

People of the Margins

Across Ethnic Boundaries
in North-East India

Philippe Ramirez

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

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Transliterations and orthography

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

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

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



Introduction

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

9 See for instance (Narayanan and Sandra 2000).

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

15 (Gupta and Ferguson 1992:6).

16 (Bashkow 2004).

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

18 (Lowie 1937:235).

19 (Bashkow 2004:453).

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

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

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

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

21 (Fairclough 2001:47ff.).

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

23 (Barth 1969).

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The main spatial framework of my field investigations is a 1,600 km² area of foothills and plains straddling the Assam-Meghalaya border. It does not match any administrative unit or cultural homogeneous zone, but on the contrary was deliberately and arbitrarily chosen to overlap such manifest spatial entities. In this area, like elsewhere in North-East India, people generally perceive their human environment through ethnic categories, either the “tribes”—for this particular area the Tiwas, the Khasis and the Karbis—or the “Assamese”. The ultimate criterion for an assigned identification is the recognition of surnames, each of which associated with a particular ethnicity. As shown in Chapter 2, a study of the perception of surnames, together with the mapping of their

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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