WHERE DID THE QUESTION ‘WHERE DID MY TRIBE COME FROM?’ COME FROM?¹

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I first visited north-eastern India in the 1950’s where, as a young anthropologist, I lived among the Garos in what is now the state of Meghalaya, south of the Brahmaputra valley. My research had nothing to do with migration, but the topic was raised by Garos, now and then, most often in the form of a question, ‘Where did the Garos come from?’ By this, the questioners meant: ‘Where did the Garos live before they migrated to their present homeland? Where was their earlier homeland?’ People in other parts of the north-eastern hills ask parallel questions about the origin of their own tribes.

This question has always puzzled me. It seemed in the fifties, as it seems to me now, exactly like asking ‘Where did the French come from?’ We know enough about the history of Western Europe to know that people have migrated into what is now France from every direction—from Rome with Caesar, from Scandinavia as Vikings, from Germany, from England, from Wales, and surely from many other places. The arrivals all contributed both to French culture and to the French gene pool, but they were not French before they arrived. French ethnicity, French nationality, and French culture all had their origins right where the French live now. Even the French language developed only in France. Roman soldiers brought their language, just as they brought their genes, but it was in France where Latin grew into French. This all seems so obvious, that to ask “Where did the French come from?”, as if the French had lived somewhere else before arriving at their present homeland, would be ridiculous. I believe that it makes no more sense to ask: “Where did the Garos (or any other north-eastern tribe) come

¹ I am much indebted to my friends and colleagues, Thomas Traumann and Thomas Toon, for many long and stimulating discussions about my ideas of migration and ethnicity. Among many other things, the first Tom led me to the wonderful writings of Sir William Jones. The second Tom showed me that it was no longer necessary to imagine that Anglo-Saxon migrations brought serious population displacement. I am also indebted to many friends who have lived and worked in northeast India and with whom I have debated these matters. In particular, Mark Post, by his friendly but firm disagreement, has helped me greatly to clarify my own thinking. It was Ruam Bengai who first told me about the remarkable story of the Mizo Jews.
from?" than to ask: "Where did the French come from?" If the question seems more reasonable when we ask it about a north-eastern tribe, that is only because we know so little about the actual history of those tribes that we resort to myths to fill in the gaps in our knowledge.

In the following pages I will express great scepticism about migration stories, but I never mean to imply that I am sceptical about migration itself. Indeed, people migrate all the time and in every direction—back and forth and up and down—and surely people in north-eastern India, like people everywhere else, have been migrating for thousands of years. Just as people have migrated into (and also out of) what is now France, I presume that people have migrated from every direction into (and out of) what is now the Garo Hills. My scepticism is not about the migration of people, which goes on all the time, but about the migration of tribes and about the north-eastern rhetoric of migration that is expressed in terms of tribes. I do not believe that tribes very often pick themselves up and move to a new location. People migrate. Small groups migrate. Tribes, I believe, rarely do.

If "Where did the Garos (or any other tribe) come from?" is not a reasonable question, we ought to ask a different question—a question about the question: Where did the question come from? Did it come from the local people? Is it their curiosity about their own origins that leads them to ask the question? Or is it a question that western visitors brought with them? It does not have to be just one or the other, and quite likely it is both, but I will emphasise the western roots of the question because I believe that side of it has been rather badly neglected.

Colonial officers in north-eastern India were certainly interested in the origins of the people they administered, and they certainly looked for migrations. Between about 1910 and 1940 British administrators who had lived among the north-eastern tribes wrote and published a series of ethnographies, each dealing with a single tribe. The tables of contents of these books follow a standard format, and each book has, in its first chapter, a discussion of the migrations that brought the tribe to its present location.

J. H. Hutton gave a particularly detailed account of migration in *The Angami Nagas* (1921), and unlike other authors, he did not restrict himself to just one tribe but considered other Naga tribes as well. He wrote: "The history of how the Naga tribes came precisely to occupy their present position has, of course, passed into the dim obscurity of vague traditions. But enough of them remain to give some indication of the course which the migrations took" (1921:6). He goes on to describe the movements of the Angamis, and of several other tribes, in some detail, and he even provides a map (see Wettstein figure 10.4 in this volume) with variously coloured and variously directed arrows crisscrossing each other. The arrows show the routes of eleven Naga tribes, from the Pom and Konyak in the north to the Tangkhul and Kacha Naga in the south, as they are supposed to have migrated into and round about the hills. These paths, the map proclaims, are shown 'according to their own traditions', but Hutton clearly gives these traditions considerable credence.

He discusses the Angami in the greatest detail, and he suggests that their knowledge of wet rice agriculture might have been acquired during "a sojourn in the lowlands of Imphal [Manipur] as they migrated north". However, he then goes on to say, "Where the Angamis came from before they reached the country near Manipur is a much more difficult problem and one quite beyond the scope of this book" (1921:8). The presumption behind these words is that the Angami passed, as a group, through Manipur, and even if we cannot know exactly where they came from before that, we can be certain that they came from somewhere.

J. P. Mills, in his book *The Ao Nagas* (1926), begins his discussion of migrations by saying, "Ao tradition states quite definitely that the ancestors of the tribe came out of the earth at Lungteter" (1926:6). Presumably Mills took that to be a myth rather than history, but he goes on to describe traditions of more recent events, including their arrival at their present homeland, and he treats these as more historical. He says: "I have been at pains to collect all the traditional information possible as to the people whom the Aos found in possession of their present country when they invaded it. These stories give us some of our very rare glimpses of the early history of the hills, and may help to throw welcome light on the complicated question of the origin and composition of the Naga tribes as we know of them today" (1926:8). Mills is very careful as he evaluates the weak evidence, but he clearly takes the migration of tribes for granted. The question was not 'Did they migrate?' but rather 'How and from where did they migrate?'

Oddly, Mills also says:

Naga invaders do not as a rule obliterate their foes. More usually, after reducing the village which is their objective to a suitable frame of mind by repeated raids, they come and live in it as overlords, take wives from it, and gradually absorb it into their own community (1926:8-9).

This is an unusual acknowledgement of tribal mixture, and it recognises the failure of one tribe to completely displace another. In some way that Mills leaves unclear, the resulting mixed population is still considered...
to be ‘Ao’, and it is still regarded as having migrated in, in spite of the fact that a substantial, although unspecified, proportion of the present population’s ancestors had lived there before the migrations. Even by this colonial account, then, people have mixed ancestry, but this is not allowed to disturb the presumption of ethnic continuity. The mixed descendants are still Ao, and they migrated from somewhere else.

In his book, The Garos (1909), A. Playfair is even more cautious about accepting traditions of migration. He gives a long and detailed story about migration from Tibet, but then admits serious scepticism about its historical veracity. He says that there is no way the people could have had any real memory of such an ancient migration, and he concludes, ‘It is difficult to place any reliance on a legend which has been handed down by word of mouth from generation to generation’ (Playfair 1909:14). Nevertheless, he also suggests that some Garo customs, particularly the ceremonial use of yak tails, point to ties to the north, and he says:

...the coincidence of a similar belief existing in Bhutan and on this side of the Himalayas, which is further supported by evidence of language, points to the possibility that in bygone ages the ancestors of the Garos and of the many tribes with which they are closely allied, did cross the Himalayas and settle in the plains at their foot (Playfair 1909:14). So, even while dismissing the story as myth, he finds other grounds for suspecting migration.

Hutton, Mills and Playfair were all commendably cautious about accepting the evidence for migrations at face value. They were all thoughtful and judicious. But, behind their caution they shared a firm presumption that people migrate in sufficiently large and coherent groups to make it reasonable to ask where a tribe, and not just individual wanderers, came from. They were not sceptical about tribal migration, but only about the particular stories that they told. Did these men, who were writing almost a century ago, get their enthusiasm for migrations from the people they described? Or did the people whom they were describing have their interest aroused by the outsiders? Who persuaded whom to believe that tribes migrate?

We have earlier and clearer evidence for the western interest in the migration of peoples in the Indian subcontinent. The interest goes back at least as far as the 1780’s when Sir William Jones was a magistrate in the British administration in Calcutta. Today, Jones is remembered primarily for his brilliant scholarship. He was one of the founders of The Asiatic Society of Bengal and was, for some years, its president and leading light. Linguists remember Jones most of all for his recognition of the relationship of Sanskrit to Latin and Greek. He described the relationship among these languages in strikingly modern terms, asserting, in these now famous words, that their affinities were ‘so strong indeed, that no philologer could examine them all three, without believing them to have sprung from a common source, which, perhaps, no longer exists’ (Jones 1993 [1807]:34). With this sentence, Jones recognised what we now call the ‘Indo-European’ family of languages and thereby laid the groundwork for the comparative linguistics of the nineteenth century. Linguists are apt to place Jones up there in the firmament of immortals, along with the likes of Panini and Chomsky.

What linguists do not usually realise is that Jones’s interest in Indo-European was only a small part of a much broader scholarly program. What Jones wanted to do was to group the peoples of Asia into ‘nations’. These were not ‘nations’ in the modern sense of ‘nation-states’, but more abstractly defined groups of people who had common origins, a shared history, similar talents, and a common character. Language was only one of four areas that Jones believed could help him to group peoples into nations. He said: ‘...we seem to possess only four general media of satisfying our curiosity concerning [their ancient civil history]; namely, first, their Languages and Letters; secondly, their Philosophy and Religion; thirdly, the actual remains of their old Sculpture and Architecture; and fourthly, the written memorials of their Sciences and Arts’ (Jones 1993:32). Jones was avidly interested in all four of these ‘media’, not just in language.

He used the evidence of the media to group the peoples of Asia (and sometimes those from other continents as well) into a few great ‘nations’. He listed the nations in 1786, in a lecture to The Asiatic Society. This is known as ‘The Third Anniversary Discourse’, but it was the first in a series of seven related lectures concerned with the nations. He said, ‘The five principal nations, who have in different ages divided among themselves, as a kind of inheritance, the vast continent of Asia, with the many islands depending on it, are the Indians, the Chinese, the Tartars, the Arabs, and the Persians: who they severally were, whence, and when they came, where they now are settled... will be shown, I trust, in five distinct essays; the last of which will demonstrate the connection or diversity between them, and solve the great problem, whether they had any common origin, and whether that origin was the same, which we generally ascribe to them’ (Jones 1993:27-28, all italics as in the original). This initial discourse was devoted to the Hindus, and from the first, in harmony with his recognition
of the relationship of Sanskrit to Latin and Greek, Jones joined most Europeans with the Hindus into one great ‘nation’. This was a grouping of peoples, not just of languages, but the language connection gave him vital evidence about the relationship among the people. Each of the other nations was the subject of a later discourse.

Jones presented the final discourse of the series in 1792, six years after the first one, and, by then, he had reduced the ‘nations’ from five to three. First, he now felt confident about grouping the Persians together with the Hindus, Romans, Greeks, and Goths, and also with the ancient Egyptians (he called them ‘Ethiops’) into one nation. In our terms, he had joined the Persians and the Goths firmly to the Indo-European language family, which is exactly where we would still place them linguistically. No one, today, however, would group the ‘Ethiops’ with the Indo-Europeans. Jones also recognised the influences that Hinduism and Buddhism had had on Southeast Asia, so he added both mainland and island Southeast Asia to the ‘Hindu’ nation. More cautiously, he suggested: ‘...that the settlers in China and Japan had a common origin with the Hindus is no more than highly probable’ (Jones 1993:186).

A second nation included “…the Jews and Arabs, the Assyrians, or second Persian race, the people who spoke Syriac, and a numerous tribe of Abyssinians” (Jones 1993:186). The third nation was that of the Tartars, migrating peoples of north and central Asia. After describing these three ‘nations’, Jones said: ‘Could these facts be verified by the best attainable evidence, it would not, I presume, be doubted, that the whole earth was peopled by a variety of shoots from the Indian, Arabian and Tartarian branches, or by such intermixtures of them, as in a course of ages might naturally have happened” (Jones 1993:186).

We should not blame Jones for modifying his classification as the years passed. The job he had set himself was an empirical one. He wanted to use the evidence from his four areas of knowledge to group the peoples of Asia into ‘nations’, and we should expect some revision of his ideas as his investigations progressed. It was certainly convenient, however, to group the Persians, and even the Chinese and Japanese, with the Hindus, because in this way he reduced the ‘nations’ to three. That allowed each nation to be identified with one of the three sons of Noah, and Jones did indeed identify them in that way. The children of Japheth became the Tartarian branch. The children of Shem gave rise to the Arabs, Jews, and Abyssinians, while the Hindus (and thus the Europeans) along with what we would now call the southeast Asians, and, perhaps, even the Chinese and Japanese, were all descended from the children of Ham (Jones 1993:194-95).

A considerable effort at cultural relativism is needed for the modern mind (or at least for my modern mind) to appreciate the worldview of an educated and urbane Englishman of the late eighteenth century. Jones simply took it for granted that the world was created four thousand years before Christ, and that the flood took place a couple of millennia later. Only after the flood, could populations grow, divide, and spread into their present homelands. Jones confidently asserts, ‘If Moses then was ended [sic] with supernatural knowledge, it is no longer probable only, but absolutely certain, that the whole race of man proceeded from Iran, as from a centre, whence they migrated at first in three great colonies; and that those three branches grew from a common stock, which had been miraculously preserved in a general convulsion and inundation of this globe’ (Jones 1993:196-97). He gives ‘less than three thousand years’ for the dispersal to be complete (Jones 1993:189).

In reviewing the ideas of Sir William Jones, I do not mean to ridicule him. He truly was a brilliant man. He had vast knowledge of the languages, religions, architecture, and of the arts and sciences, and from all of these he attempted to infer the history of nations. Nevertheless, he was locked in a worldview that we find difficult to comprehend. Jones was active three quarters of a century before Darwin’s Origin of Species was published. Even the long geological chronology of James Hutton had, in Jones’s time, been shared only within a narrow circle in Scotland (Repcheck 2003). In the early part of the nineteenth century, however, the layers of rocks and their fossils would seriously challenge the short chronology of the bible. The short chronology then collapsed completely with Darwin, although it still took some time for the full immensity of geological time to become clear. As it did so, the investigations into the origins and migrations of nations that Jones had conducted were quietly, or perhaps deliberately, forgotten. Even a century ago, Jones’s short chronology must have seemed, as it still seems to us, to be just a trifle embarrassing. It must always have seemed kinder to give credit to the genius who discovered the Indo-European language family, than to dwell on a chronology from which he simply had no means of escape.

Both Sir William Jones and the later colonial administrators who wrote about northeast Indian tribes show us how great an interest was taken

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2 Jones did not, of course, use ‘Iran’ in the modern sense. Rather he used it to name the unknown place from which the migrations began. He was confident that they had to begin somewhere in, or at least not far from, Mesopotamia, but he denied knowledge of the exact spot. ‘Iran’ was a convenient term for that spot, whatever its exact location; Jones 1993[1807]:189.
in migrations by the more scholarly British visitors to India. The most
brilliant of them took it for granted that the world was settled, relatively
recently from our point of view, by great migrations. Others took it for
granted that the modern distribution of tribes could be explained by even
more recent migrations.

Migrations have figured in many other ways in both western and eastern,
thinking, and they have been central to a standard view of Indian
history, a view that has not yet been fully shaken. The history of the
sub-continent has often been described as moulded by wave after wave of
invasions from the northwest. The Aryans were followed by the Bactrian
Greeks, and then by the Mongols, the Turks, and the Persians. The British
do not fit so easily into this sequence of invaders, partly because they
came by sea rather than across the deserts, but also because they came
so recently that we know they did not come in waves. The history of the
British period shows us that outsiders can bring major changes even when
they do not come in waves. When we recognise the relentless spread of the
English language in India today, we ought to be very cautious about assuming that Indo-Aryan needed a massive surge of migrants in
order to get established. Language shift can take place for other reasons
than migration. The more thoughtful historians of India no longer take
seriously the familiar picture of wave after wave of migrants who, in
some mysterious way, were able to find enough food to keep alive as
they swarmed across the deserts from the west. The time has past when
repeated migrations are needed to give a framework to Indian history.

Another favourite migration myth has recently been called into question.
It used to be taken as almost obvious that swarms of Anglo-Saxons
crossed the English Channel following the decline of Roman power in
Britain. These invaders were supposed to have brought the language that became English and to have pushed their Celtic predecessors to
the western and northern fringes of the British Isles. Of course, people
have regularly migrated in both directions across the English Channel,
but recent scholarship has made the picture of swarms of migrants seem
unlikely. Modern archaeology suggests far more continuity, both through
and following the period of Roman power, than is compatible with mas-
sive migrations and population displacement (Pryor 2004).

Still another strand in the history of migration myths has been the
unchanging search for the lost tribes of Israel. In his book *The Lost Tribes
of Israel* (2004), Tudor Parfitt describes how wide and enduring the search
for the lost tribes has been. Eager travellers have scoured every continent
for them. Visitors have regularly managed to convince themselves that
they have spotted a lost tribe, and a remarkable number of people have
been persuaded that their own group is one of the lost tribes.

One of the scores of observers who have believed in lost tribes was a
man named Dr. Francis Mason. Mason belonged to the American Baptist
Foreign Missionary Society and he arrived in Burma in 1814. In time,
he became convinced that the Karen, a large minority people of Burma,
were a section of the Lost Tribes, and in 1833 he wrote in a letter:
'There can scarcely be a rational doubt that the Yuwah of the Karens
is the Jehovah of the Hebrews... from the foregoing I am constrained
to believe the Karens to be descendants of the Hebrews. Look at them
sir; is not the Jew written in their countenance?' (Parfitt 2002:111). The
Francis Mason who wrote these lines belonged to the same American
Baptist Mission Society that sent missionaries to north-eastern India,
and it would be surprising if the missionaries to the northeast were
not aware of the possibility that lost tribes might be found there too.
The belief that the Karens were Jews persisted into the 1930's, and the
idea was taken seriously by Jews in India.2 Even today, some Mizos
from northeast India claim to belong to a lost tribe, and some of them
have 'returned' to Israel where they have been accepted as lost brethren
(Parfitt 2002:132-44; Rengi ms.) These examples are enough to suggest
that, when they came to northeast India, both British colonial officers
and foreign missionaries would have brought along a presumption of
migration. We see this presumption clearly expressed in the later ethnog-
raphies of Playfair, Mills, and Hutton.

Migration stories continue to be told, and my final example comes from
an article by Randy LaPolla: 'The Role of Migration and Language
Contact in the Development of the Sino-Tibetan Language Family'
(2001). LaPolla gives many fascinating and astonishing examples of
population movements back and forth across China over the course of
its long history, and then he turns to Southeast Asia. The passage that
I quote here is just one very small piece of a much longer and more
complex argument, but it is representative of many passages by many
writers that I have encountered over the years, about many groups of
people. Here is a part of what LaPolla says about the Burmese:

The people we have come to think of as the Burmese had been in Yunnan,
under the control of the Nanzhao kingdom, and moved down into Burma
from the middle of the ninth century. They came down from the northern

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1 Should anyone imagine that the search for lost tribes has ended, they might find it
interesting to disabuse themselves by a look at such enthusiastic reports as those found in
Shan states into the Kyanksè area south of Mandalay, splitting the Mon in the north and south, and pushed the Karens east of the Irrawaddy. About AD 1000 the Burmese conquered the Mon to the south, and the first Burmese kingdom, the Pagan kingdom, was founded in 1044. The court adopted much of Mon culture (it became the official court culture, and the Mon language (or Pali) was used for inscriptions; the Mon script also became the basis of the Burmese writing system. This was the early period of major contact and influence of the Mon on the Burmese, which lasted until the twelfth century (LaPolla 2001:237).

I have no privileged knowledge about the rise of Burmese power a thousand years ago, and I cannot know exactly what happened. Still, I find it likely that the actual events would be better described in a rather different way. I would put it like this: 'In the ninth and tenth centuries, people led by speakers of an old form of Burmese established control over an area of upper Burma. Speakers of Mon and Karen, who had long occupied much of this area, gradually shifted to the language of their rulers, even while retaining much of their earlier culture. Mon culture continued as the official court culture, and the Mon language (or Pali) was used for inscriptions; the Mon script also became the basis of the Burmese writing system.'

The difference between these two descriptions may not seem great, but LaPolla's implies more population movement and more displacement of people, while mine implies more language shift. LaPolla, like so many others, seems to assume that language change implies population change. I believe, instead, that language can shift without the large-scale population replacement that seems to be implied when LaPolla writes about 'splitting the Mon in the north and south' or when he says that the Burmese 'pushed the Karens east of the Irrawaddy'. Indeed, if people were displaced so dramatically, it is hard to understand how Mon culture could have survived so successfully. Less dramatic migrations, such as those invoked by Hutton, Mills, and Playfair to explain the distribution of tribes and languages in northeast India, seem, to me, to be no more likely.

My view of migration has no doubt been coloured by my particular experiences. Most of my time in northeast India has been spent among the Garos, and while I was in the Garo Hills, people occasionally asked for my opinion about where they might have come from. They were curious, I was an expert, and they supposed that I might be able to enlighten them. Only once, during my years in the Garo Hills, has anyone told me with any confidence where the Garos came from. This was a half century ago and my memory is not clear on the details, but I do remember the man who explained to me that the older home of his ancestors was Palestine. The Garos, he assured me, left Palestine about two thousand years ago, and he had drawn a map of the route they followed. These ancient Garos travelled through central Asia via Samarkand and Tashkent, across Tibet, down from the mountains, across the river and then, at last, up to their present homeland. He had written dates beside several of the cities along their route showing when they had passed. In all, the migration took many centuries. I did not, alas, make a copy of his map or record his dates, and I know of no Garos who have sought to 'return' to their Palestinian homeland.

Except for this single occasion, Garos expressed curiosity, but little knowledge of any migrations that could have brought them to what we now call the Garo Hills. If my memory is reliable, it was most often educated Garos, those who had profited from the mission schools, who raised questions about migrations and origins. I do not remember much curiosity about migration among the people in villages where formal education had not yet penetrated, and I cannot avoid the suspicion that those whose curiosity had been piqued had been stimulated by the education that western missionaries brought to the northeast. Perhaps this new education had simply stimulated a broader curiosity, but students may also have heard explicit suggestions about migrations.

Of course, I should not generalise from the Garos and I should not presume that everyone in the northeast is like them. Colleagues who have worked in other parts of the northeast have assured me that the people among whom they have lived have shown a more lively interest in migrations and expressed firmer opinions about their origins than I found among the Garos. At the same time, we should not ignore the possibility that western influence has stimulated their interest and shaped their beliefs, just as western influence has unquestionably shaped the ideas of the Garo man who traced his ancestry back to Palestine. People everywhere are interested in their origins, and north-easterners do have a special reason for their interest. The tangle of ethnicities found in the hills cries out for an explanation. From 'Why are there so many tribes?' and 'How did all that diversity come about?' it is but a small step to 'Where did these all these different people come from?'

The question of migration is enormously complicated by a tendency to equate language with ethnicity, to presume that everyone who speaks the same language belongs to the same 'tribe', and to imagine that both language and tribal affiliation are fixed and eternal (Burling 2007; Burling, In press). Migration stories offer an explanation for the diversity, but they also imply a longer continuity and much sharper boundaries between the
ethnic divisions than can really be justified. If we are amused by the story of Garo migration from Palestine, it is partly because it is so difficult to imagine an ethnic group maintaining its coherence and distinctiveness over such long stretches of time and space. How many ethnic groups can we name in Europe that have survived for so long? Even to suggest that the Angamis maintained their ethnic boundaries as they wandered into Manipur, and then wandered out again, surely stretches credulity.

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 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. It allows people to wonder and to ask ‘Where did the Garos come from?’ It is the only term that unambiguously includes everyone whom they would like to include within their ethnic boundaries.

North-easterners engage in endless debates, quarrels, and fights about just where the boundaries among tribes should be drawn, and sometimes the boundaries change. We do not know whether or not the people now known as ‘Nagas’ recognised any common ethnicity before the British came along and grouped them together under a single name, but they certainly recognise a relationship today, even if exactly who is and who is not a Naga remains in contention and can change over time. A small group called the ‘Anal’, who speak a Kuki language, decided, some years ago, that they wanted to affiliate with the Naga, and they are now widely accepted as Nagas (Ruata Rengsi, personal communication). Some Mizos insist that the Lakthers are a kind of Mizo. Some Lakthers insist that they are a separate tribe. A (literally) incredible migration story has made it possible for some Mizos to ‘return’ to Israel. Garos describe the people they call ‘Megams’ as a subtribe of Garos. The Khasis call the same people ‘Lyngngams’ and say that they are a subtribe of Khasis. Whether anyone has thought to ask the Megam–Lyngngams what they think, I do not know. These are only a few examples of changing or disputed ethnicities, but they are enough to undermine any notion that ethnic boundaries are either permanent or unambiguous. Rather, the boundaries are contested, constructed, negotiated, imagined. This allows ethnicity to be changed. The very lack of clarity about ethnic boundaries may encourage people to seize upon, or to invent, migration stories as a way of justifying their own claims. When ethnic boundaries are unclear, migration stories can prop up whatever one wants to believe. Migration stories may reveal much about the aspirations and ethnic values of the people. They can hardly be taken as reliable historical memories.

People migrate. That is not in dispute. But I have never seen evidence that persuades me that whole tribes or ethnic groups migrate, at least not in north-eastern India or in the adjacent mountainous regions of Tibet, China, or Burma. Migration is best seen as a metaphor by which both the indigenous people and outside visitors have tried to understand the history and distribution of peoples. Some northeast Indian hill people may have migration stories that owe nothing to foreign visitors, but the visitors certainly came well equipped with migration stories of their own.
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