, my spirits also began to drop. I realised I had a big problem – how would I go back? There was no way my little Maruti taxi could take me back that day. And given the amount of rain that had fallen in the night, I would have to wait for days, till the roads were dry enough. The Minister came to my rescue. He was going to drive back himself, he told me, and I was welcome to join them. I gratefully accepted his offer. The trip back was an absolute roller-coaster ride, but we arrived safely in Jairampur. I was completely worn out by the time we arrived, but apparently not the Minister, for he offered to then come with me all the way to Lakla, to honour our invitation to visit the documentation workshop we were currently holding there. From my previous meetings with the Minister, I knew that he was interested and cared about preservation of Tangsa culture and tradition. He had already extended a lot of help to facilitate my work. But I had not expected so much.

In this chapter the focus is on the Tangsa living in Arunachal Pradesh. But I will restrict myself to discussing only those aspects which are relevant to understanding the difference between the Tangsa situation in Arunachal (in terms of their ways of life, religion and how they celebrate their festivals) and what has been described in the preceding chapters with regard to the Tangsa in Assam. I begin with a description of life for some Tangsa in the urban as well as rural areas of Changlang, followed by a discussion of the much greater diversity in religion, prevalent amongst the Tangsa, and the many denominations amongst the Christian Tangsa. In Section 7.3, I will describe and discuss some Tangsa festivals which I attended in Changlang. In the next section, some economic benefits as well as political problems faced by the Tangsa living in Arunachal as well as some issues which stand in the way of forging a pan-Tangsa unified face will be discussed. I end with describing how my visit to some remote areas as well as to the state capital in Arunachal first made me see black, but eventually helped me find clarity in and closure to my work with the Tangsa. For the location of most of the places named in this chapter, please refer to Map 2-4 (on page 40) as well as to the larger map of the whole area, Map 0-2 (on page xvi). For the names of the new Tangsa groups mentioned in this chapter, I refer to Figure 3-1 on page 69.

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For more on the documentation workshop, see Appendix I.

Approximate distances between some of the larger named places: Margherita to Jagun: 30 kms.; Margherita to Changlang: 40kms; Jagun to Jairampur (NH 153): 14 kms; Jairampur to Nampong: 20 kms; Jairampur to Manmao: 40 kms.
The sparsely populated and densely forested hilly frontier northeast Indian state of Arunachal Pradesh is home to more than a hundred recognised ethnic groups. Part of the excluded and semi-excluded areas in British times, this area was known as the Frontier Tracts and administered by British officials from Assam. It was renamed NEFA (North-East Frontier Agency) and was placed under the administration of the Union Government in 1948. It became a Union Territory in January 20, 1972, and a full-fledged state of the Indian union on February 20, 1987. The tribal groups account for about two thirds of population and hence it is a tribal majority state. As such, special land ownership rules are in force there which imply that only tribal people can buy and own land in the state.

I shall concentrate only on the tiny part of the state of Arunachal in the southern half of the Changlang district where the Tangsa live and where I worked. Although there are increasing numbers of temporary migrant workers (like Muslim migrant workers working in construction sites and brick-kilns), about 200 families of Tibetan refugees and a huge number of Buddhist Chakma refugees from Bangladesh were settled in the Miao-Kharsang area in the mid 1960s, that area still has a very low population density. Hence, a lot of land is still under forest cover and the existing villages are well spaced out. Although a very impressive programme of road building is currently in progress in Arunachal, large parts of Arunachal are still not connected by road, and even where they exist, their condition is often very bad. Moreover, given the high level of insurgent activity in the area, there is a massive army presence there, and many check gates.

### 7.1 Changlang in the tribal state of Arunachal

The Tangsa are numerically very small compared to the many other bigger groups living in Arunachal Pradesh. But in the district of Changlang where almost all the Tangsa live, they are the biggest group. Within Changlang, they are concentrated in three areas – Kharsang-Miao, Nampong-Manmao and Changlang town, the district capital, and hence have control over four of the five Assembly constituencies of the district (the fifth constituency, 6 It has a total population of roughly 1.4 million (as of 2011) in an area of 84,000 km², amounting to a population density of about 17 km⁻² (far below the Indian average of 370 km⁻²).


8 In 1980, the Chakma population in the district was about 15,000 (cf. Gazetteer 1980: 92). More recent figures for Arunachal are not available, although more than 175,000 Chakmas live in the states of Mizoram and Tripura in Northeast India according to the 2011 Census. For more on the Chakma problem, see Prasad (2008).

9 Lekhapani is the headquarters of the 25 Sector of Assam Rifles, a paramilitary force, under the command of a Brigadier. Two units of the 25 Sector of Assam Rifles are based at Jairampur and on the way to Changlang town, both headed by a colonel (Commandant) as the Commanding Officer. To read more about how the Indian government asserts it presence and exerts its control in such border areas, read Farrelly (2013).

10 According to the 2011 Census Changlang district has a population of 147,951. Though the community figures were not available, the Tangsa is the single biggest tribal community in Changlang, followed by the Singpho and the Tutsa groups.
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Bordumsa, is a predominantly Singpho area). The Tangsa have the Singpho as their immediate neighbours to the north while the Tutsa, Nocte and Wancho communities live in the area bordering the Tangsa area to the south-west.

Contrary to the picture I had seen in Assam, the Tangsa in Arunachal Pradesh wield administrative and political power in Changlang – educated Tangsa professionals are in charge not only of running the local administration but also their hospitals, schools and colleges (cf. Bhagabati 2004b: 183). Education in Arunachal is largely imparted in English and in Hindi. Presence of Christian missionaries (of various denominations) and Hindu activists (like those working for the Vivekananda Kendra Vidyalaya (VKV) schools and rural welfare projects, such as Arunjyoti) in the area automatically imply that there are some (but not enough) private educational and health facilities available.

The Kharsang area of Changlang is in the plains. The Ronrang villages of Balinong and Jorong located there replicated the Upper Phulbari model – well spaced out houses, arranged along a central link road. My wish to visit all the Ronrang villages in India at least once took me to New Lisen and also up the hills to Manmao, to the few Ronrang bastis there. Manmao town looked really sleepy, the town centre did not have more than five shops, and most of them looked permanently closed. Nampong, the other hill town on the Ledo (Stilwell) road close to Pangsaon the Indo-Burmese border was not any bigger. There are several bastis perched on the hill slopes near these towns, many hard to reach. Although there are exceptions, many Tangsa villages in Changlang follow the pattern of Balinong and Jorong: one village, one tribe, one language, and often one religion. Many of the Arunachali bastis are very large, with population exceeding a thousand.

With an aim to contain the NSCN activity, the Armed Forces (Special Powers) Act\(^\text{11}\) is in force in the two easternmost ‘problem’ districts of Tirap and Changlang. So it is more difficult for outsiders to get permission to enter those districts. Even then, it was known that the Namchik gate leading to Kharsang and Miao was easier to negotiate than the gate at Jairampur (on way to Manmao and Nampong) because of the large army base camp at Jairampur.

There were as many as three army gates on way to Changlang town, the district HQs of Changlang district. The 40 kms from Margherita can take up to three hours to negotiate. Dense forests alternate with tea gardens and orange plantations all along the way. At one point on the roadside, there is a quaint twin temple – one with a statue of the Hindu God Shiva; the other with a statue of Rangfraa, the ‘new’ Tangsa god (see Section 7.2). Although not as small as Manmao or Nampong, the difference of Changlang town\(^\text{12}\) from the busy

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\(^{11}\) The Armed Forces (Special Powers) Act (AFSPA) is an Act of the Parliament of India (passed on 11 Sept. 1958) granting special powers to the Indian Armed Forces in what the act terms as “disturbed areas”. In 1991, the districts of Tirap and Changlang were put on in the “disturbed” list as a reaction to intensified activity by the two factions of the Nationalist Socialist Council. The district of Longding, which was carved out of Tirap, was added to the “disturbed” list in 2012. In addition, AFSPA already applied to areas falling within 20-kilometre radius in Arunachal Pradesh bordering Assam.

\(^{12}\) Officially the population figure was 6,469 in 2001 although unofficially I was told that 20-30,000 people live in the town area which is managed by an Urban Council.
bustling plains town of Margherita is palpable. It is small and quiet, and very spread out with lots of offices and government buildings concentrated on one side and a huge army base on the other, ostensibly to contain the growing insurgent activity and to protect the border region. Many small bastis are perched on the hills around with a river flowing down the middle. These bastis extend all the way to the Indo-Myanmar border and beyond.

7.1.2 The Tangsa in Changlang
The Tangsa in Arunachal belong to a much more diverse set of tribes than in Assam. And their break-up is also different. Although the Moklum or Longchang Tangsa are hard to find in Assam, they are amongst the largest Tangsa groups in India. Even amongst the Pangwa groups, the Mossang and the Juglei are by far the largest in Arunachal, but not many from either of those groups live in Assam. I shall discuss the diverse religious situation in the next section.

Economically too, the variation was much greater. There were a handful of wealthy and well-heeled Tangsa politicians and businessmen who could afford to send their children outside the region for higher studies, and who had travelled to Europe and America for business and for pleasure. Road building contracts, tea-gardens and political clout had made a few Tangsa families very rich. They were followed by a larger group of educated and salaried middle class of professionals, teachers and administrators. I met self-assured and well-to-do Tangsa doctors and engineers, teachers, lawyers and writers, civil servants and administrators, whose lives and concerns did not seem very different from middle-class Indians elsewhere. I also met a few educated and capable Tangsa women who were leaders in their own right – politicians, principals of high schools and activists. The picture was very different from the one I had seen amongst the Tangsa in Assam.

Those were the people one met in the towns and larger villages that were connected by road. The conditions for the Tangsa living in remote and rather inaccessible bastis in the hills of Changlang, however, were very different. They were still swidden cultivators and hunters, many had to walk for hours, sometimes even days, through forest trails to get to the nearest

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13 The people of Changlang town depended on Margherita for almost everything but curiously most people from Margherita seemed to know nothing about Changlang town, except that they had heard it was a dangerous place.

14 At the house of my host in Changlang town, there was running water and electricity, computers, internet and a land telephone, sturdy cars and the usual modern amenities. People in the Changlang town area seemed to lead reasonably comfortable lives, even though physically it was a world completely cut off from everywhere else.

15 As evident elsewhere in the northeast (cf. Karlsson 2011) the differences in wealth and differential access to education and resources have also led to the formation of classes within Tangsa society in Arunachal, but that is not so evident among the Tangsa in Assam. For more on the apparent contradictions of globalisation in Arunachal, see Nayak 2011.

16 I once met an old man who had moved with one of his grand-daughters from an interior village (which had no access to health care) to the side of the nearest road. They had simply built a small bamboo chang by the roadside and were living there -- all they had, as far as I could see, were a few pots and pans, a sack of rice, a kettle, a couple of plastic mats and a few pieces of clothing. For a discussion of these differences between the educated and well-to-do section of society and those living in the remote villages, see Borthakur (2006).
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town; education and health care had still not reached many parts. In Assam, one did not find many Tangsa living in bigger towns. But most of the bastis in Assam were not so remote. Hence, the contrast to Assam was very great, in both directions. Moreover, although many of the bastis in Arunachal look so well-established today, they were set up not so very long ago – Balinong, for instance, was established as recently as in the seventies. The stories I was told of the conditions prevalent in the area when they first came to ‘open’ the village, bears evidence of how quickly things have changed on the ground as well as in people’s lives and ways of living.

7.2 The Question of Religion

From the time the erstwhile North East Frontier Agency (NEFA) came into existence,\(^17\) efforts had been made to obstruct the activities of Baptist and other missionaries who had been active in different parts of Arunachal. Soon after Arunachal became a state, the Arunachal Pradesh Freedom of Religion Act, 1978 was promulgated ‘to protect those who have faith in their own tradition’ and to provide legal and constitutional protection against conversion by force, fraud or inducement. In other words, it was aimed to stop conversion to Christianity, and I was told of many instances when the first Baptist evangelists, missionaries and the first converts were arrested, tortured and even forced to revert back to their original faith during the initial years of missionary activity in the hills of Arunachal Pradesh (Ronrang 1997).

But all that stopped some time ago, and today, many of the politicians and higher-ranking officers in government are Christian. In any case, most of the Pangwa groups I met in Assam and in the Kharsang-Jairampur-Manmao were Christian. Of course, being Christian did not mean one thing and sometimes there were acute denominational differences between the groups (I will discuss this in the next section). There were also some Buddhists mostly amongst the Tikhak and Yongkuk groups both in Assam and in Arunachal.\(^18\) Among the Longchang and the Moklum, some had embraced Christianity, but a majority from these two groups had not converted and still followed their older practices, or had embraced Rangfraism.

I shall not go into Rangfraism in detail as it has no followers amongst the Tangsa in Assam.\(^19\) The Rangfraa Faith Promotion Society (RFPS) was established in the year 1995. Started by a group of educated Tangsa professionals, Rangfraism is clearly a reaction to the ever increasing wave of Tangsa conversion to Christianity (cf. Bhagabati & Chaudhuri 2008: 21). That group saw the danger of losing their traditional culture and values if Christian conversion was allowed to spread. However, they also saw that their traditional belief system had become partially obsolete and redundant, with change in their life-styles and access to

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\(^17\) Already in 1953 the Union cabinet had taken steps to ban the entry of Christianity to Arunachal Pradesh (Ronrang 1997: 26). For a general introduction to the spread of Christianity in Arunachal, read Chaudhuri (2013).

\(^18\) I shall say very little about the Buddhist Tangsa in India; for more about them see Simai (2008) and the work of Paul Hastie (forthcoming).

\(^19\) For more details, see Barkataki-Ruscheweyh (to appear).
hospitals and modern technology. So, encouraged by their Hindu activist friends, the group went about systematically selecting and modifying their older practices, and incorporating new elements from other religions so that Rangfraism can be described as a reformed, systematised and institutionalised form of the traditional belief system of the Tangsa. Today there are about 70 Rangfraa temples in Changlang and the number of followers is going up amongst the Tangsa, as well as the Tutsa who live in the area bordering the districts of Changlang and Tirap.

The rule ‘one village - one-ethnic group - one language – one religion’ followed by most of the Tangsa bastis in Arunachal, implied that when groups from within a village community decided to convert, they often moved away and founded a new village, as I saw happen in the Kantang basti (see Fn. 27 on p. 189). Moreover, when members of the same tribe are divided by religion, then relations between them can sometimes become somewhat formal and strained, as was the case between the Buddhist Ronrang basti of New Lisen and the neighbouring Baptist Ronrang villages of Jorong and Balinong. In any case, the religious diversity amongst the Tangsa in Arunachal is much greater than that in Assam, and this is true even if one restricted attention just to the Christian Tangsa; more about them below.

A Rangfraite elder, in the Moklum village of Kuttum where there are also many Baptists, claimed that Rangfraism and Christianity were more or less the same: both had done away with the bad spirits and with sacrifices, both ask their followers to keep their houses clean, both ask their followers to pray to God and fast when they are ill, and so on. There was no more trouble and expenditure in having to please the wicked spirits – if they were ill they prayed, and if that didn’t work, they went to hospital, just like the Christians.

Fractured Christianity amongst the Arunachali Tangsa

The lines along which Christianity spread amongst the Tangsa is very similar to that described by De Maaker (2012) amongst the Garo community in Meghalaya. Most Tangsa who had first converted in the 1960s and 70s had become Baptists as the other groups did not exist then. As already mentioned in Section 2.5.1, the Tangsa Baptist Churches in Assam and Changlang are under the Tangsa Baptist Church Association (TBCA) which had its HQ in Nongtham. Today there are 90 churches and about 10,000 members in Changlang District under the TBCA. It has the largest number of members among the different denominations in the Changlang district.

The New Testament was translated into Kimsing and is officially the Bible that is supposed to be used in the churches under the TBCA. But, as a matter of fact, we have never seen it in use anywhere. One Baptist pastor told us that the Kimsing Bible was ‘useless’. As already seen in Phulbari, most Tangsa do not understand Kimsing well. Denying this, the Executive Secretary of the TBCA, himself a Tangsa (Mossang), claimed that most Tangsa do understand Kimsing, as it was a sort of lingua franca amongst the Tangsa (Tangshang) in

20 Therefore, the main reason why the Baptists adopted Kimsing language of their Tangsa Bible is to do with the fact that the translator, Mr. Y.M Thungwa Yanger, was a Kimsing.
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Myanmar. The TBCA, he informed me, has always resisted division on the basis of language. However, even the former Executive Secretary of the TBCA, Mr. Molem Ronrang, admits that there are not many Kimsing speakers in India. “[S]till many have yet to master over this language. [...] Even the educated people hardly read the Tangsa New Testament” (Ronrang 1997: 117).

In any case, it is a fact that while there are only a few hundred Kimsing in India there are a few thousand Tangsa belonging to one of the four tribes Juglei, Ngaimong, Hacheng and Sangwal, whose languages were very close to each other. The Presbyterian movement amongst the Tangsa was started by a splinter group from the TBCA in 1988 whose members were not happy with the TBCA leadership and wanted to produce their own Bible in the Juglei language rather than use the Kimsing one. Later in 1991 they were adopted by the Mizo Presbyterian Synod from Aizawl and is now administered through a Field Mission run by Mizo missionaries in Khasan near Kharsang. They have already produced a Hymn book and some Gospels in the Juglei language. For the Baptist take on this issue, see Ronrang (1997: 110-11).

In 1991 another section of the Mossangs broke away from the TBCA because it would not allow them to have a Mossang Bible. The TBCA again rejected their demand in the interests of unity, cohesion and better communication amongst the church members. Since the Mossangs are probably the largest amongst the Pangwa groups in India, they did not accept this and took the help of the Sema Naga church to form a Hewa (Naga) Baptist Church Association (HBCA) where services are conducted in Mossang! The Christian Revival Church (CRC) is also a splinter group of the HBCA, parting ways due to doctrinal differences (cf. Ronrang 1997: 111-13).

Meanwhile, other divisions are growing: the Moklum and the Longchang Baptists are now threatening to break away from the TBCA if they did not get Bibles in their own languages. Given the fact that Protestant Christianity encourages the use of local languages, these developments ought to be welcomed; on the other hand, since there are more than 35 such Tangsa languages in India, and many with not more than a handful of speakers, it did not seem wise to allow the idea to go too far. In any case, the Baptist Tangsa insistence that all

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21 Technically speaking, it is Shanke, which is lexically very similar to Kimsing, that is the language of wider communication among the Tangshang in Burma.

22 According to the linguistic analysis done by our team, these four languages form a clear subgroup within Pangwa and are mutually intelligible, see Figure 3-1. However the fact remains that the Juglei Bible doesn’t solve the problem for the Ronrang any more than a Kimsing one does.

23 Besides the issue over language, differences over questions of leadership within the TBCA were also cited by many as a reason for a section led by Rev. Ranjung Jugli leaving the Baptist church.

24 Presbyterian missionaries came to Mizoram from Wales in 1894 (the last went back in 1968). The Assam and Arunachal Pradesh (east) Mission started in 1991 at Lakla and today they have 28 local churches and 3227 members in their field mission. The field office moved to Khasan from Lakla in 1994.

25 In fact there seem to be a few Mossangs in almost all Christian denominations (including Catholics) that exist in Tangsaland.
Tangsa use the Kimsing Bible even if they do not understand the language, seems to go against a basic *raison d’être* of Protestant Christianity.

Photos 7-1: The Catholic Church at Wagun Ponthai village

The Catholic Tangsa use whichever Bibles they please. Even otherwise the Catholics appeared to be more permissive about everything in general. However Catholicism requires their priests to be celibate which makes the job not very attractive (to the Tangsa). I did not meet any Catholic Tangsa in Assam but from those I met in Arunachal I was told that they converted because they were not required to pay tithes; on the contrary, the church helped them out in times of need. Also the Catholic Church financed other activities like establishing schools and hospitals. Joshi (2007: 550) cites similar reasons for the Angami Nagas embracing the Catholic faith.

An unstated reason for preferring to become Catholic rather than Baptist amongst my Tangsa interlocutors is that the Catholics were not as strict as the Baptists about abstinence from alcohol.26 Although Joshi’s observation that “In fact in Nagaland the Baptists have always opposed any accommodation with customary beliefs and practices”, might not ring true amongst some of the present lot of Baptist Tangsa leaders, it is true that generally, the Catholics have been more accommodating with respect to the older traditions of the Tangsa. Joshi (2007: 551) believes that this has to do with the Vatican II declaration that as far as possible ‘native’ traditions should be respected within Catholicism. A newly constructed church in Wagun Ponthai village had many Tangsa (but obviously non-Christian) symbols like the hornbill feathers and the drums sculpted out in concrete on the outer walls (see Photo 7-1).

The reasons why the Tangsa join one or the other of the smaller denominations seemed to vary. One senior member of Christian Revival Church (CRC) in Tengman village told me that he had become Baptist in 1990 but then moved on to the CRC about seven years back ‘as

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26 There was also one instance when a Tangsa man was expelled by the Baptists when he married twice, but was then welcomed into the Catholic Church.
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a shortcut way to get to heaven’, as the CRC is supposed to be even ‘stricter’ than the
Baptists in their observance of rules.

Besides there are other smaller groups like the Church of Christ, the Church of Grace, and the
Little Flock that we have already met in Phulbari. As mentioned earlier, the wife of the
Tangsa Baptist Minister has set up her own church called the Abundant Life Church in
Jairampur. Given the huge number of different denominations existing in Arunachal and the
fact that not many of the followers having clarity about why they belong to one and not to the
other, this general tendency to fracture, split and regroup seems to be nothing unusual for the
Tangsa. It is possible that the fragmenting nature of Protestantism really quite suits the
Tangsa temperament, given the immense internal ethnic and linguistic divisions and
subdivisions that already exist in their midst.

Summing up, the Tangsa community in Changlang district are now split into two major
groups, the Christian Tangsa (mainly among the Pangwa tribes) and the Rangfraites (mainly
among the Moklum and the Longchang). According to Maipa Kenglang, also a Longchang Tangsa, “Both groups have now evolved a common platform in various aspects where they
can re-establish the old pattern of interaction. Celebration of the common Moh/Mol festival
has served as the most vital element in instilling the ‘we’ feelings regardless of religion or
group differences” (Kenglang 2002: 63). So let me turn to festivals next.

7.3 Festivals in Arunachali villages

According to my interlocutors, the reason why the Tangsa community in Arunachal celebrate
the Moh/Mol festival rather than the winter Kuk/Kuh festival is because the Longchang,
Tikhak and Moklum groups (who are to be found in large numbers in Arunachal) do not have
the Kuk/Kuh festival, while the Pangwa groups have both the festivals. The twin name
‘Moh/Mol’ was so chosen because the Moklum call the summer festival Mol while the
Longchang call it Moh. Moreover, as already mentioned the winter Kuh festival has to be
celebrated close to Christmas and it is not convenient for the Christian Tangsa to celebrate
both.

In any case, I was curious to know whether and how each of the two groups (Christians and
Rangfraites) celebrated some of their ‘traditional’ festivals in their bastis. As I have described
in the beginning of this chapter, I attended the Wihu-kuh celebrations at the Mossang village
of Renuk. The only event there that was new (or different from what I had already seen at
Kharangkong) was the communal gathering of the villagers at the lam-roeh set-up at village
crossroads around midday (see Photos 7-2). The rituals however were familiar: making
offerings of rice-beer and the meat-rice mixture and singing the Wihu song; as was the
intention -- to thank the Wihu spirit for its bounty and praying for a good harvest in the next
season.

Inhabitants of the largest Mossang village (46 families) in the Manmao circle, Tengman, have
converted to Christianity (Catholic and CRC) around 2004/5. But they have not stopped
celebrating the Moul and Kouk festivals and do so till the present day. For Kouk, they no
longer do animal sacrifice; nor do they have a ritual post in their houses. They also do not
have a ceremonial ritual basket (sang-yi) kept aside for those special occasions but they do
decorate a basket with chum-ki flowers ‘just for show’ and hang it in front of their houses, drink rice-beer and still sing the Wihu song. Instead of going to the lam-roeh they go to the church and give their thanks with a prayer. But, much like in Kharangkong, they sing, dance, drink rice beer, visit each other and make merry the whole day. This much was possible in Tengman perhaps because most of the villagers are Catholic. I do not know of any Baptist Christian village in Arunachal where any of the ‘traditional’ festivals are celebrated in a similar way.

Photos 7-2: The lam-roeh at Renuk and a Mossang lady with her ritual offerings

7.3.1 The festival at Kantang

Attending the Wihu-kuh celebrations at the Juglei basti of Kantang, beyond Changlang town, was a different experience altogether. I travelled with my hosts – a couple who normally lived in Changlang town but who also had a house (a chang-ghar) in the basti where my host’s old mother lived. Like most people in the basti, they were Rangfraits.

Pigs were sacrificed only in three households in the basti that year – one at the home of my host, the second at a home where the (notched tree) ladder to the house had been renewed. In order to reduce costs, a pig (bought with contributions from all the families in the village) was sacrificed at the home of the rimwa (village priest) on behalf of the whole village, and all

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27 Kantang basti is about 15 kms away from Changlang town and has about 15 families, of which only about 2 were originally Juglei, all the others are Moklum, Munagrey etc. Even the Gaonbura is actually a Munagrey but the village is in an area which traditionally belonged to the Juglei people; therefore they all speak Juglei in the village and consider themselves to be Juglei. Earlier they had lived up the hill in a village also called Kantang. But then a section moved down and settled in Hadap when they converted to Christianity. Then another group of mostly Moklum people broke away and formed another village (mainly on political grounds) called Chimsu just below the present day Kantang basti. So now the old Kantang basti has been split into three smaller bastis, each with about 15 families.
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the rituals were done in his house. My hosts__(28)___sacrificed a pig that year because they felt that the new road that had been recently laid by the government right through the village might have upset the presiding spirit of the village and disturbed the forest spirits living in the area; usually villagers did not make such major changes to their village area without giving the spirits due notice. Hence they were offering the pig to appease them. Apart from those three houses, all the other families sacrificed a chicken at their ritual post in the morning, much as in Kharangkong.

The village priest told me that if they had to do all the rituals involved in Kuk properly, they would have to start about a week before the actual beginning of the festival, when a group of hunters would have to go in search of large rats (that eat the roots of bamboo plants; they are usually caught in groups of 20-25 in one place), as well as many monkeys and wild fowl to hang at the ritual post. Without those things, one could not perform the rituals necessary for Kuk. But all those animals were almost impossible to find now, so these days they did a simpler ritual called ‘Cham-kong-rok’ in the village, to honour the rice-spirit Wihau, and to give thanks and pray for a good harvest next time. Every house has the ritual post (sa-man-thong, Kimsing) where the rituals are done. That year, a group of six people had gone hunting the previous day and had killed a monkey (which is essential also for the ‘Cham-kong-rok’ rituals) and a little deer. Pieces of meat of the monkey they hunted were distributed to all the families in the village.

The festival in the ‘original’ form called ‘Rung-ri’ was performed these days only when there was some grave misfortune in the village. Moreover, no one in the village except the priest knew how to perform the rituals; but they needed at least two persons who knew the rules to perform the rituals for ‘Rung-ri’, so that they could constantly keep a check on each other.

When I asked what kind of misfortune would require performing a ‘Rung-ri’ these days I was told that it would have to be done if they killed creatures whom they considered to be kings such as the tiger, the hornbill or the elephant. Earlier people would really avoid killing a tiger because of the huge expenses involved in performing the ‘Rung-ri’. “But nowadays, people have become smart,” added my host, “even if someone kills a tiger these days, ‘Rung-ri’ would not necessarily be performed. Since it is believed that as long as the animal is not brought back to the village, no harm would come to anyone; so the body would simply be left to rot in the forest.”

After the morning rituals were complete, the cutting up of the pig, distribution of the different parts meant for different clan relatives and then the cooking of the 3-4 different parts took

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__(28)__ My host worked as a veterinary doctor in the government run veterinary hospital in Changlang town. His wife had was an MA from a premier institute in the country, the Tata Institute of Social Sciences (TISS), Mumbai in social work and had worked in the government before she gave it up to raise their children who were now both studying in boarding schools elsewhere. But she was very active socially and was Secretary of the All Arunachal Women’s Welfare Society for many terms, and was presently the leader of the women’s group in her local Rangfraa temple. They were also very enterprising; my host told me that they grew a lot of pineapples growing in their land in the village. He was building a large concrete pig pen (with the help of Muslim masons, who had set up camp to live in their house) and wanted to start a real piggery.

__(29)__ He went on to say that nowadays some would even kill tigers deliberately by poisoning them, to later sell the head and the skin which still fetched a lot of money. Earlier, no one would dare to do such a thing.
most of the morning, in my host’s home. At the home of the village priest, however, the rituals were performed only around 2 p.m. to allow for all the villagers to gather there after finishing their rituals in their own homes. Two bamboo khaps were hung at the ritual post, one for the priest’s family called rim-rim-khap and the other that they would later carry around called the rung-khap. A mixture (called cham-cham) of cooked rice, the leftover squeezed rice after extracting rice beer (called chosi), rice beer (chol) and the cooked pig’s meat and the monkey meat was made, and ritually blessed by the priest.

So much I had seen before. But then a group of village young men accompanied by the Gaonbura (who is the priest’s brother-in-law) went to each house in the basti, carrying the rice mixture on a large round bamboo tray (also called rung-ri, dola Ass.), singing the Wihu-song and being offered rice beer at every home. Another young man carried a khap filled with rice beer into which the host in every house was supposed to add some more in order to make the rice beer overflow. This rice beer is called kal-bo-chol because it has to overflow and fall on the ground in each house. This entire event is called Rung-ri-hun (meaning ‘carrying the bamboo tray’ or lit. dola-loi-phura in Assamese). This went on till past 5 p.m. as they visited every house in both the Kantang and Chimsu bastis and stayed at least 5-10 minutes in each house.

It is believed that real Wihu singers have the power to make a length of twine rolled out from the fibres of the reiben (wild jute) plant bend to drink rice-beer and to make the chum-ki flowers dance, just by singing the Wihu song. The village Gaonbura's sister is the wife of the village priest. She was reputed to be a shamma (diviner) from the old times, and one of the last remaining persons who could ‘really’ sing the Wihu song. She had accompanied the Rung-ri-hun group in the beginning and had later gone off with a group of guests from Changlang to the next basti, getting back to her home only around 11 p.m. Later that night, she invited me over to her house and sang the Wihu song again at her ritual post. That was the one and only time in my entire time in the field that I actually saw the reiben twine bend to drink rice-beer and the chum-ki flowers dance to the singing of the Wihu song.

**Continuing a Tradition**

Guests had started to arrive in Kantang basti from other bastis already around 11 a.m. and everyone was offered rice beer and meat in every house he/she visited. Quite a few older Tangsa men came walking over the hills from other bastis and several groups came by car from Changlang and beyond during the course of the day. There were also some important politicians and high ranking officers among them, but that did not seem to make much of a difference, everyone was treated more or less equally. There was no formality, people would...
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just come in and sit down around the outer fire-place and start talking to each other (even if the master of the house was absent); some would start singing the Wihu-song, they would then eat and drink what was offered by the hosts, and then after a while get up and leave.

The atmosphere in the village that day is hard to describe. It was as if the entire village was singing, and the festive mood was evident everywhere. People had simply let go, in most cases with the help of the rice-beer, and were out to just enjoy the occasion. Strains of the Wihu song was heard throughout the day and people visited each other’s homes, ate meat and drank rice-beer and kept singing and talking. It was the spirit of the festival – spontaneous, happy, unhurried, and in some sense, also rejuvenating.

There was no dancing in traditional dresses, no drums or gongs were sounded. In fact, no other song was sung, except for the Shawi/Wihu song. And unlike the gathering of villagers at the lam-roeh in Renuk and at the festival grounds in Kharangkong and Phulbari, there was no focal point for the festival in Kantang.33 There was also no flag-hoisting, no public meeting, no speeches, no communal feasting. People just came and went, much like they had done in the Wihu-kuh celebrations in Kharangkong in the years 2008 and 2011. However there was a palpable difference in the intention and in the level of self-consciousness I sensed in the Aphu Tyanglam household on the day of the festival and that in the home of my hosts in Kantang.

Much has already been said about Aphu Tyanglam’s intentions and his expectations from organising the Wihu kuh festival at Kharangkong. My hosts at Kantang, and also possibly most of the other villagers in Kantang, celebrated their festival for no other reason that they do so every year, and they did it essentially for themselves – whether people from outside were present or not did not seem to play a big role in their conduct of the festival. In that remote part of the frontier hills, the villagers were very much at home in their own territory; the state or outsiders have not yet arrived there to ask the villagers questions about their identity – hence they did not feel threatened, nor under pressure to ‘present’ themselves and to consciously project their ethnicity. They did not also bother to explain themselves, they sang by themselves, regardless of whether somebody was listening or not, they did what they did because they felt the need to do it, because it meant something to them, they were not concerned about how it might look or how it might be interpreted by others. It was an occasion for social (in the act of visiting each other’s homes and drinking together), and cultural (in singing the Shawi song together) bonding, and held some intrinsic meaning and significance for each of the villagers – young or old, man or woman.

It was also clear that embracing Rangfraism had not changed much in their ritual practices at least as far as that festival was concerned. When I asked the village priest about it, he said that as followers of Rangfraa they no longer made sacrifices and offerings to bad/evil spirits that used to cause illness and misfortune; but the spirit of Wihau was a benevolent spirit, and they were performing the sacrifice only in celebration, in thanksgiving. He claimed that as long as they were in the ‘old’ system at least he (as the rimwa) would have to do the rituals

33 Of course many villagers had gathered at the house of the priest when he was doing the ritual sacrifice of the pig. And many joined the group of young men who went house to house later at least for part of the way.
every year, even if in a much reduced scale; otherwise he would fall ill. I did not manage to find out who or what would make him ill. Nor could he tell me what could happen if the forest spirits or that of the village got angry as my hosts feared.

7.3.2 The genesis of festivals

I have not attended a Moh/Mol festival in Arunachal (primarily because it is celebrated in the summer at a time when I am not there). However, I was shown videos of the official celebrations of the Moh/Mol festival in Changlang town on April 25, 2011. They looked very much like any cultural festival, as described by Singer (see Section 1.2.2). Traditional clothes, jewellery, accessories and head gear were to be seen everywhere and dances of many different Tangsa groups were presented at the festival. The feeling that Tangsa ‘kassa’ (Aphu’s term for ‘culture’) was dying or dead, which one often got in Assam and which people like Aphu Tyanglam are trying to fight against, was certainly not the feeling one got at the Arunachali festivals. There could be many reasons for that: one was the sheer numbers -- there were simply many more Tangsa in Arunachal; another had to do with the fact that most of the Longchangs and Moklums living in the area continued to practise their traditions as before (even though many now have adopted Rangfraism). Modernity might have arrived there but the link to some of their older traditions did not seem to be as tenuous in Arunachal as it seemed to be in Assam.

A senior scholar from the University at Itanagar had this to say about the evolution of festivals in the state:

There was no concept of cultural festivals before, there were only the rituals (and sometimes also some associated dances) the different groups would perform. The practice of having a common platform for festivals was started in the late 60s; it was initiated by the state government to ‘showcase and preserve traditional culture’. At that time the Christian missionaries were starting their activities in the state and Prime Minister, Nehru, didn’t want the same thing to happen in Arunachal as had happened with the Mizos and the Nagas.

Festivals, comprising a set of rituals as mentioned above, (to mark different stages of the agricultural cycle) have always played a major role in the traditional life of my Tangsa interlocutors. The tradition got weakened during the time of World War II when there was a lot of disruption, displacement and acute poverty. After that it continued to be celebrated in a reduced scale till the advent of Christianity in the mid-sixties when it was completely stopped. A group of Tangsa leaders had initiated and explored the possibility of all the Tangsas having a common festival at a meeting in the early 80s. That is how the Moh/Mol festival first began to be celebrated for three days in April/May, and has become an officially recognised festival today.

And in keeping with modern times, state-sponsored mega-festivals, like the Dihing Patkai Festival in Assam (see Section 2.4.1), are also being organised in Arunachal regularly mainly to promote tourism. The Pangsa Pass Winter Festival (PPWF) that is held in Nampong in January each year is predominantly a pan-Tangsa festival for Tangsa living both in India and in Myanmar. The Burmese Tangsa from across the border come not as tourists but as participants. About a week before the Pangsa Pass festival in Nampong, a similar festival is also held in the Burmese side, the timing has been coordinated for the benefit of tourists who are encouraged to attend both. The Chairman of the PPWF Organising Committee, a
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Kimsing, told me that although the festival is about presenting Tangsa culture, not everything about their culture can be shown in a festival, so they concentrated on presenting dance, traditional items and crafts. Of course a lot also depended on the preferences of the tourists who came to attend: for example, bamboo items were very much in demand, and hence he made sure they were available in plenty.

With regard to the sticky question of which Tangsa language should be used in a pan-Tangsa event like the PPWF, he told me that although a Tangsa anthem had been composed with one verse from each tribe, in the end, a Kimsing song was sung. He went on to say that the dances have been ‘modernised’, by which he meant that they have tried to modify the traditional dresses in order to make the new costumes look more colourful and attractive. But the ‘traditional’ is still there, he insisted. “The Sahpolo is still the same, only the dress has been modernised.”

Another educated Tangsa couple I met in Changlang however was not too excited about the modifications that had been made; I present an extract from the relevant parts of my field notes:

They told me about the Tangsa dances that are presented on stage in the big festivals: the sequences were all wrong and he hated to see them performed, he felt like slapping them, made him very angry. Even the Pangwa Sahpolo had been distorted to look like some strange dance, keeping the song the same. He could not stand it. They were all modified by the Christians to make them look beautiful on stage. Then his wife spoke about the modifications in the ornaments – earlier ‘Four anna’ coins would be used as buttons in dresses, never as a necklace; now they use coins for everything – bangles too. People who watch these dances therefore get the wrong impression. Also the blue and white wrapper for women with red blocks produced by the TBCA was typically Naga, but certainly not Tangsa. Tangsa people traditionally did not know how to make block designs; Tangsa wrappers are either striped vertically or horizontally (called rai-pang or rai tu), now they are all Nagaland copies. The red bag of the Tangsa was usually reserved for senior, respected men like Luwangs and GBs; normal men and women never carried those red bags, but now one could buy them in the market freely (DoI: 29.01.2012):

Listening to them reminded me of the Tangsa dress I had seen at the Don Bosco Museum: the ladies wrapper was blue and white with red woven blocks.34 “Only Christian Tangsa wear them,” my interlocutor had told me. At least I had proof that some Christian Tangsa wore them.

In any case, in Arunachal, I saw the whole range of festivals, from the traditional old-style basti festival at Kantang, the newer modified village festivals of the Christian Tangsa to the big mega festival-- PPWF, in line with other state sponsored mega festivals like the Dihing Patkai Festival in Assam and the Hornbill Festival in Nagaland.

7.3.3 The link between ‘kassa’ and ‘culture’

Festivals are about preserving culture, I have been told over and over again by my Tangsa interlocutors. But it seems to be almost a tautology with respect to big mega-festivals such as

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34 Don Bosco Centre for Indigenous Cultures, DBCIC, Shillong <http://www.dbcic.org/> (accessed 07.09.2014)
the DPF and the PPWF – for the culture it preserves is the culture that is specially created for such a festival. Everything is suitably modified to be presented as ‘culture’ and then preserved as such! In that sense, the ‘culture’ that is presented to the world at such modern-day festivals is really the commoditised externalised ‘kassa’, to borrow Aphu’s word (see Section 4.2.3), comprising songs, dances and costumes.

According to my Arunachali Tangsa father, Phanglim Kimsing, “[t]he big festivals are different from the village or community level festivals because the organisers only want to show our culture without understanding what that means.” Therefore in order to analyse the link between festivals and preservation of culture I should be looking at smaller festivals, he advised me. The festival at Kantang had already indicated that holding such festivals had something to do with continuing traditions.

But what did Phanglim Kimsing mean by the word ‘culture’? Since he thought that ‘culture’ was more in evidence in the smaller festivals, he probably did not mean ‘kassa’. He possibly meant ‘culture’ as defined by Mr. Khimhun, Secretary General of the Rangfraa Society, below,

> Culture for a community is as important as a name for an individual. Some examples of what culture is are how marriages are performed, how one handles death, how a new-born is named, how the rituals in the field to do with sowing and harvesting are done, what the rituals around their festivals are etc. These are different for different communities and constitute their culture. These practices set communities apart and give them their identity (DoI: 24.02.2012).

This clearly indicates, as already mentioned in Section 4.2.3, that for some Tangsa at least, there is a clear distinction between their ‘culture’ that defines who they are and what makes them Tangsa and their ‘kassa’ which can be considered to be a form of commodification and objectification of their culture as discussed in Section 5.3.3.

### 7.4 Everything considered

#### 7.4.1 Factors impeding Tangsa unity

Repeatedly, Tangsa leaders told me that the only way to forge unity amongst the Tangsa was to use their culture as the common basis. Festivals are also about bonding, about creating solidarity within communities bound by common cultural traditions. But as we had discovered during the course of our project, in the case of the different communities who are clubbed under Tangsa, even if we discounted the recent origins of some of these traditions, there was not much in their cultural traditions that they can boast of as being ‘common’.

Although the Pangwa groups among the Tangsa share many common cultural traits, they have very little in common with the Hakhuns or with the Longchang-Tikhak-Yongkuk group; bringing in other diverse groups like the Moklum and the Ponthai skews the picture even further.
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Furthermore, language disunity is a major stumbling block on the road towards pan-Tangsa consolidation. As mentioned in Section 7.2, the Baptist Tangsa in India have a Kimsing Bible and wish to project Kimsing/Shanke as their common language. One of our informants from Myanmar told us that Khaplang was in favour of Shanke/Kimsing as the common language for the Tangshang, as it is some sort of a ‘prestige’ language understood by many of the Tangshang (at least the Pangwa) groups in Myanmar. But there are very few Kimsing in India and we have seen how divisions have appeared even amongst the Christian Tangsa in India over the issue of Bible translation; also there are other Tangsa groups in India that do not exist in Myanmar. Moreover, certain groups, such as the Longchang, the Tikhak and the Moklum, who have been in India for much longer than the Pangwa groups, seem to have established a kind of precedence when it came to representing the whole community.

And the fact that the Tangsa languages are all oral languages just complicates the issue further. Since they cannot agree on a common language, some Tangsa leaders felt that having on a common script might be a step in the right direction. Of course the Bible has been translated into at least three Tangsa languages using suitably modified versions of the Roman script but in the process not one, but three systems of orthography have been developed; see Appendix IV. Since Tangsa languages have sounds which do not exist in any of the other languages in circulation in the area like Hindi, English or Assamiya, and have sounds different to each other, many Tangsa felt that a different script was required which could also become part of their new pan-Tangsa identity. At a meeting held in Kharsang recently, two different scripts were presented by two Tangsa gentlemen, but neither was accepted, not on any technical grounds, but because one person was Mossang (and hence Pangwa) and the other was Moklum (and also had the support of the Longchangs) and the leaders of neither of these groups were ready to give in to the other. This case illustrates the rather tribe-driven politics of the Tangsa leaders, or of the Tangsa elite, if you will. Although they usually refer to themselves as Tangsa leaders, when it comes to preferences, these individuals put their weight squarely behind their own tribe/family group.

A case in point is Ms. Komoli Mossang’s (Mossang 1983) consistent use of the word ‘Pangsa’ and not ‘Tangsa’ while reviewing Parul Dutta’s 1969 book. Bhagabati (2004: 181) mentions this “as an indication of another emerging orientation of identity even while the

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35 For a detailed analysis of this problem and a description of the various attempts that have been made at finding a common language, see Morey (unpublished).
36 For example, the Tangsa news is broadcast from the Dibrugarh radio station every morning in the Longchang language.
37 For instance see Morey (2011) and Stanzezi (unpublished II).
38 The meeting, held on 28.12.2010, was organised by the Tangsa Cultural and Literary Society, Arunachal Pradesh.
39 Therefore, what Sharma (2007) says with reference to the Bodos is true also for the Tangsa in Assam — “their rejection or acceptance of one or the other script could have reasons which have not only to do with reason and common sense”. Therefore “the script issue could soon also become a site for [Tangsa] nationalist assertion.”
See Prabhakara (2012: 12ff) for an overview of the politics of script of the Bodo language.
process of wider Tangsa identity crystallization is in process.” Therefore, it seems not inconceivable that someday the pressures of trying to forge a pan-Tangsa identity (which historically never existed) could well make the Pangwa groups decide to break away from the Tangsa umbrella. And this has happened before. For instance, the Tutsa community, which had hitherto been clubbed with the Nocte, have since broken away and got recognition as a separate group in Arunachal Pradesh.

In case such a regrouping occurs, on common linguistic and cultural grounds, besides the Pangwa group (which will be mostly Christian), another group comprising the Longchang-Tikhak-Yongkuk family (which will remain part Buddhist part Rangfrea) and a third comprising the Moklum and the Hawi could emerge. Whether that will turn out to be a good strategy for self-preservation remains to be seen, but at least it will be is easier for those smaller groups to define a common identity.

In another direction, taking the cue from increasing participation of neighbouring groups, such as the Bodos (Karlsson 2001), the Garos (Bal 2010) and the Nagas (Karlsson 2003), in the indigenous peoples’ movements, the Tangsa might also decide to join the bandwagon. The Secretary General of the Rangfrea movement is already a member of the World Indigenous Faith Preservation Forum (which has membership of 60 countries worldwide).

7.4.2 Everything is much better behind the fence

If the Tangshang people from Myanmar who come to sell their wares (mainly woven cloth and typically Tangsa food items) in the Nampong Bazaar every Friday are any indication, then living conditions are better in Arunachal than in Myanmar. In the other direction, Indians can go to the Pangsau Pass on the 10/20/30 day of every month. However cars are not allowed to cross the border, but one can walk further into Myanmar, as long as one came back on the same day. In any case, as we have seen in Malugaon, it is a fact that people are coming down from Myanmar even today to settle in India for reasons mainly to do with the better facilities in terms of health care and education.

There was also plenty of evidence for the fact that communities are also moving back to the hills of Arunachal from the plains of Assam. While on the face of it this looks like confirmation of Scott’s (2009) thesis of hill people moving deliberately back to the hills to evade the state, most Tangsa are going back to the hills not to ‘evade’ but to ‘avail’ of the facilities provided by the government in the tribal state of Arunachal. Although I do not address the issue directly here, my field data show that my Tangsa interlocutors, rather than being non-state people, are pro-establishment and proactively pro-state. Not only do they not evade the state, they try to exploit the state for achieving their own ends. For a similar reading, see Wouters (2012).

Many tribals had gone in ‘beyond the gate’ once the Transferred Areas was declared to belong to Assam. Others have moved for other reasons, some of which are listed in Appendix II. Most of the Ronrang people now living in New Lisen, for instance, moved back from Phulbari (a) due to lack of land in Phulbari, (b) because they wanted to remain Buddhist while those in Phulbari were converting to Baptist Christianity; and (c) because of better facilities for education in Arunachal.
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With the influx of settlers from other communities (who have also come to the Tirap area in Assam in search of cultivable land) some tribal people have chosen to go back to the hills. Official statistics show that the population in Assam of certain communities like the Khampti is actually down to almost nil at present. The Singpho elder Bisa Nong told me that the Singpho were beginning to go back into Arunachal as they do not have to pay any taxes there and have many other benefits. Two of his own brothers moved back after floods submerged the village of Bisa in Assam some years back. Earlier there were 20 Singpho families in Bisa, now there are only seven or eight left. Even they are planning to move to Arunachal.\(^40\)

Another story that we heard repeatedly is of border villages unilaterally deciding that they belong to Arunachal and not to Assam; this has been the case with the \textit{bastis} of Hanju Wara and Mungkam. The reasons given are always the same: better facilities, better schools, roads, electricity and water supply. Here is an extract from my field notes about what one GB told me:

GB of Mungkam (Warra II) Kamtong Yongkuk was born in a village called Hanju near the Tipong colliery. They came down the hills as advised by the Coal India officials and first settled in a village called North Tirap where there was earlier an Assam Rifles camp. Although technically the area belongs to Assam they got no facilities from Assam while the Arunachal government gave them roads, electricity, ration cards etc. – so now they call themselves Tirap Chakhan and claim they are part of Arunachal (DoI: 29.12.2010, Kharangkong).

This was confirmed by an Assamese police officer who told me that both the border villages named Warra and Honju (3-4 hours walk from Tipong Colliery) wanted to belong to Arunachal. Honju claims it is part of Arunachal because no official of the Assam government has ever visited or has bothered to visit them. Warra has been persuaded to ‘return’ to Assam largely through the efforts of some Assamese NGOs active in the area.\(^41\)

As mentioned earlier, Simon Ronrang from Phulbari said that he was planning to eventually move ‘into the gate’ to Jairampur because “the tribals were given no dignity in Assam and were treated like refugees”. They also could not claim any rights over their land and would not be able to do anything if all the non-tribals (who have already become a majority in that area) were to stand up as one and ask them to leave. At least in Arunachal the land belonged to the tribals alone.\(^42\) He was also happy that the Inner Line Regulations were still in place.

\(^{40}\) This movement is confirmed by Sadan (2013: 6), which she explains as a fear amongst the Tangsa elites that the eventual opening up of the Stilwell Road could result in many more non-Scheduled people coming to live in that area. Hence better to be officially a rural Tribal [in Arunachal] than an urban citizen [in Assam].

\(^{41}\) A similar story is narrated in a newspaper article by an Assamese journalist, M. Das (2011) who describes how after the mines collapsed in Malugaon in 1999, many Tangsa families, rather than coming down the hill to settle in the present day Malugaon of Assam, went uphill to settle in the village of Rhan-rhing-kan in Arunachal.

\(^{42}\) Similar sentiments are echoed by the people living in Mizoram (see Pachuau 2014:15).

As Baruah (2010) points out, if customary law governs land rights, and land rights favour particular Scheduled Tribe communities legally identified as natives in one state and not in the other, the consequences of where the border is drawn can be significant. Since ethnicity marks some claimants as native and others as non-native, the border could make all the difference as to how competing land claims are, ultimately, sorted out.
Moreover, while the Tangsa automatically have Scheduled Tribe status in Arunachal Pradesh, in Assam they are clubbed under the ‘Other Naga groups’ category, he told me. Hence moving back ‘beyond the fence’ looks attractive to many young Tangsa in Assam today, especially amongst the Christian Pangwa groups. Of course that question did not arise for some sections of the Tangsa population in Assam like the Tikhaks and the Yongkuks because they are Buddhist, have lived in Assam for a very long time already, have studied in Asamiya-medium schools, and have got assimilated to a greater extent into Assamese society.

“Boundaries are markers as well as makers of difference,” Townsend Middleton (2013) writes, with respect to the situation in and around Darjeeling. But he could have well been talking about the Tangsa situation with respect to the inter-state boundary between Assam and Arunachal Pradesh. The facts that Arunachal is a tribal majority state where non-tribals are not allowed to buy land and settle, and where the rights and privileges of ethnic communities are protected, and that the Tangsa, by virtue by being the majority population in the Changlang district, also wield political and administrative power at the district level, make Arunachal very attractive for the Tangsa in Assam. Because, in contrast, in Assam they are a tiny minority group, forgotten and marginal even within the collection of ethnic groups in the state, where the land rights vested on tribals in Tribal Belts exist only on paper but have long since been superseded by vested interests of powerful non-tribal players.

Of course, there have been some positive developments in Assam too: the award of the Development Council to these communities (see Section 2.4.2) is considered to be a step forward; however, as already discussed, the fact that it is only a Development Council with no territorial or administrative powers means that it does not amount to very much. Moreover, the couple of initiatives made by the local administration in Assam to work together with the tribal communities do not seem to have taken off. The proposal for the establishment of three Eco-lodges in that area is a case in point. And we have already seen in Section 2.4.1, how the Dihing Patkai festival which was supposed to be only for the tribal people of the Tirap area in Assam, has been ‘hijacked’ by the non-tribals, in the words of the outspoken Manje la Singpho, the newly-installed Chairman of the Development Council.

7.4.3 Problems for the Tangsa in Arunachal Pradesh

However, it is also not true that everything is fine for the Tangsa living in the state of Arunachal Pradesh. For one, the rapid change in life-styles have brought in some imbalances and new dependencies, as observed by Don Jonsam (2003: 84) “People are gradually becoming dependent on the market in search of raw materials and many traditional elements of material culture are replaced by new elements available in their nearby markets ultimately

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43 Baruah (2010)’s observation explains why:

In the case of the Inner Line still applicable to Arunachal, Mizoram and Nagaland those living behind this frontier have developed a stake in defending this colonial institution: it becomes a legitimate way of limiting the rights of the interloper, or even grounds for expelling him or her.

44 While Manje la Singpho is running the Eco Lodge at Inthong, the one in the Tai Phake Phaneng village is defunct and the third, which was supposed to have been established in some Tangsa village, never materialised.
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reducing their linkage with ecosystem.” Moreover, it was clear that underneath the picture of middle-class well-being there were strong internal divisions amongst the Tangsa in Arunachal: some groups who came in much earlier to that area like the Longchang, Moklum, Mossang and Juglei have had a head-start over the more recent arrivals. Further divisions were caused due to differences in religion.

In terms of infra-structure, this easternmost tip of Arunachal is less developed in comparison even to the neighbouring areas in Assam. Since China poses a greater threat than Myanmar, the Indian government worries more about the western districts of Arunachal bordering China than about the eastern districts of Tirap and Changlang. Furthermore, being so far away from the centre of power of the state located at the state capital Itanagar, and being so numerically weak, the Tangsa as well as the other tribes living in those districts do not really have much say at the state-level. They claim that state leaders give them a kind of step-motherly treatment; not without grounds since state resources are distributed unevenly in Arunachal among the different districts and most of it is used up in the Itanagar-Tawang area. And this, despite the fact that there is a separate department for the development of Tirap and Changlang (DTC) in Itanagar headed by a Minister.

The growing unrest bred by the infiltration of the NSCN into the Changlang and Tirap districts is a major cause for concern. Till the present, the NSCN problem is restricted to these two ‘problem districts’ only. A senior scholar who had worked with the Tangsa in Arunachal told me that the fate of the Tangsa in Changlang is really in the hands of the NSCN (K) (which he interestingly believed to have been created by the Indian army in the first place); and hence there was no hope of any change for the better as long as the NSCN problem was not resolved. While Changlang is mainly in the hands of NSCN(K), in Tirap, the NSCN (I-M) presence seems to be giving rise to some strong opposition (leading to the creation of a third home-grown faction, see Section 2.5.2.1).

This takes us back to the question of the relation between the Tangsa and the Naga; although, culturally and linguistically, there seems to be a continuum of sorts from the Konyak areas of Nagaland to the Wancho, Nocte, Tutsa and then Tangsa areas of Arunachal, the main link now of the Tangsa to Nagaland is via Baptist Christianity, the NSCN and their underground insurgent movement. It is a contradiction of sorts that while there is a ceasefire, and hence

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45 Most of the Tangsa leaders, writers and politicians belong to one of these communities. Mr Kenglang Kengsang, one of the most respected members of the Tangsa community, and who has written extensively about the Tangsa in Assamese, belongs to the community. As already mentioned, the Secretary General, Mr. Latsam Khimhun, of the Rangfraa movement is a Moklum, while there is at least a couple of front-line Mossang and Juglei politicians active in the district.

46 So much so that most Arunachalis living in Changlang go down to Margherita and beyond if they are sick, to attend college and university and also increasingly for their normal needs of food and clothing.

47 In 2012, the district of Longding was carved out of Tirap. However in this work, the district of Tirap will refer to the undivided Tirap district.

48 Moreover, the number of persons from these districts who have cleared the Arunachal State Civil Service (APPSC) Examinations is relatively low.

49 A senior scholar told me on condition of anonymity that a meeting was held in Miao some years back when the NSCN forced all the tribes living in Tirap and Changlang to add Naga behind their names, in order to
relative peace, in Nagaland, the fighting carries on in Tirap and Changlang, not so much between the army and the underground insurgents but amongst different factions of such insurgents, which is a constant source of danger and tension for the inhabitants of the area.

Furthermore, Baptist Christianity is making rapid inroads into the districts of Tirap and Changlang. There are reports of a lot of forced conversions and extortion in those areas although people prefer not to talk about it. In the Tirap district things are supposed to be even worse; one Christmas, around a thousand young NSCN cadres came to a certain village, demanded to be fed and then asked for money, I was told. In another Tangsa village in Kharsang, villagers described how the NSCN used to bother them till a few years back: they didn’t ask for money, just for food, and some young men of the village were asked to act as couriers to carry things from one place to another. It is believed that the NSCN promotes opium trafficking from Myanmar, which this is still widely prevalent in some pockets of the state, at least where opium addiction is high.

A senior Rangfraa office-bearer told me that by asking the people to not convert to Christianity, the Rangfraa top brass had come into direct confrontation with the NSCN. As already mentioned, many villages in Tirap district had been forced to convert at gunpoint by the NSCN. Nine families in the Tutsa basti called Kothung in Tirap, later converted back to Rangfraism as a result of which the NSCN created a lot of trouble, kidnapped the secretary of the Rangfraa temple, demanded a ransom and the Rangfraa temple was closed. The Rangfraa leaders had to negotiate long and hard with the NSCN top-brass before the temple was allowed to open again.

A village leader in the Nongtham basti (near Kharsang) spoke about the army harassment which had taken place in search of the NSCN till a few years back and the problem of the Buddhist Chakma people all around them in the Kharsang area. It seems about 3000 Chakmas had been settled in this area at the time of creation of Bangladesh, but in course of time many more came, even those who had been settled in other parts of the country (and also near Itanagar) had all moved to this area and they could easily be the majority group in this area.

Returning to the Tangsa, another senior Tangsa leader named three things that, in his opinion, had destroyed the Tangsa men in Arunachal in recent years: first the ‘kunda’ timber business which made people rich overnight,\(^\text{50}\) because one could get rich by selling just one tree. That made the people think that they did not need to study further and that they need not bother about looking for jobs or finding others means of livelihood. But when the ‘kunda’ business stopped suddenly with the Supreme Court ruling banning the cutting of trees, the underground problem raised its head. To cope with their worries, many started using not only opium but also other stronger drugs like brown sugar and heroin. The use of alcohol and rice-

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\(^{50}\) Illegal trade in timber and coal has brought in a lot of money to Changlang, but has subsequently also brought in the extortion slips from various insurgents groups active in the area.

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\(^{2.5.2.1}\)
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beer was already prevalent; all these factors impacted on the physical well being of the people. Simai (2008) is very much of the same view.

So the situation for the Arunachali Tangsa is not so rosy either, trapped as they are between the uncaring state government and the NSCN ‘ultras’. There is also resentment because there is very little development in those two districts relative to other parts of the state, and my Tangsa interlocutors feel alienated even in Arunachal. The relative advantages that the Tangsa might have there at present over those living in Assam might also disappear over time -- the population in Arunachal is not so high now, but more and more non-tribals are settling there despite the Inner Line restrictions, and in a few years time the situation there could well become similar to that now in Assam. In Assam too it was more or less the same story – as we have already seen, many of the smaller ethnic groups feel threatened there of their very existence and survival; even in Nagaland, there were reports that some Naga tribes were not treated as well as the others. It did seem as if there was not really a lot of choice.

Postscript to Chapter 7

7.5 Crisis and closure in my own personal journey

At some point, right in the middle of my field work period in Arunachal, I was faced with a huge crisis. I had been travelling into some interior and remote parts of Arunachal for the first time then, and had just attended the Wihu festival in the breathtakingly beautiful Kantang basti where before my eyes, I had seen the reiben thread bend over, obeying the Wihu singer’s request, to drink rice-beer. I had also seen the chum-ki flowers bob their heads in tune with the singing. Visiting the remote but large and well-laid-out mostly single-tribe Tangsa bastis in Arunachal where people mostly spoke to each other in their own languages, lived their lives at a completely different pace, continued to practise many rituals in more or less the same way as their forefathers had also practised before them, and where old village rules still seemed to regulate daily life, I was faced with a dilemma. For it became clear to me that our documentation of older Tangsa customs and traditions should have been done in Arunachal and not in Assam. The feeling that I had wasted a lot of time and valuable resources and that it was too late to start all over again was just so overwhelming that I was almost ready to throw in the towel and return to Germany immediately.

By then I had also met wise and discerning Tangsa elders who could teach me a thing or two about doing field work; for instance, one elder had advised me, “Never take one person’s word for the truth before you hear the same story from someone else.” I had also understood that there was often nothing dramatic or singular about how matters evolved in Tangsaland, that decisions made by my Tangsa interlocutors were often ad-hoc and based on pragmatic considerations, that things or events did not always carry deep meanings, and that I had to learn not to expect more. Added to all the above was an irritating feeling that my Tangsa informants themselves seemed to be amused (rather than happy) about my wanting to work with them and
that they were probably having the last laugh behind my back. I wondered for whom and for what I was punishing myself by persisting.

Unable to see my way forward but not wanting to stay on in Tangsaland, I decided to go to Itanagar, the capital of Arunachal at the other end of the state, just to get away from it all for a while. A different set of Tangsa – well-to-do, influential and successful – lived there. Some of them had made it big in state politics. Others held high positions in the state administration. For me, it was very good to have a chance to see how far some Tangsa have made it on the one hand while also observing how some of those who had made it still retained their strong sense of belonging and responsibility for their own community. I also understood that for them there was only one way forward for the Tangsa, the one that came with education, development, modernisation,.... They had come too far already down that path, soon they would become like the rest of us.

Chatting with a few of them over tea in a nice and comfortably furnished living room of my Tangsa host, I realised that their concerns were not very different from mine – they wanted a good education for their children, they worried about the damage travelling on the bad roads was doing to their backs, wanted to know about possible places in Europe where they could go on holiday, were concerned about the general state of the Indian economy, and so on. As we became friends I also got to know them better as individuals, and found nothing surprising in their confidences either – they also fell in love and got married (quite a few of them have non-Tangsa spouses), they also worried about their aging parents, they also gossiped about the scandals caused by extra-marital affairs, but the day one of them asked me whether I could recommend a place in Europe where his daughter could go to learn baking, I realised that I could have just as well been sitting in my living room in Guwahati, talking to my convent-educated Assamese friends.

That was a difficult realisation to cope with initially, for when I had set out to work with them I had imagined that the Tangsa would be different. But being in the field with them and becoming friends with some of them had made me see that even if some of their world views or ways of life were different from mine, at the individual level, there was not much to set us apart. In other words, I could see “the similarity in all our lives”, that Abu Lughod (1991: 157) was referring to when she was recommending writing “ethnographies about the particular”. In a certain sense, this realisation brought me full circle and gave closure to my fieldwork. Curiously, one final incident, when I was unfairly but soundly rebuked by a Tangsa woman leader, helped me see that I had been in the field long enough. I had seen and experienced enough. It was time for me to start writing up, as best I could. But it was also equally clear to me that ‘their’ story could not be told separately, that ‘my’ story had to be part of what I was going to write up, if any of it had to make any sense at all.
Chapter 8   Closing the circle: festivals and ethnic identity

Tangsa society is in a state of some decay.

(Elwin is supposed to have commented in 1960, cf. Roy Burman 1961: 97)

Either you assimilate, or you learn the tricks of the plains people so well that you can hold out on your own in their midst, or you go back to the hills.  Rajesh Singpho, Margherita

One final event: The date was the 7th April, 2013, the venue was the nicely laid out Margherita Coal Park in the heart of Margherita town; the occasion: release of a revised second edition of a book titled ‘Tribes of Indo-Burma Border’ by nonagenarian Assamese writer Mr. Suren Barua, and laying the foundation stone of the Margherita Ethnological Museum. Both the projects had been initiated and funded by the local MLA who was also a Minister in the Assam Government. It was organised by the Sub Divisional Officer, Margherita at the behest of the Minister. The Tangsa Minister from Arunachal Pradesh, who we have met earlier and who was a personal friend of his Assamese counterpart, had been invited to be the Chief Guest of the meeting and to release the book, while the Assamese Minister would lay the foundation stone of the museum. Coal India was sponsoring the expenses for the meeting and hosting most of the out-station guests in their Guest House.

The park was very well-maintained. In the midst of the profusion of flowers and plants, a many-hued water fountain added to the beauty of the setting. A neat and sturdy pavilion had been set up at the far end of the park, with a beautifully decorated stage at one end. Another smaller pavilion had been set up on the side for serving refreshments after the event. A small thatched hut between advertised the book that would be released -- copies of the new edition would be sold at half price there after its release. In between was a marked area where the foundation stone for the museum would be laid. But the actual location for the museum was elsewhere, therefore although the formal ceremony would be held in the park that afternoon, the ‘foundation stone’ would have to be transported to the actual site later.

The meeting was scheduled to start at 3:30 p.m. As I had helped with getting the revised edition ready for publication I had also been invited. When my husband and I arrived there shortly after 3 p.m., not many guests had arrived. Slowly it started to fill up -- first the hosts -- the SDO as well as some top Coal India officials -- to do the final check on the arrangements. Then Mr. Manje la Singpho arrived with two colourfully and traditionally dressed groups of dancers -- one from the Singpho and the other from the Tai Phake community. A representative from the publishing house in Guwahati (that had published the book), local leaders from Margherita, as well as journalists and media persons were present. The leaders of many communities, including Assamese and

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1 First published in 1991, this book is based on official records and the personal experiences of the author during his long career as an officer in the office of the Political Officer at Margherita from pre-Independence times.

2 As already mentioned in Section 2.4.1, the same Assamese Minister had also initiated the Dihing Patkai Festival.
Nepali, living in that area had been invited and were present in large numbers; they included Aphu Tyanglam, Gaobura Khejong, and the Singpho chieftain Bisa nong Singpho. 

It was well past 4 p.m. when the VIPs started to arrive. The two ministers arrived together. The Arunachali Minister was accompanied by his wife and a few other Tangsa leaders. The Tinsukia District Administration was in full attendance in the form of the Deputy Commissioner (DC) as well as an Additional DC. It was not clear whether the aged author, Mr. Suren Barua, who had not been keeping too well, would be able to attend. But the re-publication of his book meant a lot to him, and he came, accompanied by his whole family, dressed in his traditional best.

Soon the meeting got under way. On either side of Mr. Barua, on the dais, were the two Ministers. The DC, the SDO, the representatives from Coal India and the publishing house and I were also invited to the dais. After the usual extended and time-consuming welcome ceremony, where even my unsuspecting husband was not spared, the meeting got going with a dance by the Tai Phake and a song the Singpho troupes. After brief speeches by the DC and the publisher (who also gave Mr. Barua, considering his precarious state of health, a cheque of a rather large sum as advance royalty), the two ministers took turns at the microphone, as they released the book and also laid the foundation stone to the museum. They spoke about various projects they had undertaken for the welfare of their constituents and how, despite the inter-state boundary separating them, the peoples of the two states still remain united. The Tangsa minister offered to buy hundred copies of the book for distribution in libraries in Arunachal. The two of them held forth till well past 6 p.m. when the meeting came to an end.

When Mr. Barua realised that the meeting had ended, he protested about not having been given a chance to speak; he was then allowed to speak but by then the audience had started to disperse and had gone off to get their tea and snacks. All the copies of the book the publisher had brought along were sold within minutes. We left soon after since we had a train to catch, and did not stay for the grand dinner hosted by the Minister later in the evening.

The next morning, Mr. Manje la Singpho rang me up. He had been in charge of the cultural component of the programme as well as for doing the catering of ‘ethnic’ Singpho food for the dignitaries. He told me that he was unhappy that although both the book as well as the museum had to do with the tribal people, not one tribal leader had been invited to sit on the dais, not one of them had been invited to say a few words. He told me that the tribal leaders who had attended were not too happy about this. I did not know what to say. I tried to relativise his outrage by reminding him that when even the venerable Mr. Barua, the star of the meeting, was not given a chance, what hope did anyone else have? But it was true: no one on the dais, except for the Tangsa minister from Arunachal, was tribal.

In the preceding chapters, I have described in some detail the situation for the Tangsa in three villages in Assam and also given a rough idea of the major differences with the situation in Arunachal. I have also discussed Tangsa festivals in different forms and at different places, and also given an account of my personal journey and development while working with the Tangsa. In this final chapter I wish to pull all these different strands together, in order to verify some of the claims I made in Section 1.2.4 and explore some of the questions with which I started out – what does it mean to be Tangsa, what do festivals mean for the Tangsa,
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what do they tell us about Tangsa identity and culture, and also, where do we, and also the Tangsa, go from here.

8.1 Negotiating marginalisation

The last few chapters have given a glimpse of the ground realities for the Tangsa in Assam, and a sense of why some Tangsa are making the choices they are. One of my Tangsa interlocutors from Kharangkong, told me one day (DoI: 29.10.2009): “Tangsa culture will not survive anywhere in India. In Assam it will be overtaken by the Assamese or the pan-Indian culture, in Arunachal by the Christian or the Western tradition.” By Tangsa here, he probably meant only the Pangwa groups. But equally pessimistic comments have been made also for non-Pangwa groups, see Simai (2011).

However Bhagabati believes the chances are higher for the Tangsa to survive as a cultural and political unit in Arunachal. “Arunachal Pradesh provides fascinating examples of how small, essentially kinship-based societies are getting linked up to form larger ethnic units so as to become effective share-holders in a state-level polity which is still in its formative stage” (1992: 499). Citing the Tangsa as an example, he goes on to say:

In recent years, [the different Tangsa groups] have begun to see new meaning and significance in their common cultural heritage and sharing a compact habitat. ...They have increasingly come to feel that compared to many other sections of tribesmen (e.g. the Adi and the Apatani) they are educationally and economically rather backward. In order to move forward and secure opportunities for themselves, it has become essential for them to project the 13,000 odd Tangsa as a united and corporate front. ... In these cases, therefore, tribal ethnic categories are evolving as part and parcel of the emerging regional (i.e. state-level) socio-political formation (Bhagabati 1992: 500).

Some Tangsa in Assam have attempted to strategically use their connections with the Naga, with Myanmar, with the NSCN, and/or with their Christian brothers to improve their standing within their immediate local area in which they have to survive, even while maintaining their difference from the lowland non-tribal, predominantly Hindu populations. At a even more micro level, one can observe several processes in operation: the last chapters have shown how some Tangsa in Assam try to negotiate some space for themselves by playing the NSCN card when necessary (to keep the ULFA at bay) but then use the Buddhist card at other times (as a buffer from the Baptist NSCN). They also often use the Congress card in order to maintain their distance from the other political parties and to make demands from the ruling Congress party (sometime successfully, as the award of the Development Council shows) even while playing the good citizen card (in that they always go to vote, and many Tangsa serve in the army etc.) to strengthen their case. In that sense, they are not non-state people (cf. Scott 2009). Like other minorities, my Tangsa interlocutors too have learnt to use the ‘victim’ card as well as the ‘tribal’ card, as and when required, depending on the context. Some of my Tangsa informants have also figured out how to get the maximum benefit out of state-
sponsored schemes. As Jonsson (2001: 159) rightly observes, “these dynamics are in part about ethnic minorities placing themselves within the nation, not in opposition to it”.

Moreover, as Sebastian (1999: 131) observes, “prospects of a tribal trans-nationalism, cutting across the political boundaries of India and Myanmar appears to be a fact”. The Singphos already have a network extending as far as Thailand and ties between the Tangsa on both sides of the Indo-Burmese border seem to be growing, with or without the help of the NSCN. Some Tangsa groups are also contemplating joining the indigenous peoples’ movement, as already mentioned in Section 7.4.1.

However, on the ground the prospects for most of my Tangsa informants in Assam do not look very promising. The discerning Rajesh Singpho hit the nail on the head when he told me (in response to my query about what the options were for small ethnic communities such as the Singpho and the Tangsa in Assam), “either you assimilate, or you learn the tricks of the plains people so well that you can hold out on your own in their midst, or you go back to the hills.” It was pure coincidence, but these are roughly the three scenarios that were alluded to in the three Tangsa villages of Kharangkong, Malugaon and Phulbari respectively. Rajesh’s words spoken in 2012 echo (or are perhaps taken from) those of Kunstadter (1967: 10), written more than fifty years ago about minority communities vis-a-vis the state: “As the hegemony of the central governments expanded, three choices were available to the vanquished: fleeing to the hills, becoming absorbed in the newly dominant group, or establishing, and in some way maintaining, boundaries around themselves so that their identity could be preserved in spite of their loss of political independence.” Thus not much had changed in all these years.

The overall prospects of some other communities living in the Tirap area are not significantly better than that of the Tangsa. As mentioned earlier, the actual numbers of the Singpho in Assam are decreasing. While this can be attributed to reasons peculiar to the Singpho such as their strict marriage clan rules which lead to inbreeding and consequent degeneration, it is also a fact that many Singpho have moved back into Arunachal while others have deliberately joined other communities.

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3 They routinely apply for state subsidies to buy farm equipment like tractors and by forming Self-Help-Groups to get loans from banks for setting up small businesses, like weaving units or piggeries.

4 Rajesh Singpho plays a big part also in Mandy Sadan’s 2013 monograph (see Ch. 9). This only goes to show that when dealing with small communities, researchers coming from different disciplines and with different questions, often land up interacting to the same set of people -- the so-called elite. Hence, it is often discussions with such individuals, like Rajesh Singpho, that contribute significantly to the researcher’s understanding of the field situation.

5 The term assimilation is used in the sense of incorporation here, in which one group loses its identity by merging into another group which retains its identity (Harowitz 1981). Brass (1991: 34) explains the reasons as follows: “an alternative situation favourable to assimilation and decline in ethnic identity occurs when differential modernisation so favors a minority ethnic group that it chooses to assimilate to the language and culture of the ruling ethnic group.”

6 As mentioned earlier in Section 4.3.2, and as observed by Ramirez (2013), changing group allegiance is not unusual in Northeast India.
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However, Dollfus & Jacquesson (2013) who have worked with the Sherdukpen community in western Arunachal Pradesh believe that “small populations in Northeast India have continued to thrive, using a number of adaptive techniques or strategies. It is not true that smaller groups are necessarily weaker.” In their work, the authors have shown the central role played by the Khiksaba festival in the continued vitality and the identity formulations of the Sherdukpen. But the Tangsa in India do not have a common festival. In any case, the recent efforts made by the Tangsa in Assam to organise festivals and to invite neighbouring communities as well as administrators and politicians to attend, can be considered to be attempts at performing their ethnicity as a strategy for survival. That being the case, the lack of a stable common core, the perfunctory nature of the performances as well as the underlying randomness of what is presented are indicators of larger problems besetting the community, and imply that they have still some way to go.

8.2 Culture and festivals

The distinction between ‘kassa’ and ‘culture’ has already been discussed in Section 7.3.3. However, the questions that still remain are, first, given that distinction, how can the same people also claim that festivals help to preserve Tangsa ‘traditional culture’? And secondly, what about the Christian or Buddhist Tangsa? For them, there are at least three distinct sets of related ideas: their ‘kassa’, their culture (as defined by Mr. Khimhun in Section 7.3.3) which have to do with their ways of life before they converted, and their newly adopted cultural traditions based on their new religion. What do festivals do or mean for them?

The answers are not easy, because these categories are not watertight and we cannot write off festivals as mere displays of ‘kassa’ because these new festivals are all my Tangsa interlocutors have -- especially the Christian/Buddhist Tangsa – to project, display and claim their Tansaness -- their ethnic identity -- as opposed to their religious identity. On the other hand, their new religions impose restrictions on which of their traditional practices, for example, which of their agricultural rituals, they can still continue to really practise. But there was no objection to some of those rituals being merely enacted, ‘just for show’, as performances. And the Tangsa festivals in Assam I have described bear witness to precisely this process – the enactment / performance of a few rituals, packaged with large doses of ‘kassa’ which then together comprise the performance of their ethnicity.

8.2.1 The importance of festivals

In the previous chapters I have looked at festivals, both as physical sites as well as performative constructs (cf. Bennet, Taylor et al 2014: 2). There has been ample evidence that “festivals and rituals are thus not spaces to reveal tradition but also spaces to create it” Vandenhelsken (2011). In that sense, festivals are sites not just for cultural reproduction but also for cultural production (cf. Guss 2000:11). That is precisely why the study of festivals has become so crucial to the understanding of the transformations taking place in the Tangsa cultural traditions and the processes involved in Tangsa identity formation⁷.

⁷ About the importance of the Manau festival for the Kachins, Sadan (2013: 454) states: The wider importance of the manau ideologically is not inherently bound by the performance itself. Rather, the manau encapsulates an ideological model of indigenous political culture, a non-institution based domain of public interaction,...
At the same time one must not read too much into and from these festivals. For, there is a
great deal of contingency and under-determination in most situations (Rabinow & Marcus
2008: 56). Many of the decisions made at festivals are often random (Q: Why was she chosen
as the one to lead the dancers? A: Because she was ready first.), ad-hoc, contingent (Q: Why
did you put up a bigger pavilion this year? A: Because we were worried it would rain.) and the
reasons are quite often pragmatic and banal (Q: Why are you sacrificing a red chicken this
year? A: Because it is the only one I have.). In fact, so much of what happens at these festivals
is contingent that it almost calls for ‘a systematic study of contingency’ (Fuchs, pers. comm.),
however oxymoronic the idea might seem. As I have shown, most of the details of what
actually happens at a festival in any given year is decided often at the last minute, and the
rituals observed are entirely dependent on the skills and the interest of the older members of
the family and the elders of the village who were available and willing to participate.
However, as pointed out by Ramirez (pers. comm.), the content of performances is not
however totally random -- one of the minimum requirements is that it should look specific,
not necessarily traditional but displaying specific features (e.g. specific attires, with a typical
colour and so on).

It is also a fact that, like everyone else, a large majority of the Tangsa live their lives without
consciously worrying about their identity, their culture, and their ethnicity. Modernisation of
their way of life and the changes it has brought means that not many have the time or the
interest in organising or spending a lot of time on celebrating festivals. Just like the Nagas, as
Longkumer (forthcoming) remarks, “[t]hese choices are very much made in the ‘ethnographic
present’, and when people are left to choose between ‘survival’ and ‘preserving culture’, it is
often the former that takes precedence.”

However, when a festival is organised by someone in their village or in their community, then
most participate, partly because festivals are a change from the routine of everyday life,8
moreover, they are simply fun (Jonsson 2001). Most Tangsa who came to attend such
festivals came because they felt the need to be present at ‘their’ festival, although not many
knew much about what they could expect from it. Many others came for some cultural
entertainment;9; the younger lot attended basically because of the popular entertainers and the
fashion shows. There are other uses too: for as Arunachali filmmaker Moji Riba says,
“Festivals do more than just perform rituals, they bind the people together.” Thus festivals
also play a social function by bringing people together and renewing bonds of kinship and of
friendship.

The reasons that my Tangsa interlocutors (who are also community leaders) gave me for
community participation were, however, somewhat different. According to them people came,
not only for social reasons, but also because at the back of their minds, many Tangsa worry
about erasure as a minority community, and they believe organising and participating in
festivals is one way to prevent that. Furthermore, although the general reason they gave me

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8 During the course of my fieldwork, I did not get meet anyone who had been asked not to attend or had
specific reasons for not wanting to participate in such a festival. Of course I did meet some Tangsa Baptist
Christians who told me that they would not attend festivals where sacrifices were still made.
9 Festivals are almost the only occasions when the Tangsa living in villages have the chance to participate in or
just enjoy a cultural programme.
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for organising festivals in all the three villages was to present and preserve their cultural and ethnic-identity, as we have seen the accents were different. At Kharangkong, the Wihu-kuh was used as a site for cultural reinterpretation and rearticulation, for modification and reformulation – linking it with the past but locating it in the present, which also implied the selective reification of certain cultural traditions. In Malugaon the festival was instrumentalised for very specific individual ends and was focussed on self-preservation and the self-presentation of the Hakhun as a modern and Christian community, yet one with a unique ethnic identity. Therefore, culture was commoditised (Cohn 1987: 235) and externalised so that the resultant ethnicity could be used as a resource. The Shawi kuh celebrations in Phulbari were aimed at internal consolidation, at standardisation and finding common ground and about projecting and performing (cf. Longkumer forthcoming) a pan-Tangsa ethnic identity which transcends religious divisions; in other words, regrouping in the present under the given circumstances. That process naturally used political mobilisation as a strategy, involved some amount of political negotiation and hence led to politicisation of ethnic identity.10

In sharp contrast, the festivals in the bastis of Changlang were not about presenting or projecting identity, it was about continuing a tradition, doing what they have done every year. However, many of the rituals had been simplified and the scale of festivities has been reduced to cope with modern day compulsions. The Catholic Tangsa of Tengman basti had also made some necessary modifications to the manner in which they celebrated the festival, so as not to offend their new Christian sensibilities. But there was almost nothing that anybody did ‘just for show’, simply because there were no onlookers – whatever they did, they did for themselves, while the mega-festivals were at the opposite end of the scale, with considerations of what the audience might want to see and the visual impact of their performances taking precedence over everything else.

In any case, it is clear that there have been many changes not just in form but also in content, as well as in function, of these festivals. As I have mentioned elsewhere (Barkataki-Ruscheweyh 2013: 254), various considerations—some nostalgic, some contingent, some religious and some largely pragmatic (and fuelled by the political and economic aspirations of a small, active elite) have led to a shift in function and purpose of these festivals, from a predominantly ritualistic, celebratory, thanksgiving, or victory-in-war meaning of earlier times to a predominantly social and festive meaning of today. They are now aimed at visual and cultural entertainment and at presenting the ethnic as well as modern credentials of the Tangsa to the world. And with the change of function, the form of the festivals has also undergone a lot of change: for instance, they are now held in an open arena with a stage and lasts only for a day.

There is an imitation effect involved as well: ‘everyone has a festival so we must also have ours’. But it is more than mere imitation. For, as pointed out by Ramirez (pers. comm.) in recent times a new pan-Assam or even pan-Indian language/code of identity performance has

10 In this they are not alone. As Karlsson (2001: 8) observes, “during the last few years, triggered by the Bodoland movement, the Rabhas and other indigenous communities in Assam, have started to politicise their indigenous identity.”
emerged; and the shape of Tangsa festivals is influenced by the conventions of this new code, in that they try to present their ‘culture’ in terms which are understandable by others; for example, since divining with chicken claws has no meaning for a north Indian official, it would not be presented to him.

Tangsa village level festivals also reveal how the Tangsa leaders wish to project and present themselves to the world around them, besides reinforcing their own idea of what it could mean to be Tangsa – albeit an ‘imagined community’ (Anderson 1983). But in the process, they also reveal how contrived these attempts can be and how the need to conform to the new notion of a cultural festival (as described above) and the need to display their tribalness have forced these groups to concoct new ways of ‘performing’ and ‘presenting’ their so-called ‘culture’ in order to satisfy these new expectations.

8.2.2 From ritual performances to secular festival

In terms of religion, in Kharangkong there was an attempt to combine the older traditional system with Buddhism, while in Phulbari and Malugaon, the attempt was to combine the older traditions with Baptist Christianity. However, the strict Baptist Christian element was more pronounced in Phulbari than in Malugaon where Christianity was sought to be coupled with their own version of modernity; in any case more of the ‘traditional’ practices are still to be seen in Kharangkong than in the other two Christian villages.

As already alluded to in Section 1.2.3, an important difference in the Christian Tangsa understanding of their culture is that it does not have much to do with their new religion -- in fact that is part of the argument church leaders use to justify the organisation of such village festivals. As Lumren Hakhun in Malugaon explained to me, religion is something personal, but the Tangsa ‘culture’ is what gives a Tangsa his/her ethnic identity. Therefore, as long as ‘performing’ his Tangsaness did not require him to do something which is forbidden by his new religion, there was no problem. While the non-Christian Tangsa such as Aphu Tyanglam are not so sure about this separation between culture and religion, even Aphu has come to accept this as the only viable compromise in order to ensure that the Christian Tangsa also join his efforts for the preservation and projection of Tangsa cultural identity. Along the way, Tangsa village festivals have been transformed from events comprising just a sequence of rituals (as we saw in Kantang) to secular events where the ritual component has been diluted and the ‘kassa’ component has been strengthened, and also where elements from larger cultural festivals and secular government events have been incorporated.

As discussed in Barkataki-Ruscheweyh (2013: 243) and also in Section 1.2.2, there is a difference between ‘traditional’ rituals and the newer ones on the basis of who the ritual is addressed to or is meant for (as pointed out to me by Philippe Ramirez, pers. comm.). While traditional rituals are usually addressed to some spirit or deity, the newer rituals are addressed primarily to the audience. Hence they are ‘performed’, as are songs and dances, and will be assumed to be part of the cultural performance or show. Given this distinction, it becomes possible even for older traditional rituals to be ‘performed’ and hence transformed into newer ones, where the actions remain more or less the same, but the intention might have changed.

This is in line with De Maaker's (2013) view that rather than carrying a single message, rituals usually have multiple meanings. What matters, is the overall agreement among participants
that a particular ritual is important, and charged with a certain intentionality. Consequently, the performance is ‘about’ something, although people need not be explicit about, or agree on, what that something is. It is the attribution of intentionality that counts.

Not just rituals, similar transformations can be seen in the enactment of traditional songs and their dances. Shorn of the context and reasons for their enactment in earlier times, at present they have been modified and optimised to produce the maximum impact when ‘performed’. These staging of traditional songs and dances along with the ‘show’ of performing their traditional rituals is what a community understands to be and presents to the world as their ‘kassa’.

Sara Shneiderman (2011: 208) has argued that both ritual (which she calls practice) and performance are both essential aspects of contemporary cultural production. While that is true, my work has shown that mainly due of conversion to Christianity the ‘performance’ element has gone up at the expense of the ritual component, in recent times in communities such as the Tangsa even in community-level festivals. This is what I shall discuss in the next section.

8.2.3 The externalisation of culture

As I have already discussed, the exercise of finding common shared ground at Phulbari restricted the scope of the presentation of ethnic identity to a few symbols and a few items of cultural performance. Some traditional objects like the ritual altar were retained but their function had changed, from the altar where animals would be brought for sacrifice to a mere decorative, simply symbolic function; the ‘rim-rim’ prayer was recited/sang without actually performing the ritual sacrifice, traditional Tangsa dresses and traditional Naga symbols such as hornbill feathers were also conspicuously displayed as visual symbols. Certain cultural elements such as the Wihu song and the Sahpolo dance were standardised and presented as symbols of pan-Tangsa identity and culture. But, as already mentioned, the dances are partly new and not many among the younger lot know how to sing the Wihu song, even fewer understand the meaning of the words.

Traditions are to some extent always both invented and inherited (Otto & Pedersen 2005: 35). Therefore, there is no way to tell the vintage of the traditions that were on show, but at least one had the feeling, cf. Barkataki-Ruscheweyh (2013), that there seemed to be some urgency to create a full repertoire. The Wihu song, which was on the verge of dying along with the lot of older Tangsa, is now being resurrected in the form of an easy-to-learn Wihu dance. Enterprising Tangsa young people are beginning to recast their traditional love songs (which were also becoming a thing of the past because they could not be sung in front of siblings or clan relatives) into modern Tangsa songs.

Much as in the Garo case (De Maaker et al 2011) traditional Tangsa dances and songs have moved, from the fields and forest clearings where they were traditionally performed, onto the stage. And since some of the leaders believe that dances, performed by large groups wearing

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32 As Konsam (2005) remarks, referring to similar processes amongst the Meitei in Manipur: “The space of non-ritual entertainment within the festival is also increasingly defined in terms of relatedness to the ‘traditional’ Meitei culture.”
coloured costumes, look better on a stage, hence that is what the ethnic groups are trying hard to ‘invent’ for themselves; thus long songs sung by one or two people are no longer in fashion, short colourful dances with quick footwork, group songs and songs with a chorus are in vogue. Songs are being composed, for example, with one verse in each of the many Tangsa languages.

The fact that such songs did not exist before is not important. They will become part of their new ‘culture’ (read ‘kassa’). All these processes point to modification, reinvention and standardisation on the one hand, but also to homogenisation, modernisation, conformism and influence of the bigger world on the other. This fits in precisely with Stuart Hall’s concept of ‘articulation’ of ethnic identity which is a process ‘of becoming as well of being’ (see Section 1.2.3).

These processes had made the Tangsa dances and songs suitable for presentation at mega trans-community cultural festivals like the Pangsau Pass Winter Festival and the Dihing Patkai Festival. The exposure and visibility that the tribal groups get during these festivals have led to a growing awareness among them that somehow it is important to have something to call one’s own ‘culture’, not just for oneself but also to show to others. This has caused an attitudinal change towards culture – culture has become a commodity, subject to the forces of demand and supply, and it has gradually got transformed to ‘kassa’.

These mega-festivals have also demanded amalgamation of the cultural practices of the different Tangsa sub-tribes into one ‘Tangsa’ culture. And this has naturally also led to efforts, as I have shown, not only to recreate and fix what they have retained of their traditional culture based on the little that is common and acceptable, but also to invent new cultural traditions, in an effort to be seen, heard and given applause. Earlier each of the sub tribes sang songs in their own languages, there were variations in their dresses, and their migration songs were distinctly different in content (if not in structure and melody). But now they all answer to the same term ‘Tangsa’ necessitating a merger of several distinct forms.

While rewriting or reinventing cultural traditions and histories in order to consolidate under a common label might be easier for oral cultures (like the Tangsa), in the process, there is the danger that the internal differences between the different Tangsa groups will get elided or at least become difficult to keep apart. A senior Tangsa interlocutor echoed this when he told me, “Nowadays while trying to ‘reform’ and redefine our culture, the Tangsa have become more similar than they were before – in their clothes, in their songs and dances. It would be hard to tell the Tangsa tribes apart just from that, if it were not for the difference in languages, since the older distinctive customs have also been given up.”

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12 It is a curious but interesting fact that in terms of mutual language comprehension and religion, as the linguistic analysis done by our team reveals, there is a lot of evidence that the Tangsa groups have diverged from one another. Furthermore, from our experiences in the field these last years, we believe that diversity will persist longer amongst the Tangsa (than what one would have expected say ten years ago) mainly because of the efforts of community activists and their access to modern technology, as I have already mentioned in Section 5.4.1.

13 What is more, in their clothes, the new ‘reformed’ Tangsa dress is almost indistinguishable from the Singpho dress, he claimed. The lungi, shoulder bag and paguri (turban) of both the groups are more or less the same.
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The biggest influence on these processes comes from the ubiquitous pan-Indian culture as seen on television and in the (Bollywood Hindi) cinema. Television has reached most Tangsa bastis, many in Tangsa homes watch movies using DVD players. All this is coupled with a growing desire of most Tangsa youth to be seen as smart and modern. Many of them go to English medium schools in Arunachal and wish to set themselves apart as westernised and ‘cool’. And, as was evident in Malugaon, the Tangsa youth are in the process of composing and choreographing a new genre of modern Tangsa songs and dances very much in Bollywood style. Moreover, as was demonstrated by the group from Relang at Malugaon, since there is a felt need to be seen as both modern and Christian, yet another genre of modern religious songs is also being composed and presented.

As for the older forms, modern technology has made it possible for the younger Tangsa to learn them from recordings of earlier performances. This process can be double-edged: recording their songs and dances is one way of preserving them, and also of propagating them. But since there is usually no one close at hand, who one could ask the meaning of the songs and dances, the stage has come when many sing the songs without understanding the meaning. This also marks a break in the age-old process of intergenerational handing down of culture where the elders used to teach the younger ones directly.

8.2.4 Keeping culture in business

And as the presentation of Tangsa ‘culture’ has moved to distant stages erected for mega cultural festivals, it has been thrown out of the everyday lives of people, and has been reincarnated as performance, as a spectacle, even sometimes lapsing into mimicry. And the task of presenting their ‘culture’ has moved from the hands of all the Tangsas into the hands of just a few ‘keepers’ of Tangsa culture -- the few Tangsas left who still know how to sing and dance, or in some cases, the ones who have made it their job to keep inventing new cultural items to present as their ‘kassa’. The practice of rituals too has moved out from the hands of the dumsa or priests into the realm of performance, and hence, into the hands of those who have made it their business to transform them into items of their new ‘culture’.

The more the Tangsa are being told that preserving their ‘culture’ is important, either by researchers like us or by their own leaders, both with their own separate agendas, or by the state who sponsors cultural festivals, the more they have tended to find new items for their ‘kassa’ repertoire. Even in this, the Tangsa have followed the lead shown to them by the Naga.

The manifestation in traditional material culture and performance in Naga festivals has, [...], made a shift from denoting individual identity towards collective identity on tribal level. This trend can, to be sure, also be observed in other world regions and may be understood as a tendency of ‘folklorisation’ of traditional performative events and dress culture” (Wettstein unpublished).

That the tribal people play along with this idea is understandable, since that is what everyone around them are doing, but that they play along to the extent of deliberately exoticising their culture to make it look more dramatic on stage is clearly a sign that these communities have begun to perform their ethnicity in order to instrumentalise it for achieving other bigger

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14 Our DOBES project has played a major role in making such CDs and DVDs of recordings available.
In all of this, aspects of culture has moved from being something lived, something integral to everyday life, to something that is just extra, just put on, just performed at certain times, without any real relevance to their everyday life. As Litzinger (2000: 231) put it: “the ethnic minority had become... an object to be displayed, an identity to be tried on, a cultural world to be momentarily inhabited”. And we saw an actual demonstration of this at Phulbari, when on the day of the Shawi-kuh festival, many Christian Tangsa, wore Tangsa dresses and some even danced a few of their traditional dances -- Tangsa for a day!

If we add to all this the views of Tangsa in different age groups, we have a Tangsa society in which ‘culture’ has different meanings for different people – for some it is a matter of existential importance, for others it is a weak and uneasy link to their past and for yet others, it has become a way of reaching out to the future.

8.2.5 The culture of festivals

Some of the elder Tangsa, such as Aphu Tyanglam and Junglum Hakhun, celebrate festivals with a hope that seeing them, others will follow and the younger generation will see and remember something of what it meant to be Tangsa in times gone by. What the Tangsa actually finally land up doing at these festivals can also have different reasons – some things they do simply to carry on the tradition (like the soil-digging ceremony at Kharangkong on the evening previous to the Wihu-kuh festival, see Appendix VIII), some others they do simply because it is expected of them (like the songs and dances), and some of it is deliberately added or modified keeping specific considerations in mind, like appeasing all groups while composing an anthem with each verse in a different Tangsa language. They also do certain things to achieve specific goals, like inviting the press to get media coverage, or inviting the army so that they don’t make a surprise raid on their village on the day of the festival.

In Malugaon the festival was held mainly to assert presence and distinctiveness. This idea is not new. Anthropologists have been talking about ‘the politics of cultural performance’ from the time of Gluckman (1940) at least. But even much closer home, this phenomenon is not peculiar to the Tangsa alone – in fact the Tangsa are doing today exactly what countless other ethnic groups in Assam have done in recent years in their effort to reinvent themselves and to give themselves a new identity in keeping with the modern order of things. In fact, as already mentioned in Section 2.3.1, two small ethnic communities closest to the Tangsa -- the Tai Phake and the Singpho -- have both started celebrating their traditional festivals again.16

15 Although the Tangsa have not gone so far as yet to make big business out of their ethnicity, as mentioned by Comaroff & Comaroff (2009), it is beginning to happen slowly in the region, for instance at the Hornbill Festival.

16 Commenting on the benefits of celebrating the annual Shapawng Yawng Manau Poi Festival since 1985, one Singpho writes: “What was our cultural identity prior to the celebration of this festival? What was the relationship amongst our people living in Assam and Arunachal? We hardly knew each other and there was complete communication gap. ...Had there been no Shapawng Yawng festival, such a tremendous cultural revival could not have been brought about” (Souvenir 2000: 14).

The revival of the Chapchar Kut festival in Mizoram (cf. Rohmingmawi, pers. comm.) is another such example; and further afield, the Gau Tao festival amongst the Hmong in Vietnam (cf. Ngo 2009), and even as far away...
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There is a growing awareness of their difference among these communities – many Tai Phake, for example, have changed their names back from Gohain, which is a sort of generic name, to their clan names. Also Manje la Singpho has recently declared that he would sign his name henceforward as Manje La only.

And this trend is slowly catching on among some Tangsa groups as well. The All Langching Welfare and Development Society was formed to try to record (in written form) their history, the family genealogies, the migration stories, the clans and sub clans, and all the ‘lost’ or ‘fast disappearing’ traditional practices. For the last 5-6 years they have been having a general meeting of the society on the 15th Dec. each year. But they do not call it a festival and there is no ‘cultural’ component as yet. Once when I expressed my interest in attending their next meeting (due in Dec. 2009), the Secretary of the Society told me not to bother as they had ‘nothing to show’ as yet. They were in the process of getting ready the costumes necessary for the cultural programme: their traditional dress is almost the same as the other Tangsa groups, he told me, but they are trying to make it a bit more colourful; the other accessories -- like spears, shields, caps and ornaments -- were also being procured; and the singers and dancers were being trained. He believed that in a year they would be able to stage a cultural programme as well. And in a couple of years they hoped to have their ‘history’ ready too!17

Thus festivals can also be empowering, by raising the level of awareness within community members.

8.3 Festivals, ethnicity and Tangsa identity

Through festivals, ethnic communities express not only their ethnicity, but also their modernity, albeit a kind of ‘alternative modernity’ in the sense of Van Schendel (2011: 27) or of ‘indigenised modernity’ (Sahlins 1999). They are a product of what the state wants them to be and as well as what they want themselves to be.

Furthermore, festivals are sites for “the expressive production of ethnicity in action” (Bentley 1987), and are powerful sites to project, display and also ‘enact’ this identity. First of all by ethnicity or ethnic-identity, the Tangsa mean their sense of being Tangsa, which has to do with their culture. Hence their understanding of their cultural and ethnic identity are related to their sense of Tangsaness. However the new Tangsa identity they want to project has more elements to it, because it includes also their newly acquired modernity, at times also their new religious identity and their ascribed social identity as a group relative to that of others around them.

From what I saw in the field, the Tangsa wish to project a multi-faceted identity, asserting both their modern Indian-ness as well as their ethnic distinctiveness. While at Phulbari, a unified and inclusive pan-Tangsa identity was sought to be projected, at Malugaon it was just about the Hakhuns. Furthermore, it was clear that this ‘new’ Tangsa identity has been as in Mexico (cf. Gross 2011). For a recent study of the “Festivization of Culture” in Europe and Australia, see Bennet, Taylor et al 2014.

17 And they are not alone in trying to do this, as Schlemmer remarks about the Kirant people in Nepal, “The wishes of ethnic minorities are founded on claims of a common identity and culture, and one of the privileged ways to express this is through possessing a proper history” (Schlemmer 2003/4: 119). “Subsequently inventing the past is inheriting the future” (Ibid., 138).
consciously and deliberately fashioned by a few Tangsa leaders, keeping in view broader as well as personal considerations, and in order to substantiate their claims of difference within sameness. Again a parallel is to be found in the Naga story, as evident in Von Stockhausen's work in which

[he] wishes to demonstrate how the possibility of formulating identity continues to be exploited in our times for both political and religious ends. [...] identity seems to be consciously 'shaped' and 'calculated' in equal measure. [...] More than ever, identity seems to be a political expedient among the Nagas – in both the religious as well as the political context (Von Stockhausen 2008: 58).

Let me examine some of these ideas in greater detail in the following sections.

### 8.3.1 The acquisition of identity and modernity

Hence the Tangsa today are in the process of redefining their identity: they seek to replace their older tribal image with a more modern one, which serves their new political and social aims better. Tangsa identity as evident in their festivals are constructed relationally, situationally and reflexively taking care to maintain the balance between ethnicity and modernity (cf. Comaroff & Comaroff 1997). For the newly converted Christian or Buddhist Tangsas in Assam, their new religion has also become a significant third component of their identity.

As Ramirez remarks, “The self ascribed identity precedes the debate over political status”, and he goes on to explain why that is the case for the Karbi people: “Karbi are neither those who live in the autonomous district nor those who are governed by a peculiar set of institutions: they are all those who claim to be Karbi” (Ramirez 2007: 104). That is true, but the question still remains of what it means to be Karbi, or Tangsa in my case. Or the case of the Garos described below.

People construct ethnicity for many reasons: to be like others; to be different from others; to include; to exclude; to assert superiority; to make claims over territory; to forge unity in aggression or defence against their neighbours. One means of asserting common ethnicity is to share a name, and it may be that the label Garo helped to create Garo ethnicity. ‘Garo’ is not, in origin, a Garo word. Rather it is the name used for the Garos by their Bengali and Assamese neighbours and now by English-speaking foreigners. Garos know the term but if they are willing to use it, that is only because no single Garo word is its exact equivalent. It helps to give unity to a wider group of people than any other ethnic term available (Burling 2012: 60).

The process of formation of a pan-Tangsa identity is best described with the empty-vessel metaphor: an assorted group of tribes were given a new name – Tangsa, they needed to fill it with meaning in order to pass the requirements of being a tribal group, that is, a group with a distinctive culture. For them it was not just a question of defining boundaries, it was also not just a question of inclusion and exclusion, it was also a question of selectively choosing elements from their past, however imagined and contested they might be, to become symbols for as well as proof of their common ‘culture’ in the present, making sure that a subtle differentiation was maintained between their culture and that of their dominant non-tribal neighbour. Again this process is well-known: “Colonised people have ... valorised elements of their own cultural traditions – decontextualised or transformed – as symbols of the contrast between those cultures and Western culture” (Keesing 1989: 240).
Moreover, as many others have already noted, this whole process of identity formation, is itself a modern process. I have remarked elsewhere (Barkataki-Ruscheweyh 2013) that the readiness and ease with which the many diverse tribes have accepted the term ‘Tangsa’ and have made it their own is itself very surprising. However, this recognition of the need to find a common name for themselves was perhaps the first step towards recognising the need to have a new identity; earlier perhaps their tribal affiliations were enough, but not in a modern democratic state. Hence the very need to have a shared common identity is itself a ‘modern’ need partly imposed by the Indian state. Bhagabati confirms this view, “consolidation of cultural identity and its assertion, even if in ethno-political terms, are always concomitants of the modernization process” (Bhagabati 2004b: 178).

8.3.2 Instrumentalisation of ethnicity

Moreover, as I have already shown, this modern need is felt more acutely only by a small group of Tangsa leaders -- perhaps the emerging Tangsa elite -- who usually have other often personal reasons for wishing to project a new and consolidated Tangsa identity. In Chapters 4, 5 and 6, I have shown how the main festival organisers at Kharangkong, Malugaon and Phulbari, have used the festival as a springboard for their political ambitions and how the successful organisation of a festival was then used as proof of the organisational capability and leadership qualities of the organisers to give them greater credibility in the eyes of their own people and of the powers that be, thereby leading to furtherance of their personal political aspirations. This is a demonstration of Cohen’s notion of the mutuality of symbolic (cultural) and political identification (see Section 1.2.2) under certain conditions. Therefore it was no coincidence that exactly those three Tangsa leaders have become the only Tangsa members in the recently formed Development Council, see in Section 2.4.2.

In this manner they have become not only the representatives of their community but also mediators between their community and the government. This in a way is also evidence of the beginning of the process of formation of ‘elites’ within the community; elites who take the initiative of organizing these festivals and who influence their shape, according to their vision of what their own culture is or of what ‘should’ be shown to the external audience. This process is much in line with Brass’s argument (1991: 8) that

[ethnicity and nationalism [and in our case, identity] are not ‘givens,’ but are social and political constructions. They are creations of elites, who draw upon, distort, and sometimes fabricate materials from the cultures of the groups they wish to represent in order to protect their well-being or existence or to gain political and economic advantage for their groups as well as for themselves.

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18 Even more surprising is the fact, as already mentioned in Chapter 5, that although linguistically and historically the Hakhun are very close to the Nocte group, every Hakhun we asked told us, without a single exception, that now they consider themselves to be Tangsa and not Nocte.

19 This view is similar to Brass (1991) who argues that ethnicity and nationalism are modern phenomena, inseparably connected with the state.

20 In any case not older than the official recognition of the term ‘Tangsa’ itself in the 1950s.

21 As I have mentioned before, except for that small group who took all the decisions, the rest of the Tangsa people we met at Phulbari and Kharangkong did not have much idea about, nor did they have very strong opinions about how the festival would be conducted.
Gradually, these elites will begin to make other decisions for the community, and in this process, become even more powerful.

While it is clear that ethnic communities like the Tangsa do seek to instrumentalise their ethnic identity for obvious ends, that is, to use their ethnicity as a resource to gain agency and visibility (Tomkinson in Otto & Pederson 2005: 18), the ground reality is more complex than that. To understand that, one must look beyond the compulsions of elites to the everyday concerns of the community members.

The prevalent modern concern with identity and history among people in the margin of states are not only a matter of instrumental manipulation to gain access to land and resources (though of course this is critical), but concerns also what sociologist Stuart Hall (1996a) talks about as grounding one self and rediscovering a place from where to speak (Karlsson 2013: 327).

Exploring this further, Karlsson (2001: 31-32) describes it as “a subtle process of community formation. It is a matter of subaltern resistance and of constructing a ‘sense of self’ in opposition to the dominant, encroaching [neighbour].” This is exactly how I see the position and compulsions of at least some Tangsa in Assam, such as Aphu Tyanglam and Lemo Rara.

8.3.3 Who still calls the shots
In the village festivals I have described one saw “how politics of representations mix with performances of identity and combinations of ideologies”. As Deka (unpublished) notes, “ethnic consciousness constitutes an emotionally powerful ideological response to the pattern of insecurities generated by the power structure of the state, and therefore the character of the state constitutes the dominant influence upon the character of ethnic politics” (cf. Brown 1994: 258). Thus it is the nature of the power structure of the state that creates these insecurities in minority ethnic groups, which forces them to rise and take action; conversely, the character of their responses are determined by state policies; and as I have shown, performing their ethnicity at festivals is one way for small minority communities like the Tangsa in Assam to deal with this insecurity; so much so that just as in the case of the Thangmi people that Shneiderman (2011) discusses, at Tangsa festivals, the enactment of ethnicity is not so much for the benefit of tourism or for preservation of Tangsa culture, as it is for the consumption of the state, who is the ‘consumer of otherness’. This is also borne out in the difference in the intention of the festivals in Assam and in Arunachal. Since the power structure plays out differently in Arunachal, the Tangsa are more secure there, and hence do not need to project and perform their identity to the consumer state, as much as they have to do in Assam.

This brings us back to the important question of the role of the state in the actual form these festivals take. For a moment, let me go back to the event that I have described in the beginning of this chapter. Although this was not a Tangsa festival, it was a meeting which had primarily to do with the ethnic communities of that area. The book that was released was about the tribal communities living in that Indo-Myanmar border region (including the Tangsa and the Singpho) and the museum was also specifically for the same communities.

What happened that afternoon clearly reveals who still calls the shots in the Tirap area even when the focus is on these communities. The host Minister, the writer, the publisher, and their assistants (like me) were all Assamese. Therefore it is members of the predominantly
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Assamese mainstream who still claim the right to speak for those ethnic communities, write about them, then publish books about them, set up museums to immortalise their traditions, and then organise meetings, like the one under discussion, to inform the communities about all that they have done for the tribals. And the ethnic communities resent this. As veteran Karbi leader Teron (2011: 171) writes: “At the heart of all the violations of our human rights has been the failure to respect our integrity, and the insistence on speaking for us, defining our needs and controlling our lives.”

At the end of the day, the two politicians made political capital out of the entire event -- the resplendent old man sitting in between the two ministers was necessary only as an excuse for the beautifully orchestrated mutually reinforcing tandem-act. As for the ethnic communities, their presence was necessary because they were the ‘objects’ under discussion, and they played the role set out for them -- by adding ethnic flavour to the cultural asides and the gastronomic offerings. But nobody expected them to be able to speak for themselves -- after all they were just ‘objects’ -- dumb museum exhibits.

How things evolved that day shows clearly the actual reality in the Tirap region even today -- in Section 2.4.1, I have described how it is the Assamese and the local administration who decide whether or not to hold the Dihing Patkai Festival, a festival primarily meant for the tribal groups. The tribal communities might have been given a Development Council, many from these communities might well be educated and well-off, but it is still the case that even today, in 2013, the Assamese writers, politicians and administrators still feel the need to speak ‘for’ them, to ‘decide’ for them. The idea of setting up a museum for these communities might have been well intentioned, but were they actually asked for their opinion before the decision to set up the museum was taken?

8.4 Taking stock
This section is written in the postscript style of the other chapters because it is reflexive and assesses the shortcomings and gaps in this study as well as the important lessons learnt.

8.4.1 Shortcomings of my work
At the end of it all, I have to admit to significant gaps in my knowledge about the Tangsa. The Tangsa in Assam are too few numerically and too marginal to give a real impression of what being Tangsa could mean: the full range of ethnic and linguistic diversity as well as religious complexity prevalent amongst the Tangsa is not fully reflected in those living in Assam; for that one would need to also work with the Tangsa in Arunachal and with the Tangshang in Myanmar.

Even in the three villages in Assam where I spent a lot of time, I worked mostly with middle aged and older men, and hence cannot speak with any degree of confidence about the hopes and aspirations of the younger Tangsa, or about the women. Since our project had to do with documentation of the older Tangsa traditional culture, and most of the young people in the village were born Christian, we believed we were better off talking to the older people; also because we often had the feeling that the older people were more interested in our work. But even with them, since I did not think it proper to join them in the drinking sessions in the evenings, I probably missed out on a lot. Also since I was alone most of the time in the field, I had made it a rule not to take any unnecessary chances. That probably meant that I missed out on a
lot of more subtle and sensitive data which would have possibly come by way if I had been a little more daring.

Women’s perspectives are also vastly missing from my data, for although I did make special efforts, time and again, to talk to Tangsa women, often they were busy with their children, or in the field or with housework and did not have time to talk; else their men answered for them.

Since there was a general impression that our team was only interested in past times and older practices, the women often told me that I was better off talking to the men, although a few, like Aphu’s wife, had a very sharp memory for details like dates and place names.

I have also not been able to work in a rough description of the general Tangsa situation in Assam. For example, the fact is that quite a few of the Tangsa living in Assam belong to the Tikhak/Yongkuk groups and they are mostly Buddhist. But I have said almost nothing about them here, partly because I had decided to work mainly on the Pangwa groups, partly because there is a lot more known about the Tikhaks, thanks to Simai’s (2008) book, and also because another Australian linguistics doctoral student, Paul Hastie, was working with them around the same time. Even within the Pangwa groups, the Mossangs are numerically the largest in India, but since they are mostly in Arunachal, they are mostly absent in this work.

I did not manage to visit all the villages in Assam where the Tangsa live. Neither have I mentioned all the interesting features that I observed in the field, for instance, we discovered that there were many instances of paired Tangsa villages which were very close to each other but where the villagers had very little contact or no contact with one another. Nor have I delved into many of the very interesting debates that are very relevant to the discussion of ethnic communities in northeast India, for instance, how does the Tangsa case contribute to the debate on Scott’s (2009) thesis that “hill people have deliberately gone back to the hills to evade the state” (see Wouters 2012 for more on this topic).

Another serious shortcoming of my data is that although I have spent more than a year in all in the field, I have been there mostly in the winter months. As such I do not have any idea of how the Tangsa live or survive during the hot monsoon months, when most of the gravel roads become unusable. Another fall-out is that although I have focussed my analysis on festivals, I have only been present at winter festivals and have not seen the Moh/Mol or any other festival that is celebrated in the spring/summer/fall.

On a personal level, since I am by nature very talkative and very impatient; I have often prompted my interlocutors when they have taken too long to give me an answer, but did not realise it till much later when I played back the recordings. And the facts that we had a linguist in our team who was ‘doing’ the languages and that I could get around and communicate with everyone using Asamiya or Hindi meant that I did not make any effort to pick up even a few words in any of the Tangsa languages that my interlocutors spoke. In retrospect I regret that because at the end of the day in that respect I am guilty of having been every bit as arrogant and patronising as the other Assamese who I have found fault with. I also have to admit that my inability to keep calm and just let things take its normal course have cost me quite a few stories, such as for instance, the time in Malugaon when after a village gathering, the elders were preparing to relax over a smoke of opium; unable to contain my curiosity, I stupidly asked someone to confirm what
was going on, and that was enough for the Gaonbura to ask the elders to disperse, bringing that afternoon’s festivities to an abrupt end.

As for what is still left to do, this work has certainly not done justice to the Tangsa living in Arunachal. There are two reasons for this -- first because I feel I need to spend a lot more time in the field in Arunachal before I get to the stage of being able to write, and second, because I believe that that story deserves to be told in detail, separately. Aspects like making sense of the mind-boggling range of religious differences amongst the Tangsa in Arunachal: the Buddhists, the Rangfraites and the Christians (and their many different denominational variations), and how this plays out in their relations with one another and in their understanding of identity and culture, would be the natural sequel to this work.

From the combined work of our project team we are led to conjecture that there is a kind of ‘cultural and linguistic continuum’ spanning from the Tangsa in Changlang to the Tutsa, Nocte and Wancha communities in the Tirap and Longding districts extending all the way to the Konyak Naga groups in Nagaland. This would make sense, both in terms of locational contiguity of these groups and the similarities in their cultural practices. Stephen Morey has already started work on the linguistic aspects of this conjecture (with the help of a linguistics student from Gauhati University, Iftikar Rahman). Someday, hopefully soon, there will be enough data about these communities to be able to say more.

8.4.2 Looking back and lessons learnt

Only if to state the obvious, this whole exercise has taught me a lot about the Tangsa. But it has also told me at least as much about the Assamese and about myself.

First about the Tangsa, it was a disappointment to realise that there are no big secrets there waiting to be discovered, that nothing dramatic happened in Tangsaland on a daily basis which I had the exclusive right to report about, that my Tangsa interlocutors were more or less like me, and that in their everyday lives, decisions were made based not on some exclusive inspiration and wisdom reserved only for them as Tangsa but on common sense and pragmatism. As I got to know them better, I told myself that if festivals for most of them are nothing more than simply occasions to come together, to eat, drink, dance, sing and be merry, then I would have to be happy with that. If culture was just song, dance and dress for the people themselves then I would have to accept that. And if in the end, being honest about what I found in the field implied that my dissertation did not have anything profound to say about the Tangsa or their festivals, then I would have to live with that. My job was only to faithfully report what I saw and leave it at that.

Next about the Assamese: my time with my Tangsa interlocutors has left me very uneasy about my being an Assamese. I had seen a lot of evidence that Assamese hegemonic attitudes were largely responsible for keeping the Tangsa where they were and for magnifying the perceived differences. Perhaps one is more critical of one’s own people, and hence I might have over-reacted at times whenever there were Assamese involved, but still, it is a fact that the situation could have been different if the civil administrators, the politicians, the journalists and others who come into regular contact with these communities would simply learn to treat them, not with so much sympathy and compassion, but simply with respect due as equal individuals.
I have made many friends among my Tangsa interlocutors, have come to be accepted by many as a member of their families, but in the end, this whole exercise has been an experiment of self-discovery -- to find out who you are by placing yourself against who you are not, or by realising that the differences were not all that significant after all. And this has changed my own life world.

In writing this book, I am guilty of doing exactly what I have accused many others of having done: namely, speaking ‘for’ the Tangsa. But I have done so with their permission, and because many of them have even encouraged me to do so. I have tried my best to remain faithful to what I have seen and heard in the field in trying to present a snap-shot of the (ethnographic) present moment, for their future record. I have written, also because I want the Tangsa community, and many others like them, to speak up for themselves in the future.

The fact that an Assamese is writing this is relevant because as the dominant majority community in the state, the Assamese have been taking advantage of the fact that the Tangsa “cannot speak up for themselves” for too long. This is also my way to try to make good some of the hurt that we, as a community, have inflicted on those we have tried to boss over, over time. Someday I hope that we shall find a way to live together, in this land we call our own, treating each other with respect, due not because of anything else, but because of our common humanity.

8.5 Conclusion
Despite all the shortcomings, due to the improvised nature of my field work methodology, my own diffidence as well as all the various limitations mentioned in Section 8.4.1, if I have dared to write about the Tangsa at all, it is because I am convinced that the three villages I have studied are in many ways representative, and that the information I have gathered and the understanding I have acquired during my many months in the field and also at many other locations are enough to give a reliable picture of the Pangwa situation in Assam. Of course my study leaves out the non-Pangwa mainly Buddhist Tangsa groups living in Assam and also the much bigger Tangsa partly Christian population in Arunachal. But as already mentioned, including them would have taken the edge out of this study, as their situation and their problems are quite different from those addressed here. Nonetheless, discounting finer details, this study can be thought to be illustrative, in a broad sense, of the problems and issues that confront many other such small ethnic communities living at least in the Tirap area of Assam, such as the Singpho, the Naga Sema and the Tai Phake, and also indicative of the strategies many such small communities seek out to gain agency and to resist marginalisation.

The previous chapters have shown that the Tangsa use the platform provided by festivals to convey different and distinct messages. However, given the general situation in each village and the relatively unenviable position of the Tangsa in Assam, most of what they do during festivals and also in the ways they connect and network with other groups and communities can be considered as expressions of their marginality besides being strategies for survival and for acquisition of agency, be it performing their identity at festivals or wanting to move
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behind the fence – that is how the different strands and themes in this work so far come together to tell one and the same story.

My main underlying claim therefore is that their marginality is central to any analysis of the Tangsa in Assam. It is their marginality that makes them, in the most part, behave the way they do or take the decisions they take. When a community is forced to perform their ethnicity in order to remain in the reckoning, then this performance is not so much a show of agency as it is proof of their marginalisation. In that sense, festivals can be seen as assertions of difference and of self-worth in the face of existential threats of being subsumed by the Assamese (or more immediately by the Nepali and the Singpho), by Christianity, or of being rejected by the Nagas. Hence they also betray a sense of insecurity and nervousness.

Tangsa society as I have described it in the preceding chapters is in flux: like Leach's description of the Kachin world, the Tangsa system is also not in equilibrium (Leach 1954: 283). That is not at all surprising because “social systems are not naturally stable” (Ibid.: 285). However, unlike a regular predictable oscillation in Leach’s Gumsa-Gumliao model, there are no predictions that one can make in the Tangsa case, different segments are pulling in different directions, evolving in different ways, transforming into different and separate entities.

What is more, contrary to normal expectation, I have demonstrated how the valleys and plains dwelling Tangsa in Assam are in many senses relatively less ‘developed’ both economically, in terms of their education, as well as otherwise in comparison to many of their hill-dwelling relatives in Arunachal. I argue that that is mainly because they are also relatively less advantaged in Assam, mainly due to the different ways in which the two states of Assam and Arunachal handle their tribal populations. The incentive structure is different in Arunachal because of the way ‘tribal’ politics works in the scheduled tribe majority hill state. Therefore the contexts are different, and this makes the Tangsa also perform their identity at festivals differently in Assam than in Arunachal.

The Tangsa case is a good instance to observe the twin forces of consolidation and fragmentation in action. While, ethnically and politically, the different Tangsa groups try to come together under a common banner, in terms of religion there is ever-increasing splintering amongst the Christian denominations within the Tangsa. And as I have demonstrated with the Hakhun example, a section of the new leadership are trying to forge a special identity for themselves, even while remaining under the broader Tangsa umbrella. So these processes are neither uniform nor do they have the same effect on different parts of the Tangsa whole.

And while this tendency amongst the Tangsa to splinter and divide might be an impediment towards formation of a pan-Tangsa identity, their fractious character is in some sense part of their identity, just as it is for the Naga (cf. Jacquesson 2008; Longkumer forthcoming). Moreover, it is this tendency that forces them to be creative with regard to construction of their common identity and permits them to participate in the production of their own image, by being selective about which elements of their traditions to revive, which to abandon and which to reinvent.
Summing up, festivals are not only shows of self-confidence, they also reveal the inherent diffidence; they are also attempts at conformity rather than just flaunting difference. The professed culture is no longer something simply practised but something also performed. Furthermore, I claim that the surprisingly thin cultural and ritual content, and casualness with which these festivals are organised, is not accidental; the Tangsa in Assam are just too few in number and too deeply divided and too weakened by various problems -- they cannot do much better. But they still need to perform their identity in whatever way they can in order to make themselves visible and remain in the reckoning. And it also pays off for some individuals to some extent on certain occasions, as we have seen in the preceding chapters. But these are small gains compared to the bigger problems that afflict Tangsa society.

Most of all, what some Tangsa decide to do at festivals and how they go about doing it reveal the marginality and insecurity that small groups such as the Tangsa have to face on an everyday basis, so much so that a sense of being victims, of being victimised, can become a part of their identity. Festivals can best be understood as platforms where such communities attempt to turn the very facts, of being discriminated against and of being forced to perform their ethnicity, into instruments for securing special privileges and concessions for themselves, hence subverting the dominant discourse to serve their particular ends. But these acts do not only give evidence of their ingenuity or of their ability to strategise, they also reveal the helplessness and desperation of such small communities in Assam, who are constantly haunted with the fear of being further marginalised or of being completely annihilated altogether.

And finally, to end where I began, to answer the question of the young Assamese researcher (mentioned on page 1), given what I know so far, there is nothing so very special about the Tangsa. But why do they have to be special for us to want to know more about them? Is it not enough that they are people just like you and me? If I have only been able to convince my Assamese friends that the Tangsa should not be treated as creatures apart – this exercise would have been well worth the effort.
Appendices

I. Impact of the project on the community

The DOBES Documentation project has made possible the production of books/videos/dictionaries etc. based on material recorded from different communities. Although I will speak mostly about the Tangsa case which I know best, the project has also done extensive documentation work with the Singpho and Tai communities living in the same area of Upper Assam. Project leader Stephen Morey has been very supportive of efforts within the Tangsa community members to develop orthographies (using the Roman script with some additional characters) for their own languages, with which they can then actually start ‘writing’ down their stories and lyrics. There is a growing interest in some communities like the Hakhun, the Ronrang and the Langching to record their migration histories as well as in recording and writing down what they can still find out about their traditional village customs and practices.

As already mentioned in Section 1.5.1, Stephen Morey believes the project was a success for two principal reasons: first because in the course of the project we have at least managed to document some important aspects of Tangsa language and culture, and secondly because we have managed to involve some community members to carry on the work further. The general level of awareness for the need to record culture has gone up simply due to the presence of researchers (like those in our project team) who were interested in knowing more about and recording their traditional practices seems to have triggered off some sort of interest (and perhaps even pride) amongst certain community members to make a greater effort to discover more about and to give more value to their past.

Although the response has not always been uniformly encouraging, over the years we have seen the enthusiasm and eagerness of our Tangsa collaborators to join in our effort grow. In the last year of our project, we organised two 3-day workshops in Lakla to train young volunteers from different Tangsa groups to record and document their songs and stories; they evoked a lot of response. Equipped with

1. a book in Asamiya (Dutta 2011) containing the migration history of the Ronrang Tangsa people written about eighty years ago in Asamiya by a Ronrang who worked for the British (as obtained in a handwritten manuscript in the custody of his son) and stories by two other Ronrang elders, have been compiled, published and distributed to the community.

2. Cf. Morey 2005, Morey & Schöpf (under review). A student of linguistics from Gauhati University, Palash Nath, was research assistant of the DOBES project and has submitted his Ph.D. thesis in 2013 based on his work on orthography development with the Singpho community; many other students of linguistics from Gauhati University have contributed to the creation of comprehensive word lists and dictionaries, and recordings of around forty different language varieties – within Tai, Singpho and Tangsa. In all about 100 hours of video recordings, more than 100 hours of audio recordings, many hours of word by word transcriptions and thousands of photographs have been uploaded to the DOBES archives at Nijmegen.

3. In November 2011 a 1000+ word list of Kimsing (Chamchang) Tangsa with recordings was produced and work is on to have this online as a searchable dictionary with sound file links by Feb. 2014 (http://sealang.net/chamchang). Similar work is going on with Mossang Tangsa, where a word list is in the process of being uploaded (http://sealang.net/mueshaungx). This will also include a few words written in a script developed by a community member (Lakhum Mossang). See also http://sealang.net/joglei and http://sealang.net/cholim.

4. The Wihu song, for example, was not recorded at all before we started with our project (cf. Barkataki-Ruscheweyh & Morey 2013).

5. These workshops were held in 2012 to train community members on how to use video cameras, write metadata files and also to translate and work on the media files.
basic recording equipment financed from our project, a few community members are now carrying on the documentation work in their own communities that the project had started.

There were times, however, when the expectations some Tangsa had from the project exceeded reasonable bounds. For instance, Stephen is often asked his expert advice on the question of a suitable common script for the Tangsa languages. I have already mentioned Aphu Tyanglam hope that Stephen’s linguistic work would help the Tangsa to develop a common Tangsa language, taking words from the various Tangsa languages.

Moreover, sometimes it was not easy to see what all our work on documentation and transcription could be good for. The following story illustrates one such moment: one of the biggest tangible achievements of our project was the compilation of a bilingual collection (in Cholim and in English translation) of Tangsa stories as told to us by Aphu Tyanglam. Stephen had produced the manuscript after months of hard work, first recording the stories with Aphu, and later transcribing (using a phonetic script) and then translating the stories, word by word, line by line into English. Aphu was very excited about this project. However, before it could be published as a book, Stephen wanted someone from the community to check the manuscript for correctness. Since Aphu could not read and write in English, we had to find someone else to do the job. That turned out to be almost impossible, as even the graduate Cholim schoolmaster, who is the highest educated Cholim person in India we could find, could hardly read, leave alone, understand, either the English or the Cholim versions. We realised that publishing the book (in its bilingual form) did not make sense, as there was no one at all, at least amongst the Cholim speakers we knew, who would actually be able to read and make sense of the stories in Cholim, or be able to judge whether the English translations were appropriate.

Of course, with improvement in the levels of education and general awareness in the communities, there have been many new developments which have been initiated from within the communities themselves without any direct support from the project: the efforts amongst a section of the Tangsa to institutionalise and rationalise their traditional practices in the form of a new religion called Rangfraism, the efforts of the Tai Phake community to celebrate their New Year, to mention only two. Therefore even without the help of the project, all this would have come in any case, but perhaps not right away. Therefore it has been a two-way process to say the least, and I believe the story would have been somewhat different if our project had not existed.

The impact of the project on the Phulbari Shawi-kuh festival

A few incidents which occurred during the Phulbari Shawi-kuh celebrations in 2010, at which two of my project colleagues – Stephen Morey and Juergen Schöpf – were present, illustrate the extent of this impact.

1. In the morning of 5th Jan., when the group of older ladies from Kharangkong were performing the rituals and singing the Wihu song at the ritual post, some Hindi film music was being played over the loudspeakers on the stage where the public meeting would be held later in the day. Since the loud film music was making it difficult to hear and record the song being sung by the ladies, Stephen asked one of those present to turn off the Hindi music. Not only was that done but very soon a microphone on a

While the issue of common script is being debated within the community, our project team members have encouraged community members to write, using whatever script they felt most comfortable with. And as I have discussed in Section 5.4.1, since many Tangsa are routinely writing SMSs to each other, or communicating over Facebook, writing in one or the other of the Tangsa languages using the Roman script, they seem to be already well on their way to be able to do so.
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stand was brought and placed next to the ladies so that their singing could be heard over the loudspeakers. The ladies, who were busy performing the ritual without paying much heed of their being recorded till that moment, on seeing the microphone being placed in front of them, started to sing the Wihu song with renewed enthusiasm once more from the very beginning.

2. Later on, during the gaps in the proceedings, earlier recordings of Wihu songs and other songs that our project had made and presented to the community as DVDs were played over and over again over the public address system.

3. At dusk, when Lemo and the others wanted to formally bring the day's programme to an end, they decided to do so by asking a Phulbari village elder to come up to the stage and sing the Wihu song.

4. Later on, Juergen realised that he had forgotten to switch on the record button while a 'tiger-killing' dance was being performed for the VIPS by a group of Mukloms who had been brought in especially from Arunachal. Aphu told me later that he was very sorry that it had not been recorded, since it was hard to find Tangsa who knew how to perform that dance these days; he did not know the dance and had been very keen to have it recorded in order to show others, and also in order that some others could also learn the dance.

Finally, as I have mentioned elsewhere (Barkataki-Ruscheweyh 2013), I have to add a caveat, because, I am not sure how much of what we saw happening in the festivals at Kharangkong and Phulbari happened simply because of our presence there. While it is a fact that identity considerations have become a very important issue in the discussions and deliberations of the Tangsa elite in recent years, it is not clear whether festivals and their performance would have assumed such a significant role in this process of identity-construction and projection if our team of researchers had not landed on the scene and expressed great interest in documenting and recording their Wihu song and dances.

II. Reasons for some tribal groups receding to the hills

According to many elders who have lived all their lives in the area, in earlier times the area around Makum (now Margherita) was inhabited almost entirely by tribals; it was a predominantly Tangsa and Singpho area (with some other smaller groups) before the British arrived in the area. But now there are not many from those communities left there. Most of the Khampti people have moved into the Namsai area of Arunachal. The numbers of the other groups are also dwindling.7

Many writers have already reported on such movements (cf. Simai 2008: 25). The Kato (Katoi/Kadoi) Naga are probably related to the Tikhak as are the Yongkuk and the Hasak, and these were possibly the earliest Tangsa groups to settle in the Tirap area.8 Soon after coming down to the plains many Tangsa (Nokja and Kato) people are believed to have died from stomach ailments, malaria and other

7 The Report of the Assam Opium Enquiry Committee of 1924 states that from 1881 to 1901 there was a steady decrease in the indigenous Asamiya speaking population. This was chiefly due to the diseases of kala-azar (black-fever), cholera, small-pox and malaria.
8 See Hastie (forthcoming) for a further discussion of Tikhak and Kato.
various illnesses which were not prevalent in the hills. At present there is only one surviving family of Kato residing at Nampong in Changlang district.

Another Tangsa group, the Juglei (Jugli), met the same fate. “Some of the Jugli migrated to Khnagnah, which is located near Ledo (Assam), but could not stay there for a long period, as they could not adjust with the climatic condition of Assam, and had to return to Shallang” (Traditional Systems 2005; 104). I heard many other such stories from my informants. I was told that there were Jugli people living in the area around Babul Cinema Hall in Margherita but they fell ill with malaria and had to retreat back to Longvi village (near Jairampur) in Arunachal. Another informant told me that earlier there were many Ponthai people living in the Borgolai/ Namdang area and that they all first moved to Mounglang in Assam and then back to the area around Wagun Ponthai. As reported by Morey & Schöpf (under review) “the Moklum once populated large parts of what is now the Assam plains. While the dates for such movements are hard to fix, there is ample evidence that these movements took place.”

The fact that today many villages in the Tirap area with a majority non-tribal population, such as Parbatipur and Tinsuti Mullong, still have tribal GBs is indicative of the fact that the tribal people were the first ones to settle there. The name of places like Tikak and Malugaon bear witness to the fact that there were Tikak people living in the Ledo area at least 200 years back along with the Singpho and the Tai Phake communities.

Decrease in the Tangsa population also occurred when, after the Burmese invasion of Assam, the Burmese forced many Nokja young men from the Ledo area to go back with them as prisoners (to carry salt) to Burma. World War II was yet another reason for many Tangsa groups receding back to the hills – during the War, the tribal people living in the plains in the Lekhapani area were asked to move up to the forests and hills for their own safety. And finally the growing pressure of land caused by increase in settlers forced entire Tangsa villages, like Phulbari, to move back and resettle close to the Assam-Arunachal border or in Arunachal.

There are more romantic reasons too as many tribal elders told me: ‘hill people are so used to living close to forests that they don’t like staying in the open plains. Moreover, tribal people are like nomads and cannot stay in one place for too long.’ Moreover there is also the classical argument of hills people against plains people, which reminds one of Scott, as I heard from more than one of my older interlocutors:

the hills people have had an easy life and cannot cope with the problems of the plains, so they get cheated very easily and cannot be smart like the plains people. In Assam there are many problems so those who grow up there learn to cope. In the hills there are no problems so they lose out when they are faced with problems. There is enough to eat for everyone so they have not learnt the hard way to struggle for survival (DoI: 30.10.2012).

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9 It is commonly believed that malaria occurs more in the plains because there are more bamboo clumps in the plains where mosquitoes can breed. Cholera, dysentery, black fever and malaria were quoted as the common ailments to which the hill people fell prey.
III. Note on the Rangpang Nagas (relevant excerpts)

by Mr. T.P.M. O’Callaghan, Political Officer, Sadiya Frontier Tract

(Part of Annual Administrative Report for the year 1925-26 of the Sadiya Frontier Tract (Report 1926). Political B Sept. 26 No. 801, Assam State Archives)

Nagas of the Sadiya Frontier Tract: The regular administration of some of these tribes and clans was undertaken from 1923-24. Previous to this, enquiries into thefts by Nagas of iron rails from the collieries in the vicinity of Ledo brought to light the fact that the practice of human sacrifices undoubtedly still obtained among the Rangpang clans south of the Patkoi range. The Rangpang clans living on the northern slopes of the Patkoi, whilst admitting that they had made them in the past, denied that there had been any in the present generation. These latter Rangpangs were forthwith brought under direct administration, assessed to house tax and the survey of the area taken in hand and will be completed in 1926. This has brought the regularly administered area of the District to the crest of the Patkoi Ridge looking down on the area where barbarism still survives and to eradicate which the Governments of Assam and Burma are cooperating.

The detailed information available at present is given herewith:

Habitat: The Nagas occupy the hills in the Eastern portion of the southern area of the Sadiya Frontier Tract between the Plains of Assam and Burma and may be conveniently divided into (1) those between the plains area of the district and the Patkoi Ridge i.e. Cis-Patkoi (2) those between the Main Patkoi Ridge and the Assam-Burma boundary – Trans – Patkoi. Actually between the Patkoi Ridge, the Upper Chindwin District of Burma, the Hukawng Valley on the East and the Naga Hills District of Assam on the West is practically unexplored area, inhabited by Rangpang and other Nagas. Those living in the Hills adjoining the Hukawng valley are to some extent under the influence of the Sesan Singpho (Chingpaw) Headmen of Shinbwiyang etc. living in the Hukawng valley.

2> Cis-Patkoi: The Cis-Patkoi tribes of the Sadiya Frontier Tract consist of (i) Laju (Laiyu) and Hatut clans, 16 villages, 1125 houses, 11200 souls, living in the head waters area of the Tirap river in an area of about one hundred square miles i.e. a density of over 100 to the square mile a fact which will in time become an administrative problem owing to land hunger. These two tribes are not administered.

(ii) The Moklum: 6 villages, 185 houses, 1300 souls who may be classed with the Laju and Hatut; the Yogli and Rangrang both Rangpang clans who live in 10 small villages, 800 people, living between the Tirap river and the Namchik-Tirap watershed.

(iii) The Longri, Moshang, Lungphi, Ronrang, Tulem – all Rangpang clans – Yungkup, Kamlan and Tikkak – 30 small villages – 2000 people in the Namchik River Basin and eastwards. (ii) and (iii) are all administered from Sadiya though at present administration consists only in cold-weather tours and the collection of a house tax of Rs. 2/- per house. Sadiya to them has hitherto been but a name.

The noticeable features of the Laju and Hatut are the comparatively large village communities. Laju, the main village of the clan, consisting of some 400 houses with a population close on 4000 is, however, exceptional. These two clans with the Moklum seen to have affinities with the Namsang, and other clans of the South-west and West and have probably been forced Northwards along the Western slope of the Patkoi by clans of the Mokochang unadministered area. They deny performing
human sacrifices. They are head hunters and the skulls are still preserved in the ‘morungs’ or meeting houses. Laju has a good collection, Borduria a small village (60 houses) in the Lakhimpur unadministered Naga area is in proud possession of a collection of many generations, several hundreds carefully preserved and arranged in the ‘Morung’!

3> The headmen are elected and their influence rest largely on individual character and personality. The men are physically well-developed but slight in build, averaging 5’ 3” and the elder men often refined and slightly aquiline in appearance though the younger men are course (sic) and heavy-looking. They shave the front of the head but allow the rest of the hair to grow wearing it gathered up in a knot at the back of the head. The high pointed narrow hat of closely woven cane decorated with pigs tushes and bristles and toucan (hornbill) feathers is common and with this and pierced ears ornamented with gural horns or flowers or pocelain (sic) beads – the young ‘buck’ is a pleasing sight. The Laju women clip their hair as close as possible. Both clans are polygamous, and say they are endogamous. The Laju bury their dead while the Hatut burn. Each village as its young mens ‘club’ or clubs each with its ‘canoe’ drum twenty feet in length and two feet in diameter. When beaten alternately in unison by ten or twelve men ranged on either side the effect is impressive and the sound travels a great distance and messages broadcasted. There have been no inter-clan raids of recent years. The arms are the broad bladed dao and spear and an occasional flint lock gun and effective shields of bark are used. The Laju, unlike the Hatut and all others, do not come down to work in the plains. The former are the middlemen – astride the trade route – between the Nagas to the West from whom they take salt, and trade opium, daos and spear-heads from the Trans-Patkoi Nagas to the East.

Borduria in Lakhimpur unadministered area has twenty brine wells and supply salt as far away as the Hukawng valley. To the West of the Laju between them and the Sibsagar Naga area live the Nivongs who are said to go naked and are despised accordingly. Even the children of

4> of the Sadiya are people wear clothes. Both men and women tatoo – the men from the shoulders to the solar plexus a V shaped diagram on chest and back in lines half an inch apart as well as serrated lines round the neck when they have taken a head and the women the lower part of the forehead and upper part of the nose. Slaves are not kept. Very many of the men and some of the women smoke opium.

They are prosperous, contented and healthy – they can more than hold their own in their area and treasure their independence and do not want to be interfered with by administration or otherwise. The Laju people have been credited with supplying i.e. selling victims for human sacrifice to the Rangpang clans. They deny it. It is very probably that they did so in their old raiding days.

As regards (iii) who live North-East of the Moklum, they are, with exception of the Tikkak, Kamlan and Yungkup, Rangpang clans who have migrated in search of food and land over the Patkoi from the basin of the Dilli (Namphuk) river where their present clans and affinities still live. They are in physique and general virility inferior to the Laju, Hatut and Moklum.

There is but little known at present of these Naga tribes and clans. The Hukawng Valley is a historical route of invasion of India from the South-East and these Nagas are possibly early arrivals, pushed aside by the Ahoms and Kachin tides of movement, having been left behind by some pre-historic conquerors of Assam. It is noteworthy that other peoples of Assam History are believed to have been addicted to human sacrifices i.e. Chutuyas, the Ahoms etc.

The Rangpang clans are monogamous and endogamous:
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5> some burn and some bury their dead. They are addicted to opium which is grown everywhere in the trans-Patkoi area. They keep to themselves and there is but little interclan trade. Though their language is one there are noticeable differences in dialect between the clans.

All Nagas do ‘jhum’ cultivation, rice and Kochu (arum tuber) being the staple crops. They keep cattle, buffalo, pigs and fowls. The monotony of their primitive lives are varied by feasts which are held on the slightest pretext.

TRANS-PATKOI NAGAS: The main area of the Rangpangs clans is the basin of the Dilli (Namphuk Hka) River system which is a tributary of the Chindwin river. To the East is the Kachin settled Hukawng valley, while on the West is the unexplored area of the big raiding Naga villages East of the unadministered area of the Naga Hills District of Assam, i.e. East of the Assam-Burma boundary. The clans are Moshang, Morang, Langshing, Yogli, Sangke, Shangwa, Mimung, Katsan, Longri, Lonphai, Sograng, Sangtai, Dungai, Motai, Tulim & c. The general description already given of the Rangpang of the administered area, cover them – a people in no way impressive, living in unkempt hamlets.

HUMAN SACRIFICE: This custom has been and is a normal practice among all Rangpang clans which they explain as a reaction to felt necessity to appease the spirits. It is primarily a personal or communal votive and intercessionary gift and will be vowed in times of difficulty i.e. promised for the future if a victim be not immediately available and it is such promises already made to the spirits, which many clans in the unadministered area have advanced as one of their main reasons for not immediately abandoning the practice i.e. the fear of retribution due to the non-fulfilment of such vows. More than one house-hold may subscribe to purchase a victim: in time of urgency a slave victim may be borrowed to be replaced later or may

6> be bought on credit and even buffaloes etc. stolen to provide part of the price. Victims who are generally slaves, captives in war, may be of either sex and any age and cost from rs. 300/- to Rs. 500/- . Doubtless, useless members of the community are seized and sold and also weak, helpless debtors in a powerful turbulent village. Rangpangs do not supply any victims themselves and all admit that the source of supply is way to the South and South West i.e. the Dilli (Namphuk) River Basin and Westwards. i.e. West of the sandri Bum and Magri Bum Ridge where Rangpang area may run with the big raiding, headhunting Naga villages in the unexplored area of the Naga Hills District of Assam. The Rangpang not only sacrifice but also traffic in victims, the Dilli basin people not only buying from the West and sacrificing, but buying and reselling, in fact it is probably the custom for a victim to pass through more than one hand before meeting his or her end. The slaves are always described of being of an unknown clan, tattooed on the cheeks and forehead and speaking an unknown tongue. The Rangpang of the administered area give the Laju clan one as the sources of supply in the past. The Laju dwell just inside the Sadiya Frontier Tract unadministered area – it is the most Northerly of the big head hunting villages and though they deny keeping slaves or trafficking in them, it is extremely probable that some of them did it in the past. They number some 7,500 people. When purchased for sacrifice the victim is kept in the house of the owner, well cared for and fed but kept in stocks if there is any suspicion that escape may be attempted. The sacrifice is within a month of purchase unless bought for resale. On the appointed day, selected, as is the executioner by divination by the ‘wise’ men, the victim is drugged with opium or drink or, failing these, even beaten into insensibility, led to the front

7> of the front verandah of the house and decapitated by a blow or blows on the neck from behind at the top of the notched tree which serves as a ladder entrance to the verandah. The skull when clean is divided in two perpendicularly and the front hung suspended in the verandah room. As for the body, one account is that the body is divided up and the bones, flesh and entrails are sold as charms or divided among clansmen: another account is that the body is buried in the jungle and when the bones
are cleaned they are distributed or sold. Others have stated that the body is buried unmutilated. The executioner, it may be noted, is never of the household of the donor of the victim.

It has often been alleged that runaway coolies from the Assam tea gardens, and Coal Mines, Earthworks etc. have been enticed away by the Rangpang and others, seized and sold as victims but enquiries have hitherto failed to elicit any evidence whatsoever to support these allegations.

The march of time and progress has brought Government to the question of eradication of this horrible custom. The preliminary enquiries have disclosed a problem of real magnitude: the area concerned inhabited by those who sacrifice and those who are the source consists of tumbled masses of mountains inaccessible and practically all unexplored, totalling in area at least 10,000 square miles. The intimate administration of this area is at present beyond practicability. The obvious action for immediate suspension is the cutting off of the source of supply of victims. Even were Government in an easy position to enforce my arms immediate orders to abandon the practice – which it is not, something more than a force is required. At first sight it is easy to assert that with people who have not emerged from barbarism the only law until such time as they can be educated to a higher state of reasoning and conduct is force. Here are children of nature, isolated, hitherto working out their own destinies with social customs, primarily the result of physical environment. Analysis of the principles of human section, which explains particular events in this matter as in everything else must be made and the results studied. Government has started to make it clear beyond all possible doubt and compromise that the practice is opposed to all humanity and these ideas becoming widely prevalent are a substantial coercion to right-thinking according to civilisation. Travelling back in thought to the background of our own history in which Sun-worship and the Druidical rites are a dim memory, one can approach the question with understanding and a spirit of patience and of hope and this spirit will give vision and initiate a reasoned onward movement from barbarism. There will be advances and relapses but progress will continue. A good number of villages have already publicly undertaken to give up the practice so there is in existence a right-thinking section to show the way to their fellows. As little interference as possible and full liberty to arrange the personal details of their lives compatible with our ideas must be the policy. Enthusiasm with patience is necessary if pressure and success is to result, looking beyond the immediate effect of what actual action is taken. So much for theory and generalisation, there remains the details of immediate effort indicated. These peoples must be systematically visited by sympathetic understanding officers from Burma and Assam from the South and West and from the North and East respectively and regular campaign undertaken on the lines indicated. Where reasonably possible main routes and intervillage tracks must be improved to become Belloc’s ‘channels, not only of trade but of ideas and of progress, to move and control them intellectually as well as physically.

These notes are the results of hurried tours on the fringe of the Rangpang country and it is hoped that they will serve as a basis for the preparation of detailed reliable information of these peoples.

Signed O’Callaghan, Political Officer, Sadiya; dated: 27.4.26

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10 Elsewhere it is mentioned that 34 villages have done so.
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IV. Tangsa orthography

According to Morey (unpublished), the history of writing in Tangsa can be broadly divided into six stages:

Folk stories of an ancient form of writing done on the hide of animals that was lost when it was eaten by the ancestors (these stories are widespread in the region);11

The writing down of word lists and sometimes texts by scholars, starting in the 19th century. The oldest records of this kind are the Moshang (Mossang) word lists of Needham (1897), continuing through to Dasgupta (1978, 1980) and to the present with the work done in our project;

Roman-based orthographies designed for use as ‘common language’, particularly for Bible translation and hymn books and in the medium term for literacy development;

Orthographies designed for single subtribes to preserve cultural information;

More informal orthographies;

Non-Roman based scripts.

With all the Tangsa languages being oral, there is to date no standard writing system or orthography that has been accepted by all of them. However, there are at least three Bible projects we are aware of all of which use different variations of the Roman script. Besides an already published Bible in Kimsing (Chamchang), the Bible is also being translated into Mossang and Juglei. In addition, there are several other orthographies that we know about: one, developed by Lakhum Mossang, uses a new script marking tone with 78 symbols;12 and a second new script has been developed by Latsam Khimhun. Finally there is a Roman based orthography developed by Beike Mungray, which uses the Roman script.

As I discuss in Section 7.4.1, the lack of a common script has been one of the major reasons, cited by Tangsa leaders, for their disunity and ‘backwardness’; see also Simai (2008: 120). The problem seems to be not much easier for the Tangsa (Tangshang) in Myanmar. As Statezn (unpublished) reports on the situation there:

To be Naga (or Chin) is to write in Roman script. While today more and more people are receiving schooling in Burmese and are taught the Burmese script, the Burmese script is seen as Buddhist, because the Burmese people are predominantly Buddhist. For a predominantly Christian group like the Tangshang, use of the Roman script helps to distinguish them from Buddhist groups.

To conclude this section one can only agree with Statezn that, “As is typical, ..., identity issues trump accessibility and linguistic issues.”

11 Grothmann (2012: 136) refers to the same story prevalent amongst the Lopa communities (who live next to the Memb community) in western Arunachal Pradesh.

12 A font has been developed for this by Paul Hastie, and can be seen online at http://www.aftm.net.au/dictionary_web/linguals_1_43.html, which includes links to sound files.
V. Traditional practices

Human Sacrifice

The Pangwa performed human sacrifice for primarily two reasons: either when a person was gravely ill, or as a sacrifice during a feast of merit, called *Khau-tang* (Juglei) / *Dah-tang* (Mossang) / *Dawan* (Ronrang) / *Di-ta* (Kimsing). Feasts of merit are described by Rustomji (1985: 33) as feasts that were offered to the community by the more prosperous and influential members.

When a person was gravely ill and was near death, as a last resort, families who could afford to do so would buy a healthy ‘slave’ and perform a human sacrifice in order to effect an ‘exchange’ of life of the sick and the sacrificed persons. When some misfortune or ill-luck befell a household, like if the crops got spoilt so that there had a bad harvest, or a woman died at childbirth, then the family would try to at least buy a piece of human flesh (from a human sacrifice made by some richer person) for use against the evil spirits which were causing the trouble.

Human sacrifice would be accompanied by dancing to the beating of drums and ringing of pistol shots; many rituals had to be performed for over a period of five days; many buffaloes and pigs would also have to be sacrificed. Lots of rice beer had also to be brewed as a lot of eating (of roast meat) and drinking (of rice beer) would also take place. It was a major event not just for the village but for all the clan-relatives of the host family. The family who hosted such a sacrifice had to bear all the expenses. The executioner’s family was also accorded a special position. A ritual song called *ku-shi* or *da-shi* (Ronrang) (*da/di* meaning slave) would be sung during the sacrifice; see ‘Songs and Dances’ below. The person sacrificed was usually from some enemy clan and was bought for the sacrifice. They were usually poor, and were supposed to be lazy or just mischievous trouble-makers who were sold by their parents.

After the sacrifice, the body was thrown away deep in the forest and the head was left in the jungle to rot. When only the skull was left it was brought back and ceremonially installed in the house when another ritual (*di-khu-pa*) (*di-khu*: slave – head, Kimsing) was performed. Rows of buffalo skulls fixed in vertical columns on the main wall of some houses were all that I got to see of this practice in the Mossang Tangsa village of Renuk. The practice of doing human sacrifice was abolished by the British administrators in the mid 1920s although there have been further instances of it occurring much later (cf. Means 2000, see also Fn. 49 of Chapter 3).

Tangsa Cosmology and Traditional beliefs

Tangsa cosmology was peopled by spirits and unseen forces which played a role in their everyday life. They were not nature-worshippers, nor did they worship objects, like stones or trees. Neither did they pray to any god or spirit on a regular basis (cf. Ghosh 1992: 115-16). They believed that there

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13 Dutta (1969: 77) makes a difference between feasts of merit and the *Dawan* ceremony of the Ronrangs which he describes as a religious festival for the welfare of the people in which human beings were sacrificed, performed annually in December. For another description of the Ronrang *Dawan*, see *Traditional Systems* (2005: 80).

14 As told to me by Phanglim Kimsing (Chamro, 13.11.10), Laoko Langching (19.11.2009) and Mohen Ronrang (20.01.09). Phanglim Kimsing has never seen a human sacrifice. He told me what he had heard from others. For a detailed written account of the procedure in which such a ceremony was conducted and for many other fascinating insights into the lives of the Naga tribes at that time, see Dewar (1927:23).

15 Some Tangsa groups had the practice, however, of installing stones at one or both ends of a village where certain rituals associated with human sacrifice would be performed.
were other beings that they did not see, or could not see, which also shared the same physical space with them, and who complained when they felt their rights had been impinged upon. Of course, difference was made between benign forest spirits (*rim-rim-ku*) who did not do anyone any harm as long as they were left alone, and mischievous spirits (*thang-no*) who played pranks and troubled people (by making a person trip and fall while walking alone in the forest, for example). But they considered this difference to be nothing unusual – after all there were also mischievous people who played pranks on these poor spirits in just the same way.

Dependent as they were on burn-and-slash swidden cultivation in the hills, once a forest area had been chosen for clearing for the next round of cultivation, they would go to the forest, about a week before the cutting and burning was due to start, and literally give ‘notice’ as it were to those creatures, both visible and invisible, that lived there, explaining why they had chosen that particular forest, begging their forgiveness and requesting them to leave and move to a safer place with their little ones and belongings before the action started. The same procedure would be followed just before they would fell a big tree. The only ritual they did on a regular basis (mostly annually) was to organise a feast in honour of their house spirit – the *Matai/Mettei* -- who they believed lived with them in their houses, and watched over and protected them.

As mentioned above, some Tangsa classify spirits into good spirits and the bad ones (Ronrang 1997: 15). The good spirits were the ones, like the spirit of Wihu/Wihau, which they called upon and honoured at festivals so that they would bring them greater wealth and prosperity; see Section 4.2.1. Apart from a few ailments and bruises which could be cured by forest herbs and plants, sickness or illness (and death) were believed to be caused by some bad spirit, which had been offended for some reason. This necessitated first calling a diviner\(^{16}\) to ascertain the spirit responsible and also to work out what would have to be offered to appease it. This usually involved having to perform some rituals and sacrificing some animal, mostly a cock, but sometimes also pigs, cows and buffaloes, and for some special spirits also monkeys and dogs. Most bad spirits could be appeased with some food and attention, it was believed. But in serious cases, special priests with extraordinary powers called *shammans*\(^{17}\) (*khamme* in Cholim) would have to be summoned. Some of these *shammans* were known to be very powerful and were believed to have been able to physically pull out worms from people’s

\(^{16}\) *Vela* are the diviners who do augury with leaves and *tai-ti-ling* are those who do divination using a stick.

\(^{17}\) The *Shammans* are people who show signs of being extraordinary already at birth – they often have birthmarks (such as tiger stripes) or some such sign. *Shammans* recognise each other and have special healing powers or have the power to see what they should do in dreams. They can be both male and female. They are people whose spirit can link with other spirits like that of a tiger, or a dead person; they roam about from village to village, singing the Shamma-song and go to the forests to meet the spirits; most can also make prophecies and read the future. (As told by Wamjung Ronrang, Phulbari, 21.11. 2009)

*Shammans* (are different from the normal priests(*dumsa*) who do augury etc) and they have special powers of connecting with souls. While performing a ritual to cure a sick person, the shamma goes into a trance, and starts to sing in a different language. He is himself not aware of what he is singing. While in a trance, he only sings; does not talk. He sings by himself – the people who listen have to understand what he is saying. When he sings the soul of some other spirit enters him; he is hardly aware of what is going on, but he can work miracles – just by singing. Some *Shammans* can make a live insect crawl out from inside of the mouth of the sick man or from the body of the sick man – the insect is killed by putting into hot ash. After singing for 2-3 hours he tries to come out of the trance by asking for cigarettes, ginger or opium, then one has to put the appropriate amount of money on a plate and after a while the money is gone and the cigarette is there. (As told by Phanglim Kimsing, Chamro, 27.11.2009. He also said that he has heard about all this but has not seen these things for the last 30-40 years.)
stomachs or even exchange the life-spirit of a dying man with that of a healthy one; see also Simai (2008: 69).

**Songs and dances**

The Pangwa groups have a rich repertoire of songs and dances. It is worth noting that in some cases, songs sung in different languages, might share the same names, tunes, contexts and meanings. In other cases, songs with the same content might have different meanings (cf. Morey and Schöpf under review). As mentioned already in Section 3.4.1, the song language used for the traditional songs of different Pangwa groups are much closer than the spoken languages today, and this enables older people from different Pangwa tribes to understand each other even though they might not know the spoken languages of the other groups.

The most important traditional songs are the Wihu songs, the love-songs (called rin-shi (Ronrang), or nyo-jyo-shya (Cholim)) and the Shamma song, while the most important dance was the Sahpolo tum (dance). The Wihu song tells the story of the creation and migration of the Tangsa and is also an invocation to the spirit of mother earth, the Wihu/Wihau. The Wihau / Shawi singers are called shiwis, and they often sing the song as a duet. Shamma-shi are spirit-calling songs sung by Shammas when called upon to cure disease or to avert impending disaster.

Thewang-shya was sung when a new house had been constructed (which often coincided with the time when a buffalo sacrifice would be held by the new house-owners) and shau-shi (tiger-killing song and dance) was sung by the Ronrangs when they went to kill a tiger. The wang-nyam dance was performed with drums when a human sacrifice was performed (Rennan Lungri, 3.11.2009), ku-shi (or da-shi, da meaning slave, is sung while performing a human sacrifice and tells the slave that ‘there is no sin of the buyer, the sin is with the seller; your parents have not been able to take care of you and have sold you – the sin is theirs’, while re-shi (re meaning enemy) is sung when they bring back an enemy head – the song says ‘you said you would kill us, but because you dared us, now we have killed (cut) you’. The singers are supposed to get possessed while singing songs like the wihau-shya, the shamma-shi and the da-shi.

While there are very few people left who can sing these songs, even among them, the ones who have converted are hesitant to sing because these songs were thought to be associated with spirits and the other forces which they have given up. Another problem, as mentioned earlier, was that in earlier times, there were strict rules about where and in whose presence the love-songs could be sung – they could be sung either alone in the forest or only in the presence of one’s loved one. It was strictly

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18 Songs are called shi (Ronrang)/ shya (Cholim). I shall use both shi/shya depending on my informants. My main informants were Mohen Ronrang from Phulbari and Nangtu Ronrang from Manmao, besides Aphu Tyanglam, Laoko Langching and Phanglim Kimsing.

19 For more on the Wihu/Wihau song, see Barkataki-Ruscheweyh & Morey (2013). Non-Pangwa tribes do not have the Wihu song. But some of them like the Hakhun and the Moklum Tangsa have songs, of epic length, which also tell their migration story, called Phon-tu-si (see Section 5.1.1) and Run-hun respectively. For examples from other non-Tangsa communities, see Gaenszle 2002, Blackburn 2010.

As mentioned already in Section 4.2.2, the Wihu song is usually sung in the form of a duet by a host and a guest wherein the host invites the guests into their home to partake of the rice-beer and the roast meat on the occasion of Wihu-kuh. The long version however, tells the migration history of the Tangsa tribes – it is a song of epic length (which used to be sung by two singers for several hours, often from dusk to dawn). The song language used in the Wihu and other traditional songs is different from the everyday spoken language, as a result of which not many Tangsa understand the meaning of the Wihu song any more; see also Appendix VIII.
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forbidden to sing these songs at home or anywhere else in the presence of parents or siblings. Hence there was general embarrassment and hesitation when a singer was asked to sing a love-song. Many of our interlocutors who have sung love-songs for us have done so only after saying a few words excusing themselves for doing so and explaining why they felt it was necessary to record the songs before they were forgotten altogether.

Not everyone can sing all these different types of songs, nor can they sing unless they are sure they know how to sing them correctly. Several instances of singers becoming unconscious or falling ill because they had made a mistake while singing a wihau-shi or a ku-shi were reported. Some songs like the re-shi or the shaa-shi are accompanied by action. Besides these, the Sahpolo and the gong-dance seem to be the only traditional dances, still being performed by the Pangwa. The non-Pangwa Hakhuns, in comparison, have a much larger repertoire of traditional dances today – the horn-bill dance, the bridge-building dance, the tiger killing dance etc. The only musical instruments we saw being used by the Pangwa are gongs (of different sizes) and the two-sided drums.

VI. Marriages and kinship rules

Up till this day, marriage is seen as a transaction between the two families; the boy’s family asks for the hand of the girl, and the bride-price\(^{20}\) is seen as a way of honouring the girl and her parents and as proof that the boy is able to take care of his wife and their children. Opium, rice-beer, sunga tea,\(^{21}\) and later also cash, were possibly the original items to effect the transaction. The bride’s father (who is usually a paternal uncle of the groom) has the highest place in this transaction, and the kembe (mediator) is the most important person after the groom himself from the boy’s side. The wedding itself has no other ritual apart from the blessing from the elders with the tying of a thread (produced from the reiben-wild jute plant) on the wrists (a ritual which is done on other occasions too) of the couple. The social component of the event, of feasting together, of going to ask for the girl’s hand, of asking the relatives and the village elders permission to marry and so on all show how the marriage is not seen as just a transaction between two individuals but between two families, between two clans and in some cases, even between two villages or tribes. Conversion to Christianity and Buddhism has brought about some changes to the process. While the matchmaking is still done using the old rules, the wedding rites have changed depending on the religion of the parties concerned.

The children of any union are always considered to be part of the man’s family, regardless of whether the parents are together or not. While following clan exogamy rules, most are free to choose their own partners. And on death of one of a couple, the other was free to marry again. Birth, attaining puberty, marriage, remarriage and even death are seen as part of the normal scheme of things and are accepted as such. Birth and marriage are considered to be happy occasions and death a sad one.\(^{22}\) The dead man’s property is divided amongst the children – the sons who stayed at home and took care of their...

\(^{20}\) For more about bride price also amongst other communities in Arunachal Pradesh, see Saikia & Mishra (2001).

\(^{21}\) Tea leaves stuffed into a bamboo stem (sunga, Ass.) and smoked dry over the hearth for several months.

\(^{22}\) Death caused by accidents and by unnatural causes (including dying at childbirth) was believed to be extremely inauspicious and was considered to be caused by powerful but bad and mischievous spirits. The corpse in such cases is simply thrown into the fire and done away with as quickly as possible. Of course, the Buddhist and Christian Tangsa do things differently now.
father get more, married daughters get a share of the pigs and chicken of the dead man, but not of the money.

**Matchmaking:** The Tangsa practise still clan exogamy in marriage, but the clan rules regarding marriage are complicated; direct or reciprocal exchange is strictly not allowed; however a system of "generalised exchange" is practised. Typically a man’s universe is divided up into three disjoint sets – the sibling set X of his ‘brothers and sisters’ within which there could be no marriage (this includes all parallel cousins, i.e. sons of father’s brothers and daughters of father’s sisters), the set Y (of wife-givers) from whom he (and his brothers) can take (marry) girls; and the set of people Z (of wife-takers) into whose family he could give his ‘sisters’ in marriage; each set is a union of clans. The set Y is called ‘nyai-hu/iguni’ (sasur-jat Ass.), the set Z is the ‘gyu-sha/idetang’ (jowai jat Ass.) and the set X is ‘phu-wai/phu-wa’ in Morang/Ronrang.

It is believed that marrying into the mother’s clan is the best for a man because that has already happened (when his father married his mother). It is also a way to show respect to the mother’s clan. Marriages across tribes and across unrelated clans are also allowed but then this starts a new direction of clan relationship which must be respected by later marriages amongst the sibling group X.

Since direct exchange is not allowed, there should be at least three clans X, Y and Z in a tribe; Schematically,

![Figure A-1 : The 'directionality' of marriageable clans](image)

where the direction of the arrow indicates the movement of girls from one clan to another due to marriage. Since the number of clans are limited, the line closes to form a circle after a few steps. Of course all these rules have been relaxed over time and the practice of marrying one’s actual cross cousin is not so common any more.

Due to the inherent gender asymmetry in the system, kinship terms (for in-laws) differ depending on the gender of the ‘ego’. The gender asymmetry also gives rise to a hierarchy: a person from the group X holds the members of group Y, of potential wife-givers, in much higher esteem than those of Z, of potential wife-takers. Another consequence is that a man’s father-in-law and maternal uncle are in

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23 It was decided in the course of several meetings in Manmao 6-7 years ago, that a fine of Rs. 7,000/- would be imposed when a couple decided to marry, although the clan rules forbade it (Mohen Ronrang, 20.1.2009).

24 By this I mean that a brother and sister pair cannot get married to another a brother and sister pair. In other words, the clans from which the sons can get their wives are strictly different from the clans from which daughters can get their husbands. Just as water flows in only one direction, so Tangsa marriages can take place only in one direction. This is one of the basic differences between the matchmaking rules of the Assamese and that of the Tangsa (and many other tribal groups living in the area, like the Singpho). although some tribal groups living in northeast India do practice restricted exchange, like the Garos (Sangma give to Marak, Marak give to Sangma).

25 Many among the Tangsa believe this to be the reason for degeneration of the Tangsa population in general; for instance it is claimed that the Tangsa today are shorter than they were earlier.
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ideal situations the same person and have the same kinship term agu.\footnote{Since it follows that a girl marries her paternal aunt’s son, actually the terms for maternal uncle, paternal aunt’s husband and father-in-law are the same (agu in Cholim). In case a marriage actually takes place then there is a qualifier to imply that this particular uncle is also the father-in-law (agu-peve or agu-fa in Cholim).} [For women, her father’s sister is often her mother-in-law.] Even sons and grandsons of the agu are called agu as they all belong to the same group, with regard to marriage. By the same logic, for a man, his maternal uncle’s daughter, if he did not marry her, is in the same marriage group, as his mother; he therefore addresses her as his mother’s sister.

It is worth noting that in the Tangsa kinship terminology there is a term, anning in Cholim, which is reserved for the universe of cousins with whom marriage of the ego is possible while there is another term, ase in Cholim, for those siblings and parallel cousins with whom marriage is not possible. Note that while the ‘ase’ sets of two siblings is the same, the set of ‘annings’ for a boy is different from that of his sister. As far as I could ascertain these matchmaking rules are followed by almost all Tangsa groups.

\[\text{VII. Lifestyle: food, shelter, clothing, occupation}\]

Traditionally,\footnote{For example, the description follows closely the description of the home of Dahe Langching of Longtom village in Kharsang, Changlang.} the Tangsa used to live in stilt houses, called rang-jim (in Cholim and chang-ghars in Ass.) made of bamboo and wood. A wooden stair hija-chung (made by simply cutting grooves in a long log of wood) is set at both the front and the back of the raised platform (chang). The walls and floor are made of woven bamboo slivers and the roof is usually thatched with palm leaves. A typical Tangsa kitchen chang has an open area in front leading to a half-enclosed area with an earthen hearth (called tap-khu), over which the man of the house presides. The inner enclosed room (called tap-mung) also has an earthen (clay) hearth where the meals are cooked by the ladies. This usually opens out to an open chang jim-sang at the back where the washing (of food and dishes etc.) is done. Male guests are also entertained usually around the outer hearth while the women go into the inner cooking area.

\begin{figure}
\centering
\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{kitchen.png}
\caption{The structure of a typical kitchen chang}
\end{figure}

While what I have described above is the minimal set up; larger families have more rooms, sometimes arranged on both sides of a central corridor, most rooms having an earthen hearth placed somewhere in the centre of the room. The family members usually sleep on the floor (chang) by rolling out mats and bedding. In winter, around the hearth of the inner room is the warmest place. When there are guests, a simple solution of segregation of the sexes is followed, the men sleeping in the outer area and the women in the inner room. There is not much by way of furniture in a Tangsa chang-ghar, at most there is a low table (often with a lockable drawer) next to where the master of the house sits on
which he sometimes eats his meals and where he stores his important papers and documents (cf. Simai 2008: 83, Dutta 1969: 12).

One of the inner posts of the inner room is usually selected as the main ritual post of the house (*myen-ryo-chung*) where certain rituals during festivals are performed. The earthen hearth is made by first putting a layer of stones at the bottom of a square wooden frame and then filling it with clay. Washing and cleaning is usually done at the water source like wells or deep-tube wells and most Tangsa houses still make do with very rudimentary toilets and bathing enclosures. The traditional *chang-ghars* did not have proper doors, the open apertures are blocked with cane or bamboo mats (or with plastic sheets) in cold winter nights.

Pangwa groups used to bury their dead under the *chang* for fear that the enemies might come and steal the skulls at night. I did not see that practised anywhere anymore and the area below the *chang* is now normally used as storage space for fire-wood, and also sometimes as shelter for the animals and fowl.

In the house of the Mossang Tangsa headman of Chumpan village in Arunachal (which is the only house in the village where traditional practices are still followed) I also saw skulls of various animals -- cow, mithun, buffalo -- hanging on to the posts in each room. I was told that only the master and mistress of the house can sleep in the room in which the house-spirit, the Mettei, resided. In homes of hunters, rows of skulls, horns, jaws and antlers of animals like deer, monkeys, wild boar hunted would also hang in neat rows along the side. The wall *nye-khring/nge-khurung* separating the outer area from the inner room has special significance. It is usually the side where the master of the house sits and presides over his household. In homes which had hosted the *noi-tang* (the big buffalo sacrifice), columns of buffalo skulls sacrificed during a *noi-tang* would be stacked one on top of the other. The number of columns indicated the number of times the *noi-tang* had been performed.

A tea-kettle to brew the strong black tea that the Tangsa drink almost all the time sits on a metal tripod over the fire in the outer area; fodder for the animals is also often cooked in the outer hearth while the inner one is usually used for cooking meals. Of course keeping a log fire (or two) burning for most of the day entails a lot of extra work for the women, as they have to make sure there is enough firewood. Therefore, most mornings, after the meal has been served and the children have been sent off to school, they go out armed with a hacking knife (*jang,28 dao Ass.*) and a basket29 (*rhi-ka*) slung over the head, mostly with women of other families in the village, to the forests looking for fire-wood. They are back in good time for cooking the evening meal, sometimes even finding time to sit at their looms (both waist-looms and the normal looms are used) before dusk falls. Since most Tangsa homes own some pigs and some poultry, finding and cooking fodder for the pigs is another job for the lady of the house. They usually use the leaves and stems of the arum plant (*cho* in Cholim, *kasu* Ass.) which grows in abundance in the wet marshy areas of Assam as fodder as also rice husk and other waste.

Besides all this, there are two meals to cook for the entire household, one in the morning and the other in the afternoon. In the home of Aphu Tyanglam at Kharangkong, on normal days, morning rice was served around 7:30 - 8 a.m. while the evening meal was usually around dusk, say around 4:30 - 5 p.m.

28 A normal sword is called *pya-to-jang* in Cholim while the sheath is called *rhim-pyo-jang-hi* (silver-sword-cover); a short sword carried around normally is called *jang-chim-we*.

29 There are many different kinds of baskets: the normal one for carrying firewood is called *Rhi-khya*, in Cholim, while the special one used for ritual purposes is called *ding-du-khya*, Other baskets are *simg-rai* for storing rice, *jing-ka* (long-basket) and *phya-ra* (small-round basket).
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If one was very lucky, then tea with two slices of bread would be served around 1 p.m. but on most days there was nothing. Morning tea was the only time that tea was served with milk and sugar, for the rest of the day, one got only the bitter dark tea (phelap) that the Tangsa usually drank. There are normally several square soot-covered drying racks above the fireplace in the inner kitchen, which they use for smoking meat, tea and various other things, and sometimes also a half loft for storing things.

At meals, besides rice there is often also a watery soup with some (jou-hang) leaves (lai-sak Ass.) floating on top, and a spicy chutney made of chillies, tomatoes and other herbs. This was the standard menu. On some days there would be another dry vegetable dish or a few pieces of roast meat or fish. Food is either boiled, roasted or pounded raw. There is a special herb called ne-tangpan/shya-shu which the Tangsa use to flavour and garnish their food. The almost total absence of milk and milk products, cooking oils and fats as well as fruits, sugar and sweet dishes was striking. Even little children graduated directly from drinking mother’s milk to drinking weak tea. With this diet, the Tangsa are reasonably healthy, fit and active.

The married and older ladies usually dress in their traditional long wrappers (khya-se/ningwats) and blouses (sam-tung), many using Assamese gamochas (Ass.) to cover their heads, while others use the traditional Tangsa chequered scarves (jeship khepop); the men also usually wear their traditional violet and green lungis (rhi, closed wrappers) when they are in the village, changing to trousers when they need to go to town; the younger lot of unmarried people usually dress in jeans and T-shirts. While at home, most Tangsa walk around barefoot, the ladies often went bare feet to the forest or to their fields, it is only when they went out of the village that they normally use foot-wear.

At festival time of course, things looked a bit more elaborate. Tangsa men would sport a turban on their heads with the trademark purple and green scarf (nairi-khepop), and wear a Naga jacket (kotsam-tung) of some kind over their shirts. The women had beautiful traditional jewellery made of shells and beads and this they would wear along with a piece of ceremonial cloth called the Mongnu-khepa (Cholim) which is tied over one shoulder.

The food served at festive or social occasions was also special. Rice balls wrapped in the flat broad nyap-ryu-jak leaves (koupat, Ass.) were first handed out and when unwrapped, served also as a plate. Besides rice, there would usually be roasted meat and a salad. To drink there would be large amounts of rice-beer, served in bamboo khaps (containers). Although the rest of the food is cooked centrally, usually the rice balls are made by the women in individual homes and then put in baskets and brought for distribution. The making of rice-beer of different quality and strength and the production of ‘sunga tea’ (phelap-te) are special Tangsa specialities worth noting although they exist also among the Singpho community at least.

To meet their basic needs, the Tangsa need a lot of bamboo and a lot of rice – both to eat as rice and also to convert into rice-beer. Bamboo groves were to be found aplenty till recently in the forests of Assam, most Tangsa homes also have a few Tokou/Tinko palm trees, the leaves from which they use

30 These racks have various names: In Mosang the big half loft on top is called the khal-jung, the hanging ones above the fireplace is called khal-sa. Kha means drying, sa is small, jung is big.
31 This is also the Tai-Phake term for wrappers.
32 One can actually tell the tribe of the wearer, even the village where he lives in some cases, from a minute examination of the sequence of colours and sizes of the coloured squares on the lungis.
33 The most common varieties are ‘jati’ (Melocanna bambusoides) and ‘kako’ (Dendrocalamus Hamiltonii) in Asamiya. To get an idea about some traditional objects that were made with bamboo, see Jacobs (1990).
for thatching. The Tangsa used to earlier do swidden (slash-n-burn) (vik) cultivation and many Tangsa living in the hills still do so even today. Those that have moved down to the plains have shifted to wet-rice cultivation, but since they are not expert at that, many Tangsa in Assam have given their rice fields for cultivation mostly to Nepali peasants on a fifty-fifty basis. Moreover, in recent years, the Tangsa are planting tea in a part of their land at least, since it requires less labour and brings in a richer return. Of course other edible products are also planted in the fields depending on the nature of the soil – mustard, arum, etc. besides different kinds of vegetables.

Hunting was also a major activity of Tangsa men and hunting expeditions are still undertaken in the hills, before major festivals and social occasions as well as just as a sport. But those who have moved down to the plains have been forced to give up hunting altogether and have starting breeding pigs and poultry instead. As a result, most Tangsa living off their land in the villages are not rich, but they are also not poor – they can manage to live comfortably with what they have.

VIII. More about the Wihu-kuh festival at Kharangkong

The brewing of rice-beer (which takes long to ferment in winter) for the event had begun many days in advance, as had the rehearsals for the dances. On the evening of the 4th Jan, a little after dusk, one girl from each house in the Cholim basti went out shouting ‘A he! A he!’ and gathered along the road-side just at the village boundary. They carried a stick decorated with flowers and something to dig the earth with. Once they had dug a hole, they placed banana leaves in it, put back the soil dug out, marked the mounds with their sticks and went home again shouting ‘A he! A He!’ Very early the next morning (even before dawn) the girls went out again carrying the ritual baskets on their shoulders again shouting ‘A he! A He!’ to bring home the soil that had been dug up the previous night.

The soil was then used to make a special ritual hearth (Wihu tap-khu, in Cholim), after which a chicken would be sacrificed while saying the traditional ritual prayer called rim-rim at the ritual post, (men ryo chhung in Cholim), holding a bamboo khap containing rice-beer in one hand, thanking the spirit of the earth and asking her to bring greater prosperity in the future; these rituals as already mentioned were done in the each house.

The upper heads of the wooden ladders (hija-chung) at the entrance (and the back) of the house as well as the ritual post are nicely decorated with chum-ki flowers (xo xo pyo, in spoken Cholim) and nyap-shak (koupat, Ass.) leaves and after the chicken has been sacrificed, the post as well as the head of the ladders are smeared with blood, and a little prayer is said welcoming the spirit of Wihu to the house while pouring of rice-beer over the flowers. This is done also at the chicken coop, the cattle pen, and the rice granary. This was usually followed by doing augury with the claws of the chicken. Pieces of pork (selected from specific parts) were roasted over a fire over the new ritual hearth and then mixed with rice, salt and ginger to produce a spicy chutney called chin-cha (or thuk-tu) which

34 This was explained to be an exhortation to get the attention of the Wihu spirit.
35 When I asked why the earth had to be brought from the village edge, Aphu told me that it is at the edge of the village ‘Hara’ where the spirits meet, that is where the bad ones have to kept out and the good ones invited in. It is also at the village boundary that the animals have to be sacrificed as I shall mention later.
36 Every house has a special bamboo-cane basket (sang-yi in Mossang) woven in a special manner which is kept aside for ritual purposes.
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was then distributed in small amounts to all the family members to eat. The ritual basket containing a *khap* with rice-beer, a packet of *chin-cha* and some other items as well as the sacrificed chicken was then hung at the ritual post. Rice-beer and *chin-cha* was then served to all guests. It was also the custom to send a bottle of rice-beer along with a packet of meat to one’s maternal uncles at Wihu-kuh as a sign of respect, and in return for a blessing. I watched all this happen one year in the house of Aphu’s elder brother, Ka Xom.

The chicken that had been sacrificed was cooked and eaten the next day. The older people (mostly ladies), lightly drunk on rice-beer, sang the Wihu song, going from house to house in groups for most of the latter part of the day and also the next couple of days; and some did not manage to return to their homes even at night; they went to sleep wherever they were, completely drunk with rice-beer.

A Sangwal resident of the main *basti* told me that fresh soil needed to be brought for the hearth only when a pig or buffalo is sacrificed, and not for a chicken. Older men and women from the village were requested to come and do the *rim-rim* prayer in some households where the lady or master of the house did not know how to do it. Eating, drinking and visiting each other seemed to be the central concerns.

IX. Hakhun stories from the past

Not so long ago, the picture with respect to the Hakhuns was very different from what we have seen in Chapter 5. In Junglum’s own words, earlier the Hakhuns were so ‘uncivilised’ that they used to relieve themselves directly from the *chang* to the pigs and other animals underneath. As recently as fifty years ago they used to ‘cut’ each other. They would also start a fight over very petty issues – stolen cattle, boundary problems, some dispute over buying and selling -- and then keep fighting each other, often till one of them was killed.

As a young lad, Junglum had seen his father go to fight for such causes. About fifty years ago, he had also seen a fight between people of two *bastis* in which two people were killed. A small piece of flesh from an enemy corpse was brought back to the village and then they had a big celebration; there was a special place for this called *kan* at both the upper and lower ends of the village where they did the *rhum-be* (prayer). They also sang and danced (using drums and guns), drank rice-beer and feasted after sacrificing a cow/pig. It was like a big victory party. Such an event also took place near the Indo-Burmese border (about one’s day’s walk away from the border) as late as in 1970 or 1971. Only a small piece of flesh was brought back, they did not eat the flesh but distributed smaller pieces to all their friends and then buried the pieces at the village *kan*.

Hakhuns did not do human sacrifice (and did not buy people to sacrifice as did the Pangwa tribes) but they would sell their lazy and good-for-nothing people (again using Junglum’s own words) to those tribes who did human sacrifice. But they were known to be fierce head-hunters, as were the neighbouring Nocte, Wancho and Konyak groups. When they killed an enemy in a fight or in a battle, they would bring the head back to the village and take it to the house of the Ang, their king, where some rituals would be done and a big party organised. A hole would be made in the ground, stones would be heated and the skull and the stones would be wrapped tightly together and put in the hole and a fire would be lit over it. Then the flesh and meat would all melt or burn away and just the skull

37 As told to me by Junglum Hakhun (02.01.2011, Malugaon).
would be left which would be taken and hung. not in individual houses, but in the male dormitories called Po.

Although there were only five bastis of Hakhuns (about a 100 families at the most) in Myanmar they had about sixteen bastis of enemies. How they made so many enemies was explained as follows: since they were known to be fierce warriors some other friendly bastis would often ask them to help them in fighting their enemy in return for a gift of land or money. When such a request came, 15-20 Hakhun warriors from each basti would then go out to fight\(^\text{38}\), and they often won. But then the enemies of their friends they helped also became their enemies.

Hakhun Marriages (rohun) were held normally only in the month of September (ku-se-da) while tonsuring ceremonies (khne chun) for newborns could only normally be done only the 4\(^\text{th}\) month (April) and 9\(^\text{th}\) month (September) of the year. The ears of babies would be normally pierced on the second day after birth. The process of naming a child (mun-hoi) was also different for the Hakhun.

According to Junglum, there are about twenty Hakhun clans in all. Within each clan a baby can be given only one of a few specified names. For example Kapung, Junglum, Phulim, Lunnjung, Lunhang are all names belonging to Junglum's clan. Usually a name is not repeated within the same village – hence when one says Junglum Hakhun of Malugaon, then it identifies the person completely. Junglum ended his thoughts on the old times by saying that what he had just told me were old customs and went back a long time. Hardly anyone follows these rules today, he added.

\section*{X. A glimpse into the Ronrang past}

\textbf{History:} According to community sources, the Ronrang migrated into India from a village called Khachu in Myanmar (about 79-80 kilometres from the Indo-Burmese border) in the last part of the 18\(^{\text{th}}\) century AD. They left Khachu village on account of frequent raids and attacks by enemies of that area, namely the Loomthos and the Ghaphos etc. (\textit{Traditional Systems: 151-2}). I reproduce here from my field notes of Jan. 2009, the story of Ronrang migration into India, as recounted to me by a Ronrang elder.

In those times, the area on this side of the Patkai hills belonged to the Tikhaks and Yongkucks.\(^\text{39}\) They had been here for a very long time.\(^\text{40}\) But many died due to haija (plague) and their numbers decreased. When the Ronrangs first crossed the Patkai from Burma and came to this area, they had to ask for permission from the Tikhaks to let them stay here; in return they acknowledged the Tikhaks to be their superiors,\(^\text{41}\) and to respect them as their elders, which they do even to this day. In the beginning the Tikhaks were even scared of the Ronrangs, they thought that the Ronrangs were \textit{ajanti}\(^\text{42}\) (meaning people who are untouched by civilisation), as they had come from the

\begin{itemize}
  \item They used to fight with spears, country-made guns, long-handled daggers (do) and shields (lop).
  \item Binod Taina, the Gaonbura of Tinsuti village, confirmed that Tikhak and Yongkuk people came and settled in the area around his village even before the British arrived here. But today sadly, there were only 17 Tikhak families left in his village, and the village is majority-Nepali.
  \item This is typical of most stories I have been told by Tangsa elders, although they are very good with names of places and people, not many are able to quantify time, questions like how long back would be answered usually in terms of degrees: long time ago, very long time ago, etc.
  \item The relation is approximately described in terms of subordination-superordination;
  \item Another explanation of the word ‘\textit{ajanti}’ is people from a land not well known, referring to people who were left behind in Burma.
\end{itemize}
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hills, but they changed their minds in a year or two when they saw how brave the Ronrangs were and how skilled they were at fishing and at hunting. The Tikhaks were good neither at war nor at fishing, and they were scared of tigers. The Ronrangs on the other hand, had lived in the hills but always lived near rivers, so they knew how to catch fish and how to swim; they also had a special relation with tigers and had fought many fierce battles with their enemies.

For the Tikhak version of the same story see Simai (2008: 65-66). The story continues, as told by Ronrang elders at Balinong, and gives an interesting peep into the ways of life of the hill people and their links with the plains not so long back.

From time to time, ‘ajanti’ people living further up in the hills needed to go down to Tipang, and from there to Tirap Gate, Ledo and Margherita to buy salt, clothes and other items. The Longsang basti (near Manmao) of the Ronrangs was almost mid-way, on this route. So they often came in groups of 10-12 and stayed overnight at their basti. They usually requested some Ronrang, who normally could speak some Asamiya, to accompany them to Assam. Over time, the Ronrangs acquired a reputation amongst the hill people for their links with the local administration as well as with the plains people, and the hill people were even afraid of them because of these contacts.

At the market, the Ronrangs already knew the Marwari shopkeepers (who spoke some Asamiya and Singpho and who called them meta/mita, friend) and would arrange for the whole group to stay overnight in some shelter that the shopkeepers had set up just for that purpose; they were given tea, biri (locally –rolled tobacco), cigarettes, and also potatoes, lentils, ghee (a kind of cooking fat) and vegetables to cook their own meal (they would normally bring their own rice with them). But the next day, while paying for what they bought the shopkeepers would charge exorbitant amounts and make good their expenses of the stay. In return for bringing the hill-people to his shop, the Marwari would sometimes give the Ronrang man a new ganjee (vest) and ask him to bring more people next time.

The story continues...

During World War II, the seven existing Ronrang villages at that time (Jala, Lisen and Chingwang on one side and Manmao, Longsang, Walaktai and Kobu-Morang on the other) were right in the middle of the battle area; there was fierce fighting there as a result of which most of the crops got damaged. Famine-like conditions prevailed as people could not go to work in the fields. That drastically reduced the numbers of the Ronrang; many went down to the plains to work for the soldiers and never returned. Huge numbers of ‘American’ soldiers were gathered in the Tirap area. Sometimes war-porters carrying rations for the soldiers would give a little bit of rice to the people.

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43 Interesting how the elder uses the same term with which the Tikhaks referred to them while referring to other tribes who they thought were even more ‘ajanti’ compared to them.

44 It was only a 3.5 hours walk one way to Tipang from Manmao, so one could go down and come back in a day.

45 A business and trading community from the state of Rajasthan in western India; they control much of the trade and commerce in Assam, and also of other parts of the country.

46 The older people tell the story of how a Japanese soldier was captured at Manmao and taken to Margherita for which the Ronrangs got a prize.

47 Tangsa elders normally refer to the Allied forces as ‘Americans’.
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![Photo B-1: A view of the Tangsa village of Malugaon](image-url)
Summary

“Either you assimilate, or you learn the tricks of the plains people so well that you can hold out on your own in their midst, or you go back to the hills,” one of my field consultants had told me once when I had asked him about the fate of small ethnic groups such as the Tangsa and the Singpho in Assam. My years in the field working with the Tangsa have borne out the truth of that statement. This work puts together much of the evidence I have collected over six years while doing ethnographic field work amongst the Tangsa.

The Tangsa living in the state of Assam in Northeast India are a tiny minority community, living together with people of other communities, in mixed villages scattered over a relatively large area. Assam has more than one hundred such minority groups, some of whom, like the Bodo, have more than a million members. Hence the Tangsa living in Assam are marginal even amongst the minority communities living in Assam. Although there are Tangsa also living in the neighbouring state of Arunachal Pradesh (hereafter AP), the situation for the tiny Tangsa population in Assam is much more complicated. While AP is a tribal-majority state, Assam is not, hence the Tangsa in Assam cannot take advantage of the special privileges reserved for tribal communities in Arunachal. At the same time, the states of Assam and AP, as well as the larger region of India called Northeast India to which they belong, are also locationally peripheral and politically marginalised areas compared to most other regions of India. Thus the Tangsa in Assam are, in some sense, at the very margins of the margins, and hence face an existential threat of being completely ignored and forgotten.

Given this scenario, this study focuses on a number of steps some Tangsa community members living in Assam have taken in order to negotiate a place and identity for themselves in the world around them. It also documents a range of their attempts to reformulate and rearticulate their past traditions in forms more amenable to present times, and such that they can then be used to create a new pan-Tangsa identity.

The fact that the Tangsa speak a mindboggling variety of languages, many of which have very few speakers left, is the principal reason why the Tangsa are of great interest for linguists. Most of the work for this study was done as part of a project which was primarily focused on documenting endangered languages; my brief in the project, however, was to analyse what it means for people to be Tangsa, despite their linguistic divisions. This work is the outcome of that exercise.

Referred to previously by the British as the Patkoi Nagas or the Rangpang Nagas, there is some (Dutta 1969) but not a lot of literature about the Tangsa to date. Moreover, in the last few decades, rapid changes have occurred to the lifestyles and traditional practices of the Tangsa, as a result of their migration down from the Patkai hills in Myanmar to the plains of Assam and their consequent exposure to and acceptance of a ‘modern’ way of life as well as their participation as citizens of the Indian state. However, most recent literature on the
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Tangsa, such as Rao (2006), as well as on the Nagas, such as Saul (2005), almost completely ignore the impact of these changes, as well as the fact that many Tangsa have converted to Christianity in the last few decades. This study wishes to correct this misrepresentation and present a more plausible portrait of the everyday life of the Tangsa. Furthermore, this present work is the first detailed study of the Tangsa living in Assam.

Many Tangsa groups still live over the Patkai ranges in Myanmar, where they are known as Tangshang or Heimi Nagas. Some Tangsa claim that at least some Tangsa groups are part of the larger Naga umbrella. The Nagas have been engaged in a long-standing conflict with the Indian government ever since Indian independence over the question of creation of a sovereign Naga nation. The current leader, Khaplang, of one of the major factions of the NSCN, a radical insurgent organisation that is currently spearheading this struggle, is a Heimi Naga, and operates out of Myanmar. Although the rival faction NSCN (I-M) based in Nagaland, India have entered into a ceasefire agreement with the Indian Government, Khaplang has rejected the ceasefire offer; resulting in frequent ongoing inter-factional and cross border violence. Therefore an understanding of the Tangsa situation and their struggles to survive as a community within the Indian state could contribute towards a better assessment of the situation on the ground in order to foresee what the future can hold for the Nagas as a whole, as well as for the Tangsa in particular.

Main themes

This work is first and foremost an introduction to members of some Tangsa communities living in Assam. It examines the internal divisions amongst various Tangsa groups in terms of language and cultural practices, their past and present ways of life, and their culture and traditions. It also focuses on the changes that hill-communities have had to accept after moving down to the plains and after beginning to participate as small minorities, but nevertheless as equal citizens, of a democratic state. A linguistic classification of the different Tangsa tribes is included in the third chapter. It shows how complex the picture is and hence how complicated the project of creating a pan-Tangsa identity could be. This study also places the Tangsa in their geographical and historical context by studying their migration histories and their interactions with neighbouring groups.

As a piece of ethnography, this work explores the Tangsa trail via three distinct but related objectives in the main ethnographic chapters. The first is an investigation of life in three Tangsa villages in Assam, chosen because they are interesting for different reasons. Namely, religious affiliations and location, as well as their livelihood patterns, linkages with others and attitudes towards change and resistance. While drawing out these different aspects, I explore the internal logic of the differences among these villages and the mechanisms by which they function as units. I also show how these village communities negotiate amongst themselves and with other groups around them for economic as well as political space, in an effort to secure their lives and existence. Moreover, I put the situation of the Tangsa in Assam in perspective, comparing and contrasting their situation with that of the Tangsa living in the neighbouring state of Arunachal Pradesh. This is the first narrative, the aim being to give the reader a general introduction to the Tangsa people and also a sense of what it is like to be a Tangsa living in one of these villages.

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The second aim is to carry out a detailed documentation of specific Tangsa festivals in order to record and understand community attempts at preservation, revival, and revitalisation of some of their past cultural traditions, as well as their deliberate attempts at creating new ones. In doing so, I examine how village festivals ‘reflect’ as well as ‘cause’ cultural change in a community. By analysing the factors that determine the form of the festivals themselves, and also the impact of these representations on the self-image and cultural identity of the Tangsa, I seek an answer to the complex question of what it means to be Tangsa, at least for my interlocutors, and to those around them in the present-day-context.

A number of Tangsa I have met are actively involved in the process of “constructing, deconstructing and reconstructing” (Richard Handler 1994: 27) their cultural identity by selecting and modifying elements from their past as well as incorporating new elements. I therefore explore what terms like ‘culture’ and ‘ethnicity’ could mean for my Tangsa interlocutors, and how they use their perceived notions of these concepts to construct their new pan-Tangsa identity. These perceived notions, depend, as I will show, on a host of factors, including external factors like state policy, and the views of outsiders (like our project team) and those of other communities around them.

Observing the processes of identity construction and self-projection of the Tangsa becomes even more interesting in the light of ongoing debates, both inside and outside the community, about how to use their ethnicity and their particular cultural assets to their best advantage in order to promote their demands for recognition and to win a place in the political and social arena of the state. I claim that they seek to project a new pan-Tangsa identity which draws not only from their past but also from their modern present reality — they wish to assert their ethnicity and their uniqueness, but in modern terms, and made evident in modified rituals and performances that are intelligible even to outsiders.

This study of the Tangsa in Assam explores not only the relationships among some members of the Tangsa community living in Assam, but also those between these Assam-based Tangsa and at least three other groups. First, the majority and dominant Assamese community that has administrative control and wields political power in Assam (so much so that most of the representatives of the state the Tangsa come into contact with, such as the police and administrative officials, are Assamese). Second, other minority groups, such as the Singpho, living in the same geographical area, and finally the Tangsa living elsewhere in India, i.e. in the Changlang district of AP, and to a lesser extent, those living in Myanmar. Intertwined in this net of group relationships is another network of individual relationships that I, as a researcher, as a member of my research team and also as an individual belonging to the dominant Assamese community, already had with the Assamese community and those that I developed with my Tangsa and non-Tangsa interlocutors during the course of my field work.

Finally, the third and final aim is to follow my own personal journey in the field in order to reflect at every stage on the relations between the Tangsa and others around them in general, and my Tangsa interlocutors and me in particular. I have deliberately chosen to tell this story as it unfolds at the end of each chapter rather than compress it into a chapter at the beginning because I believe that the ways and attitudes of the Tangsa ‘others’ have a huge role to play in the determination of the Tangsa ‘self’.
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Moreover, my somewhat unusual position as an almost native Assamese researcher and as an intermediary between my Tangsa interlocutors and my foreign project colleagues has revealed many insights into the nature of doing ethnography, and the tensions and affinities in the field work situation. Therefore I also wish to place on record “our own role in the creation of the phenomenon we study” (Moerman 1993: 90). Neither my interpretation of the Tangsa world nor my analysis of Tangsa festivals would be complete or honest without this critically reflexive component.

The recurring theme that binds together the different locations and the different perspectives in this study is my claim that the performance of ethnic identity as evidenced at festivals, for marginal groups like the Tangsa, is a strategy for survival, and for negotiating a place for themselves in the world around them. In this sense, my Tangsa interlocutors instrumentalise their ethnicity, and their identity is suitably adjusted and articulated, case by case, in forms which are amenable for achieving other larger ends.

However, rather than considering these actions as calculated or manipulative, it is more productive to consider them as acts of self-preservation and of self-definition, stemming from their fear of being overlooked and forgotten in the world they inhabit and call their own. In many Tangsa persons I met, there was a strong inherent sense of belonging -- a perception of Tangsaness -- even if they could not really define what it meant, but which none of them was willing to give up. It is this sense that forces them to do something, even play the game according to the new rules of their dominant neighbours if required, with the hope that if not everything then at least something about them and their Tangsaness will remain in the end.

And this is important because although many of my older interlocutors know and live their Tangsaness they can see that, given the increasing impact of external influences on their world, it will be harder for their children to hold on to just vague notions. To survive as Tangsa in the world around them will require more concrete definitions, which in the Tangsa case -- fraught with divergent religious affiliations, varied cultural traditions and diverse linguistic repertoires -- is asking for something extremely difficult, if not impossible. This study seeks to place on record some of these attempts at self-definition in order to resist marginalisation and possible erasure.

On a more general level, this study is also about relations between the hill men and women and those living in the plains, between tribal and non-tribal, and in particular, between predominantly non-Hindu tribal communities, such as the Tangsa and the Singpho, and caste-Hindu non-tribal people, such as the Assamese and the Nepali. It is also about the growing inter-tribal solidarity to be seen amongst the tribal groups who have been living in the area for centuries, as a reaction to their gradual loss of land and priority to settler communities -- both tribal and non-tribal -- that have recently arrived and continue to come. At the core, this study is about marginality and its consequences, and the compulsions which can force individuals from small minority groups, even against their own wishes at times, to make decisions which turn their worlds upside down and make them lose their sense of who they are and who they want to be.
Conclusions

My main underlying claim is that marginality is central to any analysis of the Tangsa in Assam. It is their marginality that makes the Tangsa, in the most part, behave the way they do or take the decisions they take. When a community is forced to perform its ethnicity in order to remain in the reckoning, then this performance is not so much a show of their agency as it is proof of their marginalisation. In this sense, festivals can be seen as assertions of difference and of self-worth in the face of existential threats of being subsumed by the Assamese, (or more immediately by the Nepali and the Singpho), by Christianity, or of being rejected by the Nagas. Hence festivals also reflect a sense of insecurity and nervousness.

Tangsa society, as I analyse it in the eight chapters of this study, is in flux. However, unlike a regular predictable oscillation following Leach’s (1954) Gumsa-Gumlao model, there are no predictions that one can make in the Tangsa case; different segments are pulling in different directions, evolving in different ways, transforming into different and separate entities. What is more, contrary to the theory forwarded by James Scott (2009), I demonstrate how the valleys and plains dwelling Tangsa in Assam are in many senses relatively less ‘developed’ economically, in terms of their education, as well as otherwise in comparison to many of their hill-dwelling relatives in AP. I argue that this is mainly because they are also relatively less advantaged in Assam, due to the different ways in which the two states of Assam and AP handle their tribal populations. The incentive structure is different in AP because of the way ‘tribal’ politics works in the scheduled tribe majority hill state. Therefore the contexts are different, and this makes the Tangsa also perform their identity at festivals differently in Assam than in AP.

The Tangsa case is a good instance to observe the twin forces of consolidation and fragmentation in action. While ethnically and politically, the different Tangsa groups try to come together under a common banner, in terms of religion there is an ever-increasing splintering amongst the Christian denominations within the Tangsa. And as I demonstrate with the example of the Hakhun Tangsa community, a section of the leadership is trying to forge a special identity for themselves, even while remaining under the broader Tangsa umbrella. These processes are neither uniform nor do they have the same effect on different parts of the Tangsa whole.

And while this tendency amongst the Tangsa to splinter and divide might be an impediment towards formation of a pan-Tangsa identity, their fractious character is in some sense part of their identity, just as it is for the Naga. Moreover, it is this tendency that forces Tangsa community members to be creative with regard to construction of their common identity. It also permits them to participate in the production of their own image, by being selective about which elements of their traditions to revive, which to abandon and which to reinvent.

As already mentioned, festivals are not only shows of self-confidence, they also reveal an inherent diffidence; they are attempts at conformity rather than just flaunting difference. The professed culture is no longer something simply practised but something also performed. Furthermore, I claim that the surprisingly thin cultural and ritual content, and casualness with which these festivals are organised, is not accidental; the Tangsa in Assam are just too few in number and too deeply divided and too weakened by various problems -- they cannot do
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much better. But they still need to perform their identity in whatever way they can in order to make themselves visible and remain in the reckoning. This also pays off for some individuals on certain occasions. But these are small gains compared to the bigger problems that afflict Tangsa society.

Most of all, what some Tangsa decide to do at festivals and how they go about doing it reveal the marginality and insecurity that small groups such as the Tangsa have to face on an everyday basis, so much so that a sense of being victims, of being victimised, can become a part of their identity. Festivals can best be understood as platforms where such communities attempt to turn the very facts of being discriminated against and of being forced to perform their ethnicity, into instruments for securing special privileges and concessions for themselves, hence subverting the dominant discourse to serve their particular ends. But these acts do not only give evidence merely of their ingenuity or of their ability to strategise, they also reveal the helplessness and desperation of such small communities in Assam, that are constantly haunted with the fear of being further marginalised or of being completely annihilated altogether.

In summary, this work is first and foremost about analysing and interpreting a range of strategies Tangsa individuals use to gain agency and to resist marginalisation. Next, it is about how Tangsa leaders go about constructing a new pan-Tangsa ethnic identity which is both modern as well as traditional, analysed through how they (re)present themselves at festivals. This study is also about discovering how ‘culture’ is sought to be preserved, by reinventing it first, if required, to fit new definitions and then articulated. Finally, I also seek to explore and expose the role that significant ‘others’ of the Tangsa, notably the state and the larger communities around them, have had in influencing the above processes as well as in forcing the Tangsa into a precarious position of vulnerability and insecurity. This is the position where they find themselves at present and from where they are being forced to speak up for themselves to secure their place in the future. In this sense, their performing their ethnicity at festivals is not so much a sign of their agency as it is of their marginalisation.