

## Language, Ethnicity and Migration in Northeastern India [Footnote 1]

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Abstract. The people of northeastern India often construct migration stories in an attempt to explain the history and present distribution of the tribes. These stories assume that language and ethnic (tribal) boundaries coincide, and that they endure through long periods. Ethnic boundaries, however, are widely contested in northeastern India, and even language boundaries are interpreted in varied ways so as to support particular ethnic and political goals. While people certainly migrate, they rarely do so as coherent tribes, and the present distribution of ethnic groups is better seen as an adjustment to environmental, economic, and political conditions than as the outcome of migrations. In the past, ethnic differences were constructed, and ethnic loyalty invoked, both to justify aggression and to rally defense against aggressors. Ethnicity is still used today, both to assert local differences and in an attempt to forge unity. Ethnic sentiments have contributed to the simmering violence that has punctuated the history of northeastern India since the end of the colonial period.

Keywords: Migration, Ethnicity, Garos

Where did the Garos come from?

In the course of many years living among the Garos, I have often been asked: ‘Where did the Garos come from?’ [Footnote 2]. Garos have no myths about having emerged from the ground or fallen from the sky, but they take for granted that their ancestors had to come from somewhere other than their present homeland. They could not have just sprung into existence in the Garo Hills, but it is far from clear just where their ancient homeland might be. I have heard the same question from members of other ethnic groups in northeastern India: ‘Where did we come from?’ Everyone is presumed to have migrated from somewhere else.

The most frequent suggestion about the Garo homeland is Tibet, probably because Tibet is both suitably exotic and suitably near. Others wonder if the Garos might have come, instead, from Mandalay. I presume this is because the Garos often call themselves ‘Mande’ (which otherwise means ‘people’) and ‘Mandalay’ sounds enough like ‘Mande’ to make it a good candidate for a point of origin. I know of no evidence for a Tibetan homeland, other than a vague set of traditions, and none for an origin in Mandalay except for the coincidence of the words. Generally, however, I have been asked, rather than told, where the Garos came from. I am the expert. I am expected to know such things.

Only once have I talked with anyone who showed real confidence about Garo origins. This was long ago, during my first trip to the Garo Hills in the 1950’s. At that time, I met a man who explained, with utter confidence, that the Garos had come from Palestine [Footnote 3]. I have forgotten the details of the journey now, but I do remember that this man had a precise itinerary and an equally precise chronology. As I recall, his ancestors started their journey about two thousand years ago, and he had drawn a map

with a line that showed them passing through both Samarkand and Tashkent. He had the exact date for when they reached Samarkand, perhaps it was something like 350 C.E., and another, somewhat later date, for Tashkent. On they went, through Tibet, and then down from the mountains, across the Brahamaputra, and up into the hills where they finally made their permanent home. Apparently my informant failed to convince other Garos of his findings. At least, I have never heard anyone else repeat his claims.

A host of assumptions lurk behind the question of ‘Where did the Garos come from?’ The questioner assumes that long ago and somewhere else, people could be found who were the ‘same’, in some not very clear sense, as the people known today as ‘Garos’. Presumably these ancient and distant Garos had much the same customs and the same language as modern Garos, and they were certainly the ancestors of the Garos we know today. Only if language, culture, and biology are eternally linked does the question make sense.

For some parts of the world, such a question would not be taken seriously. What, for example, would you say if I were to ask ‘Where did the French come from? Your first reaction might be to suppose that I was teasing. If you were in a tolerant mood, and if I persuaded you that my question was meant quite seriously, you might explain that people have come to the place we now call ‘France’ from many directions. Some, who are remembered now as ‘Normans’, came by sea from Scandinavia. Others, who were linguistically German, came by land from the north and east. Some of these were known as ‘Franks’, and it was they who gave their name to the place where they settled. Even earlier than the Franks, others had brought an important language from Rome. That language was not French, of course, but it was the most important single ingredient of

what later became French. Other people came from Britain, and still others must have come from the places we now call ‘Spain’ and ‘Switzerland’ and from innumerable points beyond. For thousands of years before the Romans, others had been moving into and out of ‘France’. The arrivals, both ancient and recent, brought their genes to contribute to the gene pool, and their ideas, customs, and languages to contribute to the culture. But whatever the contributions of the incoming migrants, none of them were French. The French people and French culture came into existence only where France is right now. Even the Latin language had to undergo extensive remodeling before anything we would call ‘French’ emerged.

All this seems so obvious that it is a bit painful to spell it out. I accept the pain because I want to insist that it is no more reasonable to ask ‘Where did the Garos come from?’ than to ask ‘Where did the French come from?’ The Garos themselves ask the question because they have no written records that describe their origins and no clear or consistent oral history. Other northeasterners ask parallel questions. People talk as if their ancestors once lived somewhere else, but migrated at some point in order to reach the previously uninhabited territory where they made their final home. Few people are as confident about their origins as the Garo man who placed his ancestors in Palestine, but others also fill the blanks of their historical knowledge with stories, or at least presumptions, about migrations. Because those of us who are outsiders are as ignorant about history as the local people are, we can be tempted to ask similar questions

[Footnote 4].

## Tribes and Languages

The idea of a tribe as it is understood in northeastern India today is complex one, and I need to consider it with some care. For many westerners the word ‘tribe’ suggests backwardness, but northeastern hill people who use the term show little concern for any danger that that it might drag along connotations of backwardness or marginality. Whether or not it suggests backwardness, however, the term does describe a legal category in independent India. ‘Tribes’ are recognized in the Indian constitution as having a special status, and membership in a tribe can bring special educational and occupational privileges. Legal recognition assumes sharp boundaries between the tribes, and especially between tribals and nontribals. Because I want to argue that boundaries are less sharp than northeasterners (and the Indian constitution) generally assume, ‘ethnicities’ might be a better word for me to use than ‘tribes’. To me at least, ‘ethnicity’ does not imply such sharp boundaries as does ‘tribe’. I am concerned with the way northeasterners talk and think, however, so I need to use their word. I will use ‘tribe’ in the colloquial way of the northeast, one that carries little connotation of backwardness and one that often ignores the legal definition. In spite of its legal status, I will argue that, to use Benedict Anderson’s term, a tribe is an ‘imagined community’ [Footnote 5].

When people ask ‘Where did the Garos (or the Mizos, or Angamis, or Apa Tanis) come from’, they express the deep and abiding northeastern presumption that language boundaries coincide with tribal boundaries. In northeastern India, each tribe is presumed to have its own language, and each language is presumed to be spoken by just one tribe. A map of the tribes is expected to look no different from a map of the languages. Tribes and languages are even called by the same names: the Angamis speak Angami, the Garos

speak Garo, the Mizos speak Miso, and so on through all the hundred or so languages that are spoken in the northeast [Footnote 6 ].

This presumption of linguistic and tribal equivalence is an odd one, because most people do know of exceptions. For example, a people called the ‘Rabha’ live in the low country just north of the Garo Hills, between the hills and the Brahmaputra river. Many Assamese live in the same area, and many Rabhas are comfortably bilingual, able to use both the Indic language of the Assamese and their own Tibeto-Burman Rabha. Other Rabhas, however, speak only Assamese. Perhaps their grandparents or great-grandparents once spoke Rabha, but the grandchildren do not. Nobody denies these monolingual Assamese speakers the status of ‘Rabhas’. They regard themselves as Rabhas and are so regarded by their neighbors, but they violate the expectation that language and tribal membership will always correspond. Other examples of this disjuncture can be found here and there in the northeast, and people accept these exceptions calmly enough, but they seem never to generalize or to conclude that, even if language and tribe often correspond, they do not always do so. They fail to recognize that language and tribe are, in principle, independent.

It is true that, for the northeasterners I have known, the correspondence of language and tribal membership comes close to being no more than a matter of definition. Linguists want ‘dialects’ to be forms of speech that are mutually intelligible, while ‘languages’ are too different for mutual understanding. Northeasterners usually give these words a different meaning. For them, whatever is spoken by a ‘tribe’ is likely to be called a ‘language’, and whatever is spoken by a ‘subtribe’ is a ‘dialect’. Often this corresponds to the linguists’ definition. Tribes often have mutually unintelligible ways of speaking, so

a linguist would agree that they have separate ‘languages’. Subtribes can often easily understand each other’s speech, so linguists would also agree that they are separated only by ‘dialects’. Sometimes, however, understandability does not correspond to recognized tribal boundaries. For example, there are more than a dozen Kuki ‘tribes’, most of them living in or near the western and southern parts of Manipur state. Since these Kukis have resisted being grouped together as a single ‘tribe’, each Kuki group goes by its own ‘tribal’ name: Paite, Hmar, Gangte, Thadou and so on [Footnote 7]. In conformity with their status as separate ‘tribes’ both the Kukis themselves and others who know them, usually speak of these groups as having distinct ‘languages’. Nevertheless, Kukis have assured me that they can all easily understand one another’s ‘languages’, so they are what linguists would call ‘dialects’. On the other hand, the members of the Tangkhul ‘tribe’, a large ethnic group of northeastern Manipur along the Burma border, are all said to speak a single ‘language’, which, of course, is called ‘Tangkhul’. Tangkhul, however, is known to have several mutually unintelligible ‘dialects’ [Footnote 8]. Linguists, if true to their own definitions, should use ‘dialects’ for the many Kuki forms of speech, while they should use ‘languages’ for the different varieties of Tankhul, but northeasterners are not linguists and we are not likely to impose our definitions on them. The difference in definitions matters only when linguists hear the words that northeasterners use, and then misinterpret them as if they had been used in the linguist’s sense.

An even more startling case (to a linguist at least) is that of a people known as ‘Lyngngams’ to the Khasi and as ‘Megams’ to the Garos [Footnote 9]. The Lyngngam-Megams live in the western part of the Khasi Hills, between the Garos on the west and the Khasis on the east. They speak a language that is closely related to Khasi, or perhaps

it is even a dialect of Khasi, and this means that it belongs to the Mon-Khmer family of languages. Unlike the great majority of languages spoken by the tribes of northeastern India, including Garo, Lyngngam-Megam is not even Tibeto-Burman. Given the similarity of their languages, it seems natural that the Khasis regard the Lyngngams to be one of their sub-tribes. The Garos, however, refer to the Megams (the very same people) as one of *their* sub-tribes. I have even heard the Megam language referred to as a dialect of Garo. This, of course, is nonsense by the linguist's definition of 'dialect', which insists that dialects of the same language are mutually understandable. In no way is Lyngngam-Megam understandable to (other) Garos. Here is a place where the Garos violently override the linguist's definition of what constitutes a dialect or a language.

No more than linguists, however, are northeasterners entirely consistent in their use of these two terms. While some Rabhas speak only Assamese, I cannot imagine anyone, either a Rabha or an Assamese, who would use the word 'Rabha' to describe the language of these monolinguals. These are Rabhas who speak Assamese. Similarly, a small enclave of speakers in the Garo Hills speak, or once spoke, a language known as 'Ruga'. The community of Rugas is surrounded on all sides by speakers of Garo, and the Rugas are considered to be one subgroup of the Garos. For this reason, the speech of the Rugas is generally described as a 'dialect' of Garo even though Ruga is not mutually intelligible with the other 'dialects' of Garo. Ruga is now known only to a handful of older speakers and it is destined to die. The children and grandchildren of the few remaining Ruga speakers have Garo as their first language. Nevertheless the identification of the people as 'Rugas' will not disappear as quickly as their language. So, there are limits on the presumption that tribes have just one language and that languages



have just one tribe. Tribal boundaries do not always correspond to language boundaries, even for northeasterners.

For both linguists and northeasterners, dialects are varied forms of the same language, and for both, languages are more important. It is the association between a tribe and its language that is felt to be deep and eternal and it is the tribe that is symbolized most clearly by its language. It is tribal membership that arouses emotions. Dialects are more superficial. One tribe can differ from other tribes in everything from its traditional style of clothing and basketry to its kinship practices and ceremonial life (and so, of course, can subtribes), but nothing is so deeply symbolic of tribal identity as its language.

In the last century, many of the hill people of northeastern India have converted to Christianity, so differences in religious practices no longer correspond so clearly to tribal boundaries. Where tribal affiliation was once unmistakably signaled by clothing, especially by women's clothing, many tribal women, as well as men, have now converted, for daily wear, to anonymous manufactured garments, although they may continue to wear 'tribal' garments for special and ceremonial occasions. Neither changed religion nor changed clothing threatens tribal membership, but the idea that people might one day change their language, is likely to be dismissed as absurd. 'Garos will always speak Garo'. 'Nagas will always speak their own Naga languages'. Language is imagined to be permanent, and language is, by far, the most important symbol of tribal identity. Examples like that of the Rabhas, and the Rugas, where some people have stopped using their 'own' languages, are ignored or forgotten.

## Migration and Conflict

I do not believe that it makes much sense to ask ‘Where did the Garos/Mizos/Angami/etc come from?’ not, at least, in the meaning that is usually intended, but I do not mean to cast doubt on migration. People certainly migrate. Indeed they migrate in every direction—up and down, back, and forth. But people rarely migrate in coherent groups that retain their language and customs through long periods of time and over long distances of space. Those who migrate almost always leave some of their ethnic kinsmen back home, and no sooner do they establish themselves in a new place than they begin to construct an ethnicity that is distinct from those left behind. Nor can migrants expect to find empty territory that is free for the taking. People have been wandering across and round about in South and Southeast Asia ever since Paleolithic times. Wherever food could be found or produced, we can be confident that hungry people would have come to search for it. Many millennia have passed since migrants in what is now northeastern India could have found land to which no one else laid claim. Whether peacefully or violently, migrants and their predecessors had to make some accommodation to one another. In the very short term—a few generations—people may remember their affiliation with the distant settlements from which they came, but until very recently it was not easy to maintain ties with people who lived as close to one another as a mere hundred miles. Today, islands of Garos are found far from the Garo Hills. Santalis in Assam still recognize their affiliation with the Santalis of central India. But neither Garos nor Santalis moved as whole tribes. A few individuals moved, but the main tribe was left behind.

Once moved to a new location, humans so cheerfully mix both their genes and their customs that every culture and every human population has multiple ancestries. Rarely is a population, tribe, or ethnic group so ‘pure’ that its ancestry can be traced back to a single source. Happily, the tribal people of northeastern India, have little concern for genetic purity, but ethnicity—‘tribal’ membership—matters. It matters so much that it is endlessly contested and endlessly negotiated. Would-be leaders appeal to their followers with differing myths about their ‘tribes’. One hopeful leader insists ‘We all belong to the same tribe and we must be united. We must use the same language, practice the same customs, and defend our rights. Follow me and we will be strong!’ Another hopeful leader says ‘Our group is different from all the others. From time immemorial we have spoken our own language and practiced our own customs. We are a separate tribe and we must resist the threat to our distinct identity. Follow me and we will be free!’ Almost every day, the newspapers in northeastern India tell us about interethnic disputes. Inspired by ethnic loyalty, people regularly kill one another.

The change in name from ‘The Lushai Hills’ to ‘Mizoram’, and the adoption of ‘Mizo’ as the name for the main language spoken in the state, were parts of a move to create a more inclusive ethnicity, a larger tribe, than had been covered by the older ‘Lushai’. The Mizos and the Kukis, together with the Chins, most of whom live over the border in Burma, all have what a linguist would call either ‘dialects’ or closely related ‘languages’. Most Kukis understand each other easily. Mizos can usually understand at least some varieties of Kuki, and even Mizos, Kukis, and Chins who have lived too far apart to have become familiar with one another’s languages (or dialects), can probably learn to converse quite easily, once given the chance. Still, these dialects (or languages)

differ in plenty of ways, and there has been much dispute about exactly where the ethnic lines should be drawn among them. The Lakhers of southern Mizoram, for example, have resisted inclusion among the Mizos, even though the Lakher language closely resembles that spoken by people who call themselves Mizos. In the north, a few groups that are clearly Kukis by language now affiliate themselves with Nagas. Some Mizo nationalists would like to include both the Lakhers and the Kukis among the Mizos, and they even urge others to use the form of the Mizo language that they regard as best. [Footnote 10]

The boundaries of tribes are described in different ways by different people, and in the face of so many disagreements, we should be astonished that anyone can imagine tribal boundaries to be permanent [Footnote 11]. Rather, they are constantly in flux, and there are no objective criteria by which real tribal boundaries can be determined. The boundaries correspond consistently neither to language differences, nor to dress, nor to ceremonial life nor to any other trait that can be observed or measured. Tribes, then, are prototypical imagined communities, but this does not mean that they are unimportant to people. Tribes are imagined to be real, and because they seem real, they are important. If I identify myself as a Mizo and believe that the Lakhers really and truly are Mizos, while you insist on being a Lakher but deny that you are a Mizo, you and I may both conclude the other is simply wrong. We may both grow angry at the other's ignorance and intransigence. It is from such feelings, and from leaders who foster and exploit such feelings, that tribal conflicts grow.

The presumption of a close equivalence between language and tribe helps to confuse the question of origins. Language has a degree of coherence and continuity that other aspects of culture lack. It makes a bit better sense to ask 'Where did the Garo

*language* come from?’ than to ask ‘Where did the Garo *people* come from?’ There is a sense in which the French language might be said to have come from Rome, although we need to remember that it was not French that the Romans brought but Latin, and Latin had to undergo many changes and receive much influence from other languages before it turned into something we would call ‘French’. Still, as long as we recognize the complications, it does make a kind of sense to ask ‘Where did the French language come from?’ In the same way, we can ask ‘Where did the Garo or Angami, or Mizo, or Apa Tani languages come from?’ but we must never forget that the route from some earlier form of Tibeto-Burman to the modern languages must have been filled with just as many complications as the route from Latin to French.

The problem about asking where a language came from is not so much that the question is bad (in the way I believe the question of where a *people* came from really is bad) but that we are so ignorant of history. We simply do not know where the ancestor of the Garo language was spoken, or where the ancestor of any other minority language in northeastern India, was spoken. We do not know when, or from where, or under what circumstances Tibeto-Burman languages first reached northeastern India, and we do not know where or how the daughter languages diverged, developed, and spread. Still, linguists do usually assume that each language has a single line of antecedents. Linguists do not expect languages to go back to multiple great grandparents the way individual people or cultures do. Asking where a language comes from does make sense, even if we have no way to know the answer. Ethnicity and tribal membership have nothing like the coherence or continuity of language, and neither do human populations when seen as

biological rather than as cultural aggregations. Ethnic and biological antecedents are always a tangle, not a single line.

### Politics and Symbols

If ‘Where did the so-and-so come from?’ is a meaningless question, and if we lack the knowledge of history that would allow us to give a useful answer to ‘Where did such-and-such a language come from?’ we are left with a third question ‘How did all that linguistic and cultural variability come about?’ I believe that any reasonable answer to this third, and more reasonable, question requires us to forget migration stories and to look instead at politics, economy, and the environment.

The mountainous terrain of northeastern India has always made travel difficult. Only in the Brahmaputra valley, and on a much smaller scale in the central valley of Manipur, could the available technology support sufficient military force to build or sustain an extensive political system. Small chiefdoms were possible in the Khasi Hills and Tripura, but in most of the hill areas people lived in villages that were largely independent of one another. In many parts of the northeast, people had to defend themselves, as best they could, from the head hunters in the next valley, but they were unable to organize any overarching political structure that could keep the local peace or offer a united defense against more distant enemies.

People who take each other’s heads need symbols to mark their separation from one another, and clothing and language are effective ethnic symbols. Northeasterners were imaginative in inventing different styles of clothing to serve as badges of ethnicity, and they have been equally imaginative with their languages. When they chose distinctive

clothing, they must have done so more or less deliberately for the purpose of setting themselves apart from their neighbors. Westerners who eagerly take up new styles so as to distinguish themselves from their more dowdy fellow citizens should understand the urge to dress differently from those who are held in contempt. Language is not so easily manipulated as clothing, but westerners who carefully avoid stigmatized pronunciation or grammar should understand that language, too, can be manipulated. When contemplating the northeastern Babel, it is hard to avoid the suspicion that languages have been manipulated in order to be different—different from folks in the next valley, different from ‘them’ [Footnote 12].

Language, of course, is all about symbols. Every word we use is a symbol for an idea that we want to talk about. We use our words to convey our thoughts to others. But languages themselves also become symbols. The languages, the dialects, and the styles that I am able to speak, or that I choose to speak, tell a great deal about myself, about where I come from, about my place in society, about my aspirations. One of the messages that the northeastern hill people have wanted to convey with their many languages was ‘Hey, we are not like you. We are different.’

To some extent, people construct their languages to conform to social divisions that already exist. Even though language and ethnicity do not always correspond, people do use their languages to symbolize whatever social and ethnic divisions they find important. It is not as easy to shed one’s language and pick up another as it is to shed one’s clothing and start fresh, however. As the northeastern hill people have demonstrated so clearly in the course of the last century, when most of them adopted Christianity, even a new religion may be easier to take on than a new language. Even

without manipulating it deliberately, however, language is wonderfully useful as an ethnic symbol because any two languages or dialects, or even styles, always resemble each other in some ways but they are always different in other ways. We can point to differences between any two languages, dialects, or styles if we want to assert our differences. Equally, we can always point to commonalities in our languages if what we want is to assert our unity. We emphasize the differences or the similarities according to what we want to prove. A Bengali can point to the obvious similarities between Bengali and Assamese to ‘prove’ that Assamese is simply a ‘dialect’ of Bengali, and a corrupt one at that. By pointing to the ways they differ, an Assamese can just as easily ‘prove’ that Assamese is really a separate ‘language’. This is an argument about politics and power, not an argument about language. Partly by seizing on the similarities and differences that are already found in their languages, and partly by reconfiguring their languages in ways that fit their goals, northeasterners have pushed their languages to conform to, and to justify, their fluctuating ethnic identities.

### Glory and Tragedy

Both the glory and the tragedy of northeastern India lie in its ethnic diversity. Every ethnicity and every language is an experiment in human virtuosity, a demonstration of how wonderfully variable humans can be, and in northeastern India the experiments are legion. Sadly, people have a depressing ability to persuade themselves that their particular ways are not only different from those of their neighbors, but better. Perhaps those sentiments once helped people to defend themselves against the headhunters from the next valley, but the same sentiments can also be used to justify an



attack. Those with the most power or the largest numbers still flaunt their own ways and condemn other ways as inferior. Today, when the world bristles with increasingly powerful weaponry, sentiments of superiority have become even more dangerous than they were when headhunting swords represented the cutting edge of technology. In the decades since the British left northeastern India, its people have competed with one another, asserting the clashing goals of unity and independence, and far too often they have used modern weaponry to make their point.

The Assamese are justified in resenting the condescension of those Bengalis who dismiss the Assamese language as nothing more than a corrupt form of Bengali. Unfortunately, Assamese sometimes dismiss the tribal languages with every bit as much condescension as Bengalis direct toward Assamese. In the 1950's and 60's, when the districts that now form the state of Meghalaya still belonged to the state of Assam, some Assamese leaders wanted to introduce the Assamese language into the school curriculum of the hill districts. This was one of the chief grievances that Garo and Khasi leaders pointed to as they agitated for the separation of their districts from Assam. The result was the state of Meghalaya. Assamese who had insisted on the importance of their own language failed to understand that others might find Assamese as unwelcome as the Assamese have found Bengali.

Sadly, the condescension about other people's forms of speech goes further. The Atong and the Ruga, the two small enclaves within the Garo Hills that have their own distinctive languages, have both been steadily shrinking in numbers as their speakers shift to Garo. One of the most humane and thoughtful of my Garo friends once told me that he thought this shift was a good thing, since it would bring more unity to the Garos. I

suggested that a Garo speaker who welcomed the decline of Atong and Ruga was not much different than an Assamese speaker who pushed his language onto the Garos, but my friend would not accept the parallel. Members of the larger or more dominant groups can have a depressing lack of understanding of the joy that the smaller and less dominant groups can find in their own separate identity.

Does it do any good to preach tolerance, to ask the Bengalis to respect the Assamese and their language, to ask the Assamese to respect the tribals and their many languages, to ask the Garos to respect the Atongs, and the Mizos to respect the Lakhers and the Kukis? What else can we do but preach? Perhaps the place to start is to insist that neither language nor ethnicity is fixed. They are not glued firmly together for all eternity. They always change. They are constructed, negotiated, revised. Life would be easier if everyone could be allowed to make his or her own choices about ethnicity and language. It is a tragic fact, that men (not so often women) can gain power by asserting the superiority of one ethnicity or one language over another. This tragic fact has brought terrible suffering to northeastern India.

## Notes

1. This paper grows from my long interest in northeastern India, an interest that goes all the way back to the 1950's when I made my first trip to the Garo Hills. My attitude toward migration theories was formed during innumerable conversations with Garos and other northeasterners, starting with that early trip and continuing later in both northeastern India and in nearby districts of Bangladesh. For this paper, I am much indebted to my friend and one-time colleague, Ruata Rengsi of the History Department at Northeastern Hill University in Shillong, Meghalaya. Among other things, he has done his best to straighten out my understanding of ethnic and linguistic relations among the Mizo-Lakher-Kuki-Chin. I am also much in debt to Bettina Zeisler, Mark Post, and Stuart Blackburn with each of whom I have had extended conversations, some face to face but most by E-mail, about the ideas offered here. None of these will agree with all I have said in this paper, so please do not blame them because I am too stubborn to yield to all their arguments.

2. Robbins Burling, *Rengsangri: Family and Kinship in a Garo Village* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1963, Second Edition: Tura, Meghalaya, India: Tura Book Room, 1998); *The Strong Women of Modhupur* (Dhaka: University Press Ltd. 1997).

3. At about the time when I was told about the Palestinian origin of the Garos, some people in what is now Mizoram (it was then the Lushei Hills and the people would probably have called themselves 'Lusheis') became interested in Judaism. They decided

that they were Jews, also members of a lost tribe, and they made contact with representatives of Israel. Eventually hundreds of Mizos are reported to have been accepted as migrants by Israel. Ruata Rengsi, 'Mizo Migration to Israel' (Manuscript, ca. 2004).

4. R.J. LaPolla has given a fascinating survey of a formidable succession of migrations in China and in the Tibeto-Burman world. I would never argue that migrations do not occur, but I also wonder if LaPolla has not gone a bit too far. For example, he describes the ancestors of the Burmese as migrating down from the north and as displacing the Karens and Mons who, however, gave much of their culture to the Burmese. Might not the history be better described as one in which some Mon and some Karen shifted their language to Burmese but continued to practice much of their older culture? Randy J LaPolla, 'The Role of Migration and Language Contact in the Development of the Sino-Tibetan Language Family', in Alexandra Y. Aikhenvald and R.M.W. Dixon, *Areal Diffusion and Genetic Inheritance: Problems in Comparative Linguistics* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), pp.225-254.

5. Benedict Anderson., *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the origin and spread of nationalism* (London, New York: Verso, 1991).

6. Robbins Burling, 'The Tibeto-Burman Languages of Northeastern India', in Graham Thurgood and Randy J. LaPolla, *The Sino-Tibetan Languages* London: Routledge, 2003), pp.169-191.

7. G.A. Grierson, *Specimens of the Kuki-Chin & Burma Group*, Volume III, Part III, *Linguistic Survey of India* (Calcutta: Government of India, Central Publication Branch 1904).
8. David Mortensen, *Comparative Tangkhul*, (Manuscript, 2003).
9. U.R. Ehrenfels, 'Three Matrilineal Groups in Assam: A Study in Similarities and Differences' *American Anthropologist*, Vol 57 (1955), pp.306-321.
10. I have spoken with a number of people about the Mizo situation, but I depend especially on conversations with Ruata Rengsi.
11. As Ellen Bal has shown very clearly, even the Garos, about most of whose boundaries there is now wide consensus, have had fluctuating and unclear boundaries in the past. Today only the position of the Lyngngam-Megam is contested. Ellen Bal, *They Ask if we Eat Frogs: Social Boundaries, Ethnic Categorisation, and the Garo People of Bangladesh* (Delft: Eburon, 2000).
12. Sarah G. Thomason, 'Language Contact and Deliberate Change' (*Journal of Languages and Contact*. In Press).