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INTRODUCTION

FIXED CATEGORIES, FROZEN IMAGES

During a brief visit to Bangladesh, in December 2005, I spotted a recent edition of the national encyclopaedia (the Banglapedia), in the showcase of a professor of history at Rajshahi University.¹ I eagerly searched for a reference to the Garos, among who I had carried out research between 1993 and 2000, and to my satisfaction, discovered four whole pages devoted to their history, culture, religion, and habitat. To me this meant they have a place in the national representation of Bangladesh. My pleasure, however, at once gave away to disappointment, as I discovered one more image frozen in time; one that might as well be found in a nineteenth-century colonial report on Garos or another tribe. The Banglapedia described the Garos as follows:

Their faces are round, hair and eyes black, foreheads extended to eye area, eyebrows deep, eyes small, noses flat and jaws high. Beards rarely grow on their cheeks and they almost have no hair on their body. ... The natural habitats of the Garo people are the hills, hillocks, deep forests and places near fountains, springs, and other water bodies. Animals, reptiles and birds are their closest neighbours.... MIRZA NATHAN, a Mughal army commander, remarked that Garos eat everything except iron. There is some exaggeration in this statement but in fact, they eat all animals except cats, which is their totem. They live in an isolated world and within their own geographic, economic and cultural boundaries and follow their own customary norms.²

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This is a common depiction of a so-called tribe in South Asia. Hundreds of other groups that fall into the tribal category are often described in a similar vein, both in popular and administrative publications, and frequently also in academic accounts. Somehow, dominant discourse of tribe has undergone noticeably little change since the British began their arduous (and impossible) task to classify the Indian population into neat categories of castes, tribes, religions, races, etc.

This book is about social categories, images, and identities. It is about their construction and disappearance, their malleability and continued existence. We cannot think about the world unless we imagine ourselves and others in separate compartments. The recognition that any category does violence to the complexity of social reality does not change the fact that some classifications, better than others, serve to understand social processes and identity formation. Serious problems arise when categories, and consequentially the boundaries that separate them, are taken for granted and are viewed as timeless and unchangeable. When their labels carry notions of inferiority and no longer correspond with experienced realities. When, as various contexts in Asia and elsewhere have shown, social categories take on a life of their own, once authenticated by the state or science or both.³

Globally, race is a social category that still wields monumental power. Even though it is as much a product of human perception and classification as nations or ethnic communities are, “in many societies, the idea of biologically distinct races remains a fixture in the popular mind, a basis for social action, a foundation of government policy, and often a justification for distinctive treatment of one group by another”.⁴ Race exists as a cultural construct and informs people’s actions, whether it has a “biological” reality or not.⁵ Tribe is another notion that often carries primordial and essentializing connotations, yet has a great bearing on social reality. As a social category, it greatly resembles popular perceptions of race. The present study is a historical investigation into the category of so-called tribes of South Asia, or, as they are being called in a more politically correct fashion, “Indigenous Peoples” or *adivasis*.

Willem van Schendel pointed out that the ways in which South Asian tribes have been depicted – as if they share a number of “essentially tribal characteristics” that are fundamentally different from, even opposite to, “civilized” society – show a striking similarity with Orientalist representations of people from the Orient, as described by Edward Said.⁶ Similarly, as suggested by Van Schendel, can we refer to the “complexes of signs and practices which organize social existence and social reproduction” of so-called tribes, as the tribalist discourse.⁷



In his seminal work entitled *Castes of Mind*, Nicholas Dirks argues that a historical analysis of caste shows that “caste (again, as we know it today) is a modern phenomenon, that it is, specifically, the product of an historical encounter between India and Western colonial rule.” He continues that “it was under the British that ‘caste’ became a single term capable of expressing, organizing, and above all ‘systematizing’ India’s diverse forms of social identity, community and organization.”⁸ Dirks and other scholars have made a significant contribution to the scholarship of caste through careful scrutiny of India’s colonial and modern history.⁹ I shall come back to this in greater detail in the next chapter. Here it is important to note that a similar transformation of tribal studies has not taken place. Tribalist discourse has continued to have a great impact on much of the academic research, policy making, and popular imagination of tribes in South Asia.

Nevertheless, an increasing number of scholars have indeed questioned the usefulness of the concept as an analytical tool and expose its many downsides.¹⁰ Among them, researchers of hill tribes or upland people in Southeast Asia have made particularly insightful contributions. Since Edmund Leach’s seminal publication on the highlands in Myanmar, in which he convincingly demonstrated that processes of group formation and identification in the hills were far more complex than the earlier essentialist tribal studies suggested, many have continued to criticize the concept of tribe and, since more recently, also the dualistic framework of mutually exclusive categories in which tribes/uplanders and lowlanders usually are studied.¹¹ Unfortunately, however, social scientists have divided the world into convenient academic areas. Even though “a rethinking of ‘regional’ systems of knowing is under way”,¹² tribal studies in South Asia have only just benefited from the empirical and theoretical insights produced by their colleagues working on Southeast Asia.

TOWARDS A SITUATIONALIST APPROACH OF TRIBE

This book is based on the premise that tribalist representations should not simply be replaced with more nuanced historical and ethnographic accounts. They also need to be scrutinized in connection with the contexts in which they are produced and the purposes that they serve. In other words, we need to examine why and how tribalist discourse has come into being, and how representations of tribes/tribals have served particular agendas (of themselves and others) and have had real effects in the shaping of self-perceptions, identities, and development.¹³



For this very purpose, this study has adopted a situationalist approach to culture and identity. It proposes a conceptual shift from tribe to ethnic group or community, and from culture to boundary.¹⁴ Notwithstanding the ongoing debate, contemporary conceptions of ethnicity generally incorporate a dynamic and relational perspective. They examine, but do not presuppose, prevalent notions of superiority and inferiority. A change from a tribal to an ethnic perspective thus means a shift from a static to a dynamic approach to social groupings and boundaries, without the construction of yet another generic term which has incorporated notions of homogeneity and inferiority.

This research is heavily indebted to Barth's classic work, *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries*. Almost four decades ago, Barth developed a model for the study of ethnic relations that conformed to Leach's suggestion to remove culture from the front stage of ethnic studies.¹⁵ He proposed a change of focus from "the cultural stuff that it encloses" to the "boundary that defines a group" and argued that continuity of a group depends on the maintenance of that boundary rather than on the cultural characteristics of that group.¹⁶ Barth still holds a special position in the studies of ethnicity and is often held as the first who introduced the shift of focus from static to interactional approaches to ethnicity.¹⁷

Barth's understanding of ethnicity also implied that ethnic groups are defined from within, from the perspective of their members. Instead of listing traits of "objective culture", which members often share with non-members anyway, he defined ethnicity as categorical ascriptions which classify individuals in terms of their "basic, most general identity".¹⁸ This also suggests that cultures may change without removing ethnic boundaries. Or, the other way around, that old boundaries may disappear and new ones come into existence, without significant cultural change preceding such changes. In other words, boundaries produce culture. Since Barth, with this seminal work on ethnicity, made a path-breaking contribution to the thinking on ethnicity, many scholars have insisted that the relation between culture and ethnicity is far more complex than Barth suggested; that we also need to take the limitations of choice and freedom into account. Culture matters too, and, in the words of Thomas Eriksen, "ethnic identities are neither ascribed nor achieved: they are both. They are wedged between situational selection and imperatives imposed from without."¹⁹ And thus, from the many available definitions of ethnicity, the following is picked, which defines an ethnic group as a "reference group invoked by people who share a common historical sense (which may only be assumed), based on overt features and values, and who, through the process of interaction with others, identify themselves as sharing that style".²⁰

A major drawback of anthropological studies of ethnicity is that very few of them "really undertake the task of showing how ethnic distinctions emerge



in an area; how initially homogeneous groups are historically split into two or several distinctive ethnic groups”.²¹ (Or, how loose collections of distinctive groups develop into one ethnic community). However, in order to understand ethnicity, a historical perspective is fundamental. Only then can we uncover the complex, socially, economically and politically embedded, processes of identity formation and cultural change.²²

Anthropological research on tribes in South Asia commonly focuses on the “cultural stuff” without taking historical processes of boundary construction or the wider socio-economic and political contexts into account. Historians of South Asia, on the other hand, not often study tribes. Therefore this book breaks away from previous studies of tribes. It neither studies Garo culture as such, nor their social organization. Instead it deals with the evolution of Garo identity/ethnicity and with the progressive making of cultural characteristics that support a sense of “Garo-ness”, in the context of the complex historical developments in South Asia and the world.²³ By means of such a historical examination, it hopes to contribute to contemporary research on South Asia’s tribes. It addresses the following central research questions: What does the particular history of the Garos of Bangladesh tell us about processes of identity formation in the region? What does it tell us about prevailing notions of tribe in South Asia, and the usefulness of tribe as an analytical category? And how can close scrutiny of their history help us understand contemporary minority-majority conflicts and even violence in the region?

WHY A HISTORY OF THE GAROS OF BANGLADESH?

While largely absent in the national history of Bangladesh as agents, rather than frozen images, the Garos are hardly a new subject of interest. Since John Eliot’s encounter with the *Garrows* in 1788–89, “as the first European who has travelled among them”, numerous books and articles about Garos have been published.²⁴ The publications, however, mainly deal with the uplanders living in the Indian state Meghalaya, in the district named Garo Hills.²⁵ They have formed the majority of all people known by the name Garos. The lowland Garos of East Bengal have rarely been studied. Articles and books are few and references in administrative reports are scarce. These lowland Garos, however, have their own history(s). An international border has separated them from hill Garos since 1947. The partition resulted in a much stricter division than ever before. Although transboundary mobility has never stopped, Indian and Bangladeshi Garos seem to be increasingly developing into different directions. Nevertheless, differences between these





Garos have existed much longer.²⁶ Lowland Garos have long been in contact with Bengali culture; the natural environment (and climate) of the plains require different agricultural methods and a different style of living; the political status of the two regions also differed long before partition.²⁷ At present, the segmentation into (Indian) hill Garos and (Bangladeshi) lowland Garos is also reflected in the names they give themselves. Bangladeshi Garos call themselves *Mandi*, which means “human being”. They refer to the Garos from the Garo Hills as *Achik* [hill person]. Such differences between (Indian) hill Garos and (Bangladeshi) lowlanders legitimize the subject of this investigation (Garos of Bangladesh) and clearly underline that Garos have never constituted a single ethnic community.²⁸

This research is not the kind of borderland study as advocated by Van Schendel in his excellent work on the Bengal Borderland.²⁹ My project was, by and large, limited to the Bengal/Bangladesh side of the border that separates the Indian (hill) state Meghalaya from the plains of Mymensingh in Bangladesh. At the time of my field research, the Indian part of the Garo borderland was closed to foreigners.³⁰ Equally important was my special interest in the situation of tribal communities in Bangladesh, who have received far less attention than “the tribes of India”. I did however not begin my study from the definition of a state as a natural self-enclosed unit.³¹ I tried to show how not only the ongoing process of partition, but also the presence of an international border, has had a major impact on the lives of the Garos of Mymensingh. Chapter 8 provides a detailed analysis of that process. Here I wish to limit myself to the claim that the 1947 Partition turned the Garo *tribe* into an ethnic minority. That is, if we define minority in the words of Eriksen, as “a group which is numerically inferior to the rest of the population in a society, which is politically non-dominant and which is being reproduced as an ethnic category”. Eriksen continues that “a minority exists only in relation to a majority and *vice versa*, and their relationship is contingent on the relevant system boundaries. In our present-day world, such boundaries are almost always state boundaries. Majority-minority relations change when state boundaries change.”³²

Unlike some 90 per cent of the Bangladeshis, people like the Garos and other so-called tribal communities are neither Bengali by ethnicity and culture, nor Muslim by religion. The history of these “other peoples of Bangladesh”³³ is one marked by “othering”, and by its extreme consequence: exclusion.³⁴ Present-day Bangladesh has some 150 million inhabitants, Bangladeshis. It is important to distinguish between Bangladeshis and Bengalis. While Bangladeshis includes all citizens of the country, Bengalis refers to its dominant ethnic population (some 98 per cent), who mostly live in Bengal, speak the



Bengali language, and “feel” Bengali. They are not only found in India’s West Bengal and Bangladesh, but also in Assam, Tripura, and other parts of India. In contrast to their counterparts in West Bengal, who are mostly Hindus, Bangladeshi Bengalis are predominantly Muslim.³⁵

The partitioning of India in 1947, which resulted in the creation of India and Pakistan (and since 1971, also Bangladesh) has had a fundamental impact on the complex processes of identity formation in the region. In the region of my investigations, much research has concentrated on Bengali culture, self-identification and social arrangements. The so-called “other peoples of Bengal” (and of Bangladesh) have no place in the contemporary written history of the region. Their marginalized position is also reflected by the fact that the number of groups and total population are not exactly known. According to the population census of 1991, they make up more or less one per cent of all Bangladeshis (1.2 million people). There are, however, reasons to believe that this number is an under-estimation. Similarly, no one can say exactly how many different ethnic groups there are. Estimates range from twenty to fifty-six.³⁶

I do not consider the peripheral position of these “other peoples of Bangladesh” as a proper reflection of their numerical marginality or merely as a short-coming of contemporary researchers and politicians, but as a serious situation, which has many important socio-economic, cultural, and political consequences. Their marginal position is not proportioned to their place in national and regional history, in which non-Bengali peoples are practically invisible.³⁷ This study gives non-Bengali minorities a place in the (national) history of the region.

TRIBALIST DISCOURSE AND ITS TERMINOLOGY

In Bangladesh, the most common alternatives for tribe are Scheduled Tribes, Indigenous Peoples, aboriginals, *adivasis*, *upojatis*, *paharis*, and *Jummas*. Close scrutiny of each term reveals a great number of drawbacks and misconceptions. Below is a brief examination of each of these concepts.³⁸

TRIBE

The English term tribe or tribal was first introduced in Bengal by British colonial administrators and foreign anthropologists. Since then the word has become more or less incorporated in the Bengali language. Many scholars have pointed out that the term tribe in itself is highly problematic.³⁹ There is not one single definition which can be applied in the South Asian situation.



People generally understand who are the tribes and who are not. Nonetheless, when they are asked to describe what a tribe actually means, the picture which is presented rarely corresponds with the real situation. So-called “tribal characteristics” such as being primitive, isolated, simple, undeveloped, believers in local religions, or having specific tribal political and economic arrangements rarely make any sense. Moreover, as we will see in Chapter 2, the term carries clear evolutionist connotations. It refers to people in the “archaic stage of development” and implies an image of “primitive” man as opposed to “civilized” man. Tribals are thus seen as “inferior races”.⁴⁰

While some authors argue that tribe was essentially a colonial construct, a colonial category, others feel that this is not quite consistent with the ideas about tribe in earlier anthropological writings.⁴¹ Whether a colonial construct or not, its relevance did not, however, dissolve with the end of colonialism. Much contemporary research shows remarkable similarities with colonial ethnography. It has been noted that these studies are not only written in a style which is reminiscent of colonial ethnography, but also from a functionalist or even evolutionist perspective.⁴²

THE SCHEDULED TRIBES OF INDIA

The partition of 1947 and the subsequent division into India and Pakistan marked the beginning of distinct political developments in two (and three, since the independence of Bangladesh in 1971) different countries. In post-colonial India special national and state policies were formalized in the constitution to “uplift” the “backward tribes”. The post-colonial state showed the same systematizing urge that its colonial precursor had displayed. In order to identify the people who qualified for preferential treatment, an extensive list of all tribes was prepared. These people have since been referred to as Scheduled Tribes (ST).⁴³ In 1952, the Commissioner for Scheduled Castes and Tribes admitted that no uniform test to classify the Scheduled Tribes had been developed. Difficulties were experienced in determining which tribe was to be included or excluded from the schedule of tribes. Nevertheless, the commissioner did feel that three features were common to all tribal people: a) they had a tribal origin, b) they had a primitive way of life and habitation in remote and less easily accessible areas, and c) they showed general backwardness in all respects.⁴⁴ The tautological nature of catchwords such as “tribal origin”, “primitive” and “backwardness” to define tribes will be clear from the foregoing. In India the designation “Scheduled Tribe” has gained enormous socio-economic and political importance because of the special facilities



which are provided for people who are included. In East Pakistan and present-day Bangladesh, the state never bothered to collect systematic information on its tribal population and never developed formalized policies regarding “backward” groups.

INDIGENOUS PEOPLES AND ‘ABORIGINES’

Quite recently, another English term has gained popularity in both English and Bengali: Indigenous Peoples. This expression has become particularly popular since 1993, the United Nations Year for Indigenous Peoples. The term has much relevance for it links South Asian groups to a large number of peoples all over the world and provides them with a sense of a shared identity which exceeds local, regional, or national boundaries. “Indigenous Peoples” was a clear concept in the Americas, where it was developed and first gained currency: the Amerindian population was indeed indigenous compared to the later immigrants from Europe, Africa, and Asia. In South Asia, the concept is less clear, as recent immigration from other continents is not the issue and the idea of indigeneity is contested. Nevertheless, theories of historical settlement continue to surface. Since a decade or so, the status of indigenous people has also been claimed for Dalits on the strength of the argument that Dalits were the original inhabitants of South Asia and are a distinct people with their own culture.⁴⁵

In a way, the term is very similar to the old concept of “aborigines” or “aboriginal tribes”, introduced by the British during the colonial period. Its connotations and social and political implications, however, differ greatly. The British used the term aborigines to distinguish so-called primitive peoples from the “modern Indian”, with the underlying assumption that aborigines belonged to older, less advanced strata of population who had somehow failed to keep up with progress. The category did not just include people known as tribes today but also different castes which were seen as having to some extent assimilated into the surrounding Hindu culture. The term “Indigenous Peoples” shares with “aborigines” the idea of early settlement but points to the old rights to land and other resources flowing from that early settlement. In this way, “Indigenous People” has become a marker of emancipation and empowerment, and it provides a basis for worldwide networks of organization and action. At present, popular issues such as human rights and environment are attached to the category of Indigenous Peoples and happily employed by the people included in this category to be on political, socio-economic, and cultural agendas.



In Bangladesh, it is often argued, without much historical evidence, that so-called tribal people are no more indigenous to the country than Bengalis. In fact, the dominant discourse often reverses the positions by claiming that Bengalis are the truly indigenous people of Bangladesh and others, such as Garos, Santals, Tripuras, or Koches, are immigrants and therefore cannot claim to be indigenous to Bangladesh.⁴⁶ Interestingly, it is not the issue of indigeneity but that of being socially and culturally marginalized which has come to dominate the discussions about the Indigenous Peoples of Bangladesh.

ADIVASI

Adivasi is a common term in both Bengali and English.⁴⁷ In Bangladesh, the term was not popular until quite recently. *Adivasi*, coined from the Sanskrit “*adi*” (meaning “beginning” or “of earliest times”) and “*vasi*” (meaning “residents of”), is a close translation of “aborigine”. It also incorporates the idea that the *adivasi* are the original inhabitants of South Asia.⁴⁸ Other authors who prefer *adivasi* over tribe legitimize its application by the fact that the term relates to a particular historical development which generated a shared spirit of resistance that incorporated a consciousness of the *adivasi* against the outsider.⁴⁹ At present, *adivasi* has important political potency. We could say that tribes have rejected their passive and exotic role and adopted the role of a self-conscious actor on the social stage.

UPOJATI, PAHARI, AND JUMMA

Bengali terms for non-Bengali groups are *upojati*, *pahari*, or *Jumma*. *Upojati* has connotations similar to the English word “tribe”. It refers to uncivilized, less developed, and innocent peoples who live more or less isolated from the “mainstream” of “civilized” Bengali society. The term is increasingly being rejected by the peoples concerned. They argue that *upojati* is a derogatory concept which suggests that they are of a lower order than the Bengalis, who form a *jati* or nation, whereas an *upojati* is a mere sub-nation.

Pahari (or *paharia*) refers to both tribes in general and people who live in hills or mountains. It has been argued that the name was originally given by lowlanders to their hill-dwelling neighbours in the Rajmahal Hills in Bihar.⁵⁰ In Bangladesh, *Pahari* is also used to refer to one specific community in northwestern Bangladesh. *Pahari* is thus a term which has once been imposed by others on the basis of environmental aspects. The peoples themselves use different designations. Yet hill-dwelling people have also utilized the term *pahari* to forge a common identity and to distinguish themselves from plains people.⁵¹



A similar example is *Jumma*. Jhum refers to a particular type of cultivation, and Jhumia (in Chittagonian dialect and Chakma language: *Jumma*) to the cultivators. In the 1970s, Jumma was appropriated by the regional political party of the Chittagong Hill Tracts, the JSS (Jana Sanghati Samiti), to refer to all inhabitants of the Chittagong Hill Tracts. Jumma has become a way to distinguish the inhabitants of the hilly regions of southeastern Bangladesh from Bengali settlers in that area. Therefore the term refers to a shared experience of marginalization, exploitation, and militarization, and to a social or solidarity movement. It embraces groups of various linguistic, cultural, and religious backgrounds.⁵²

A crucial aspect of each one of the afore-mentioned terms is the assumption that all people designated as “tribal” or “indigenous” somehow share basic political, social, economic, and cultural characteristics with each other, enabling scholars and policy-makers to group them all together into a single category. But the essence of what tribal or indigenous might mean remains highly elusive, and therefore undefined. This makes the category a catch-all for all groups considered to be distant from the “observing self”: it is a category which explains more about the categorizer than about the categorized. This is not to say that a shared designation cannot generate a sense of belonging to a large (even worldwide) category of “like-minded” people. As we shall see in the following chapters, the category that was once imposed on people considered as tribal came to structure parallel experiences of marginalization and discrimination among them, and was often appropriated by them as a badge of identity.

THE GAROS OF BANGLADESH

At present, the Garos constitute less than ten per cent of the “other peoples” of Bangladesh, an extremely marginal segment of the total Bangladeshi population. Of these 80,000 to 100,000 Garos, a little over 14,000 people live in Modhupur.⁵³ This forested area is at least some fifty kilometres from the Indian border. Stories about Bangladeshi Garos are generally about them. This study largely concentrates on the people who are living in the northernmost portion of the Greater Mymensingh district⁵⁴ and on migrants in Dhaka.⁵⁵

Today, Garos can be found all over Bangladesh. For instance, since the 1950s, they have migrated to the betel leaf and tea plantations in Sylhet.⁵⁶ At present, Sylhet probably has around 7,000 Garos, but no one knows for sure. From the 1960s onwards, and especially since the 1980s, many Garos have also started to settle in Dhaka and in Chittagong, Bangladesh’s principal



cities. Dhaka is particularly popular. Many people – both men and women – leave their villages out of necessity for jobs, others for education, or simply for the adventure. Today, a couple of thousand Garos live in Dhaka. Many of them are employed as household servants and in garments factories. Others have found their way into the offices of NGOs and church organizations in the capital. The latter often have their families living with them in the city. Many of these people are doing well. Students form a third important section of the Dhaka Garo community. More and more young men and women are coming to Dhaka to study at one of the many colleges or at Dhaka University. Since the 1960s, Garos have migrated to cities such as Mymensingh, Chittagong and especially Dhaka in ever increasing numbers. They leave their villages to look for work or to follow higher education (at colleges and universities). Exact figures are not known.⁵⁷

Present-day Bangladeshi Garos set themselves apart from the many other ethnic communities of Bangladesh. We can safely argue that they form a distinct ethnic community. They share feelings of being different from other Bangladeshis and of belonging together, and ascribe their distinct identity to a shared culture and traditions, language, history and experiences. In reality, of course, like all of us, they are “complexly constructed through different categories, of different antagonisms, and these may have the effect of locating [them] in multiple positions of marginality and subordination, but which do not operate on [them] in exactly the same way”.⁵⁸ Nevertheless, hereafter, I shall briefly give some background information on the Garos of Bangladesh. I shall also introduce a number of characteristics that they themselves stress in order to distinguish themselves from neighbouring Bengali- and non-Bengali communities. I realize that such a description does great injustice to the complexity of the Garo community, but feel that the unknowing reader needs some information in order to have a handle on the subsequent writing. I hope to make up for the simplicity of the ensuing description in the next chapters, in which the process of ethnogenesis (the emergence of their ethnic identity) is closely examined. The focus on one ethnic community was not based on any preconceived notions of a distinct Garo identity. However, almost immediately upon my arrival in the field, I found that Garo identity proved of great importance to all people I talked to. I studied “an island”, and concluded that the island was in so many ways an island, but not without also taking into account the contextual conditions in which the community had come about.⁵⁹

Most Garos live in a small strip of land in northern Mymensingh, bordering India. In past times, these lowland Garos probably practised *jhum* or slash-and-burn cultivation. Some elderly Garo villagers remember stories about the Garos clearing the jungle and moving from one place to another.



However, neither these villagers nor their parents themselves ever *jhummed*. At the turn of the century, lowland Garos practiced plough cultivation and grew wet rice on their fields, just like their Bengali neighbours.⁶⁰ Another area where Garos live is the Modhupur forest. Located in Mymensingh and Tangail districts, about 150 kilometres north of Dhaka, this is one of the largest forests of the plains. Detached from the rest of the Garo area, Modhupur almost seems like a Garo island on the map of Bangladesh. No one knows how this division of Garos over two separate regions came about. The situation in Modhupur differs from the border area. The area is mostly forested highland and requires different cultivation methods. Here, both wet and dry rice are grown, and more recently pineapple has become a very popular cash crop. In Modhupur, there are several problems related to land rights. With the support of human rights activists, Garos have for many years been trying to acquire the formal land rights that they feel they deserve. It is important to realize that a great deal of interaction takes place between Modhupur Garos and the people from the border area, and that Modhupur people are far from isolated from the other Bangladeshi Garos.

Economically and politically, Garos and other ethnic minorities of Northeast India and its bordering areas have fared differently than the *adivasis* of Western and Central India. Subordination of the latter through parallel colonial policy developments in forestry and agriculture resulted in the emergence of a “sharply defined economic stratification in which a majority of the *adivasis* became tenants, agricultural and landless labourers, while the non-*adivasis*, the landlords, money lenders and timber merchants”.⁶¹ In Northeast India or the north and northeast of East Bengal, so-called tribals were not transformed into one large subordinate colonial labour force. This does not mean that they have always lived comfortably, but neither have many of their Bengali neighbours. Today, the situation of the Garos of northern Mymensingh does not differ significantly from that of the Bengali peasantry.

Ever increasing dependency on the market economy and mechanisms such as indebtedness, which operated as a means of downward mobility, leading from landholding to landlessness, also applied to the poor (Muslim and Hindu) Bengali peasantry and sharecroppers.⁶² By the end of the nineteenth century, the Muslim Bengali peasantry formed 70 per cent of the total population of Mymensingh but owned only 16 per cent of the land. Suranjan Das, for example, describes how the Muslim peasantry was exploited by Hindu landlords and moneylenders, and how economic grievances finally became one of the causes that led to communal riots in Bengal during the first half of the twentieth century.⁶³



Garos thus never developed into one single economic subclass. Chapter 8 describes how in the early nineteenth century the local peasantry, irrespective of their ethnic identity, collectively revolted against repressive landlords or *zamindars*. Here we can also read that some of the landlords who were holding large estates in and around the Garo Hills were Garos, or at least partly “of Garo blood”. The stories which I collected during my fieldwork reveal that among early twentieth century Garos landless labourers, small peasants, landlords and big business men could be distinguished. These days, not everyone owns a plot of land, but like the large majority of the Bangladeshis, most Garos are still dependent on agriculture. There are big landowners, peasants who farm small or middle-sized plots, sharecroppers, and a great number of landless labourers among the Garos of Bangladesh. This class differentiation is not a new phenomenon. In the early twentieth century, there were also big landowners as well as landless labourers among the Garo peasants.

Unlike their neighbours, Garos are matrilineal. This does not mean – as is often mistakenly thought – that women rule all domains of Garo life. In fact, Garo men play dominant roles in most public spheres. Matrilineal means that each person belongs to the kinship group of the mother, not to that of the father. People also take the mother’s name as their own. Closely linked with their kinship system are Garo inheritance practices. Until recently, property was passed from mother to daughters. Usually one daughter was appointed as the main heiress, the *nokna*. These days, more and more parents divide the property among all their children, even though this goes against the traditional Garo law of inheritance. The position of Garo women is rather different from that of their Bengali counterparts. Among the Garos, *purdah* is totally absent. Garo women are much freer to travel than Bengali women, and Garo girls and boys are never segregated in the way Bengali boys and girls are. This does not mean that men and women perform the same tasks, or that they are equal in all respects. Different tasks and duties are assigned to men and women. Although Garo women can have professional careers, women’s work is more restricted to reproduction and care, whereas men clearly dominate in public arenas. Formal roles of leadership and authority are normally assumed by men, especially in public.⁶⁴

In regard to religion, the Garos also differ greatly from their neighbours. They are the only people of northern Mymensingh who became Christians. Missionary attempts to convert other minorities such as the Hajongs, Hodies, Koches, and Banais have been unsuccessful. Today, Christianity is of great importance to the Garo community. More than ninety per cent of the Garos proudly consider themselves Christians. Both the traditional Garo religion as



well as its followers are called Sangsarek. Some of the old Garos are still Sangsarek. But unlike a couple of decades ago, outward signs of this religion are difficult to find, even more so in the border area than in Modhupur forest.⁶⁵ Bangladeshi Garos are generally bilingual, speaking both the Garo language (named Abeng) and Bengali. The various languages or dialects have become overshadowed by Abeng, named after the linguistic division called Abeng. This dialect or language has become the *lingua franca* of all the Garos of Bangladesh. The importance of these different linguistic groups or divisions has diminished greatly, and so have their languages. An important factor which caused these changes was the introduction of education by missionaries. When the Garos started sending their children to school, interaction between the different groups increased. It is important to realize that these are all important characteristics which influence the self-perception and feelings of Garo-ness today and provide the foundation on which contemporary ideas of Self are built. A historical perspective however reveals the fluidity and changeability of these notions of identity.

BREAKING THE SILENCE

This study is based on a myriad of (at times conflicting) written and oral sources: colonial accounts, post-colonial government publications, magazine and newspaper articles, an extensive body of literature, missionary diaries and other publications, fieldwork interviews, and participatory observation; each source with its advantages and disadvantages. The subsequent chapters discuss the contributions and drawbacks of the different sources. At this point I will limit myself to a short exploration of what is perhaps the most significant source material of this research: oral history.

For two reasons in particular, oral history is imperative to this study. It opens up new areas of inquiry and it allows a shift of focus. For both the nineteenth and the twentieth century, written documentation is scarce. Although hill Garos received quite a lot of attention from both British administrators and ethnologists, the lowland Garos of East Bengal were hardly ever studied. An exception should be made for Christian missionaries, who left us a great many reports and other historical data.⁶⁶ Only in recent years have the lowland Garos been increasingly studied by others than missionaries.⁶⁷ More importantly, oral history gives voice to people who have remained outside colonial and national histories. Personal narratives provide stories from within. In spite of this, an inside or emic perspective has remained strikingly under-exposed in studies of “the other peoples” of Bangladesh.⁶⁸ Thus, although I used interview material to reconstruct parts



of the twentieth-century history of the Garos, their stories derived their significance mostly from the fact that they mirror present-day perceptions on Self and Other, and reflect contemporary ideas about their past. Such an approach leads to the question of how to distil historical “facts” from perceptions of the present, a question all the more complicated since there is no material for comparison at hand. My use of oral history was based on the premise that the value of oral history is directly related to the research questions. As I was largely interested in Garo ideas and their perceptions of their past and present identities(s), their personal accounts offered the best possible answers.⁶⁹

THE RESEARCHER(S) AND THE RESEARCHED

Although I have not made my presence in the field and its influence on the outcome of this research a subject of investigation, I have chosen to give account of that presence in the text. Here, I briefly discuss the background of my investigations and my relations with the Garos.

Of the seventeen months that I spent in Bangladesh, between November 1993 and November 2000, I lived in Bangladesh for one full year (from March 1994 until March 1995). An important part of the field research was carried out in Dhaka. Here I also met Suborno Chisim, who became my research assistant. We first met in November 1993, at a seminar about “tribals” and their “Christian identity”. Suborno, who is himself a Bangladeshi Garo, proved a good interpreter at the time, and, as turned out later, a very competent research assistant. We developed a close bond of mutual trust and friendship and soon he became my key informant. His interest in the subject, his knowledge of the Garos of Bangladesh, his proficiency in English, Bengali, and Garo, his remarkable memory, his communication skills, and his ability to grasp the intentions of my investigations made our cooperation very successful. To acknowledge his contribution to this research, I use “us” and “we” when I refer to the work that we did together. When I use “I”, it is to refer to my personal reflections, interpretations, and conclusions. Of course, I remain responsible for the errors in this study.

Throughout my stay in Bangladesh, Suborno and I visited hundreds of Garo families and individuals in villages all over Bangladesh. Some we met on a frequent basis, others we saw only once or twice. We conducted interviews with people from different social and economic strata and collected a total of eighty formal interviews. Another important part of the research took place in the countryside. During the hottest months of the year, from June until September, we stayed with a Garo family in the village of Bibalgree.⁷⁰ Suborno



and I picked this village from the approximately 330 Garo villages in Bangladesh.⁷¹ It was, however, not my intention to conduct a village study. Rather, we needed a place to stay which was more or less centrally located in the Garo border belt, and a family who would be willing and able to accommodate us. Bibalgree suited that purpose very well.

The quality of our relations with the people was imperative to the success of the fieldwork. During the first few weeks in Bibalgree, I made my first acquaintance with many Garos in and around the village. In the village itself, we conducted a small survey about the number and composition of households, but mostly to find a good reason to go from house to house and become acquainted with the villagers. Our host family, who provided us with a home throughout our field research and during every visit since, was related to Suborno. Suborno referred to them as *mani* (maternal aunt) and *mamu* (maternal uncle). Other members of the household were their little daughter, a paternal uncle (*kaka*), the local schoolmaster, one or two nephews from India, and one or more domestic servants. *Kaka* was the only additional household member who lived there on a permanent basis. Others came and went. Since I had adopted a fictitious kin relation as Suborno's younger sister, I could always address people in the way he did. We all needed a few weeks to get used to each other, and for me to learn some of the basic skills to live in the village (such as bathing at the tube well, eating and dressing properly, and "digesting the rice"). Slowly I transformed from a "baby" who copied Suborno in much of his behaviour, into someone who, in the eyes of the villagers, seemed just like a Garo.

Soon after we had settled in, Suborno and I started to conduct interviews, mostly with elderly villagers, both men and women. Their stories are crucial for this study. Being a woman and a Westerner did not seem to complicate the fieldwork notably. Being a Westerner (and therefore perceived as a Christian) made it easy to establish rapport.⁷² For reasons that will become apparent in the following chapters, Garos feel close to (Christian) Westerners, whom they consider reliable allies.⁷³

Gender relations among Garos are not quite as restricted as among the neighbouring Bengalis. I had easy access to both men and women and Suborno and I could move around freely, on foot, and even by bicycle. I noticed that being a young female oftentimes was advantageous for my relations with the Garos. People seemed to take my presence easy. This became strikingly clear when "my professor" paid a short visit to Bibalgree, and when one of our village friends went as far as to cut a hole in one of the (mud) walls of his house, in order to bring out a table on which he wanted to serve our meal. He could not bear to serve dinner on the floor to a



professor. With me they obviously cared much less about “respectful behaviour”, which made it easier to talk freely and openly.⁷⁴

Since my knowledge of Bengali was very basic and I could hardly make myself understood in Abeng, I always needed Suborno as an interpreter and could not communicate independently from him beyond a superficial level. This meant that a man was present during most of the informal conversations or any of the formal interviews. I do not believe, however, that this led to a strong male bias in the research outcome. In general, Garo women are as outspoken and uninhibited as men,⁷⁵ and never were we confronted with women shying away from conversations. I also never heard of people hinting at us being a couple. It seemed that our informants clearly took our relation as a professional one.

ORGANIZATION OF THE BOOK

This study is divided into three parts. The first part shows how the tribalist discourse is shared in the post-colonial era by outsiders and insiders. It introduces etic and emic perceptions of what it means to be Garo, and also ascribes a cultural content to so-called tribes (who, for example, are imagined as “frog eaters”, primitive and isolated), as well as a basis for social and political claims. Whereas Chapter 2 focuses on the history of the tribalist discourse, Chapter 3 examines a number of Garo narratives of Self. An underlying question is how a discourse which was developed in the days of British hegemony could so easily endure into the post-colonial period.⁷⁶

Part two is specifically devoted to the history and constitution of Garo boundaries – both external and internal. It recounts the process of categorization of ethnic groups in the colonial context and its aftermath in East Pakistan and Bangladesh, and recalls that boundaries are social constructions that can always be crossed. Chapter 4 is about how nineteenth-century colonial researchers and administrators observed boundaries between Garos and others. It challenges the suggestion that Garos have always formed one distinct category of people. Chapter 5 underlines the assertion that the Garos have only more recently begun to consider themselves as one distinct ethnic community, belonging together on the basis of a shared identity and culture. The chapter is largely based on interviews with elderly Garo villagers who explain how, until a few decades ago, Bengal's Garos were a diverse collection of different linguistic and cultural groupings rather than one distinct ethnic group with one collective identity. Chapter 6 looks at the relative fluidity of relations between Garos and others, the variation in how Garos see others and how (im)penetrable boundaries between Garos and



others really are. This chapter is based on the presumption that ideas about inter-marriage mirror ideas about Self and Other.

The third part analyses the nineteenth- and twentieth-century history of the Garos, with particular focus on the process of ethnogenesis. It closely examines the historical context and developments that have played a significant role in the Garos becoming the distinct ethnic group they now are in Bangladesh. Chapter 7 explores how the arrival of Christian missionaries and the introduction of Christianity have influenced Garo self-perceptions and group formation. Chapter 8 investigates the role of the state in the ethnogenesis of the Garos of Bangladesh.

The study encompasses two centuries. It begins with the first European encounter with Garos and ends today. Such a long-term perspective serves the two most important purposes of this book: to examine the tribalist image of the Garos and to unravel the intricate processes by which Bangladeshi Garos have come to constitute a distinct ethnic group or people; in other words: to shed light on the ethnogenesis of the Garos of Bangladesh.

NOTES

1. Sirajul Islam, ed., *Banglapedia: National Encyclopedia of Bangladesh, Volume 4* (Dhaka: Asiatic Society of Bangladesh). The encyclopedia can also be found on the Internet: <<http://www.banglapedia.org>>.
2. *Ibid.*, p. 331.
3. See also Laura Dudley Jenkins, "Another 'People of India' Project: Colonial and National Anthropology", *The Journal of Asian Studies* 62, no. 4 (November 2003): 1145–46. For an elaborate analysis of similar state classification projects in Southeast and East Asia, see Charles Keyes, "Presidential Address: 'The Peoples of Asia' – Science and Politics in the Classification of Ethnic Groups in Thailand, China and Vietnam", *The Journal of Asian Studies* 61, no. 4 (November 2002): 1163–203.
4. Stephen Cornell and Douglas Hartmann, *Ethnicity and Race. Making Identities in a Changing World* (Thousand Oaks, London and New Delhi: Pine Forge Press, 1998), p. 23.
5. Thomas Hylland Eriksen, *Ethnicity and Nationalism. Anthropological Perspectives*, 2nd edition (London/Sterling, Virginia: Pluto Press, 2002), p. 5.
6. See Willem van Schendel, "The Invention of the 'Jummas': State Formation and Ethnicity in Southeastern Bangladesh", *Modern Asian Studies* 26, no. 1 (1992): 103, n.34. Edward Said explained Orientalism as a whole system of knowledge about a place called the Orient which defines its people, geography, moral character, destiny, history, future, and character. And although it is partly empirical, it is largely imaginative. Said, *Orientalism* (London, etc.: Penguin Books, 1995).



7. Here, discourses are understood as “complexes of signs and practices which organize social existence and social reproduction. In their structured, material persistence, discourses are what give differential substance to membership in a social group or class or formation, which mediate an internal sense of belonging, an outward sense of otherness”. This definition is from Richard Terdiman as cited by Laurence J. Silberstein, “Religion, Ideology, Modernity: Theoretical Issues in the Study of Jewish Fundamentalism”, in *Jewish Fundamentalism in Comparative Perspective. Religion, Ideology and the Crisis of Modernity*, edited by Lawrence J. Silberstein (New York: New York University Press, 1993), p. 9. Despite its frequent use, discourse is often left undefined. For a good overview, see Sara Mills, *Discourse* (London and New York: Routledge, 1997).
8. Nicholas B. Dirks, *Castes of Mind. Colonialism and the Making of Modern India* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2001), p. 5.
9. Among others, see Susan Bayly, *Caste, Society and Politics in India from the Eighteenth Century to the Modern Age. The New Cambridge History of India IV, 3* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999); Ronald Inden, *Imagining India* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1990); Gyan Prakash, “Science ‘Gone Native’ in Colonial India”, *Representations* 40 (1992): 153–78.
10. Several anthropologists, sociologists, political scientists, and historians have criticized essentialized and reified notions of tribe, and ensuing practices and processes of exclusion. A number of these scholars are mentioned here and in following chapters. Cf. Crispin Bates, “‘Lost Innocents and the loss of Innocence’: Interpreting Adivasi Movements in South Asia”, in *Indigenous Peoples of Asia*, edited by R.H. Barnes, Andrew Gray, and Benedict Kingsbury (Ann Arbor, Michigan: The Association for Asian Studies, 1995), pp. 102–19. See also André Béteille, “The Definition of Tribe”, in *Tribe, Caste and Religion in India*, edited by Romesh Thapar (Delhi: Macmillan, 1977), pp. 7–14; Susana B.C. Devalle, *Discourses of Ethnicity. Culture and Protest in Jharkhand* (New Delhi, etc.: Sage Publications, 1992).
11. Edmund Leach, *Political Systems of Highland Burma: A Study of Kachin Social Structure* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1954). See also for example, Tania Murray Li, “Introduction”, in *Transforming the Indonesian Uplands: Marginality, Power and Production*, edited by Tania Murray Li (Australia, etc.: Harwood Academic Publishers, 1999), pp. xiii–xxiv; “Marginality, Power and Production: Analysing Upland Transformations”, *ibid.*, pp. 1–44; and “Relational Histories and the Production of Difference on Sulawesi’s Upland Frontier”, *Journal of Asian Studies* 60, no. 1 (February 2001): 41–66.
12. Willem van Schendel, “Geographies of Knowing, Geographies of Ignorance: Jumping Scale in Southeast Asia”, *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 20 (2002): 664. See also Henk Schulte Nordholt, “Locating Southeast Asia: Postcolonial Paradigms and Predicaments”, in *Asia in Europe, Europe in Asia*, edited by Srilata Ravi, Mario Rutten and Beng-Lan Goh (IIAS: Leiden/ ISEAS: Singapore), pp. 36–56.



13. Murray Li, "Marginality, Power and Production", p. 1.
14. Cf. Susana Devalle, who also points out that the term ethnicity seldom features in anthropological literature on tribes. See Devalle, *Discourses of Ethnicity*, p. 34.
15. Fredrik Barth, ed., *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries. The Social Organization of Cultural Difference* (Bergen and Oslo: Unversitets Forlaget/London: George Allen and Unwin, 1969). See also Eriksen, *Ethnicity and Nationalism*, pp. 36–40.
16. Fredrik Barth, "Introduction", in Barth, *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries*, pp. 9–39 (with special reference to pp. 14–15).
17. Hans Vermeulen and Cora Govers, "Introduction", in Hans Vermeulen and Cora Govers, *The Anthropology of Ethnicity. Beyond "Ethnic Groups and Boundaries"* (Amsterdam: Het Spinhuis, 1996), p. 2.
18. Eriksen, *Ethnicity and Nationalism*, p. 37.
19. *Ibid.*, p. 56; see also Richard Jenkins, *Rethinking Ethnicity. Arguments and Explorations* (London, etc.: Sage Publications, 1997), pp. 121–22.
20. Peterson Royce, *Ethnic Identity*, p. 27.
21. Eriksen, *Ethnicity and Nationalism*, p. 79.
22. In her valuable contribution to tribal studies in India, Susana Devalle also underlines the fact that ethnicity is primarily a historical phenomenon. See Devalle, *Discourses of Ethnicity*.
23. Other useful and interesting studies of ethnicity are numerous. Here I mention a select number which proved helpful to my comprehension of the subject: Michiel Baud et al., eds. *Etniciteit als strategie in Latijns-Amerika en de Caraïben* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 1994); Stephen Cornell and Douglas Hartmann, *Ethnicity and Race. Making Identities in a Changing World* (Thousand Oaks, London and New Delhi: Pine Forge Press, 1998); Lola Romanucci-Ross and George A. De Vos, eds., *Ethnic Identity. Creation, Conflict and Accommodation*, 3rd edition (Walnut Creek/London/New Delhi: Altamira Press, 1995); Anya Peterson Royce, *Ethnic Identity. Strategies of Diversity* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1982).
24. John Eliot, "Observations on the Inhabitants of the Garrow Hills. Made during a Public Deputation in the Years 1788 and 1789", *Asiatic Researches* 3 (New Delhi: Cosmo Publications, 1979. First published in 1794), pp. 17–37. Sipra Sen mentions some 582 references on the Garos in her extensive, but by far not exhaustive, bibliography: Sipra Sen, *The Tribes of Meghalaya* (Delhi: Mittal Publications, 1985), pp. 14–62.
25. In 1872, the Garo hills became a separate district under the name Garo Hills, as a part of Assam. In 1972, the Garo Hills, together with the United Khasi and Jaintia Hills districts, became the full-fledged state of Meghalaya.
26. Major A. Playfair separated "those who inhabit the Garo Hills district, and those who reside in the plains and are scattered over a very wide area of country". A. Playfair, *The Garos* (Gauhati and Calcutta: United Publishers, 1975, first published in 1909), p. 59.



27. According Chie Nakane, for example, this division into hill and plains Garos represents the prime division of Garos: "The Garo of the plains have become more sophisticated by closer contacts with the lowland peoples and many of them have adopted Christianity. They seldom come into contact with the hill-dwellers and live in an entirely different ecological and cultural environment from the latter. Thus the Garo may be divided roughly into two main categories as hill-dwellers and plain-dwellers." Chie Nakane, *Garo and Khasi. A Comparative Study in Matrilineal Systems* (Paris: Mouton and Co., 1967), pp. 21–22.
28. To the world they are known as Garos, and to the world they present themselves as Garos. For that reason, I also opted for *Garo* instead of *Mandi*, but I chose not to translate *Mandi* in the interview fragments.
29. Willem van Schendel, *The Bengal Borderland. Beyond State and Nation in South Asia* (London: Anthem Press, 2005).
30. The permit requirement for Assam, Meghalaya and Tripura was lifted in 1995. I completed my one-year field research early that year.
31. Van Schendel, *The Bengal Borderland*, p. 201.
32. Eriksen, *Ethnicity and Nationalism*, pp. 121–22.
33. For the notion of "the other peoples", see also Van Schendel and Bal, "Beyond the 'Tribal' Mind-Set".
34. I derived the concept of "othering" from Lamia Karim, "Pushed in the Margins: *Adivasi* Peoples in Bangladesh and the Case of Kalpana Chakma", *Contemporary South Asia* 7, no. 3 (1998): 310.
35. According to the 1991 census, Muslims comprise 88.3 per cent of the population; Hindus, 10.51; Buddhists, 0.59; Christians, 0.33; and others, 0.27 per cent.
36. For example, Mahmud Shah Qureshi, who has edited the most comprehensive collection of studies on non-Bengali Bangladeshis, estimates their total number at thirty-one. See Mahmud Shah Qureshi, "Foreword", in *Tribal Cultures in Bangladesh*, edited by Qureshi, Mahmud Shah (Rajshahi: Institute of Bangladesh Studies Rajshahi University, 1984), p. xv. I also came across an estimation of 41, which was mentioned at a seminar about tribal identity and Christianity held in Dhaka in November 1993. A foreign missionary who has been living in Bangladesh for over twenty-five years and has widely travelled the country, estimated the number of different ethnic groups at fifty-six. According to him all "other peoples" number over 31 million of people.
37. The inhabitants of the Chittagong Hill Tracts, who have been engaged in a struggle with the governments of East Pakistan and Bangladesh since the 1960s, are a bitter exception.
38. For a recent evaluation of the terms that are used in West Bengal and Bangladesh, see also Willem van Schendel and Ellen Bal, "Beyond the Tribal Mind-Set: Studying Non-Bengali Peoples in Bangladesh and West Bengal", in *Contemporary Societies: Tribal Studies. Volume V: Concept of Tribal Society*, edited by Georg Pfeffer and Deepak Kumar Behera (New Delhi: Concept Publishing Company, 2002), pp. 121–39; "Bhumika: Name Ki Eshe Jay?", in *Banglar Bobujati*:



Bangali Chhara Banglar Onnyanyojatir Proshongo, edited by Willem van Schendel and Ellen Bal (Calcutta: International Centre for Bengal Studies, 1998), pp. 7–25.

39. Researchers who have contributed to the discussion about the validity of the term tribe are, among others, Bates, “Lost Innocents”; Bêteille, “The Definition of Tribe”; Devalle, *Discourses of Ethnicity*; Binay Bhushan Chaudhuri, “The Myth of the Tribe? The Question Reconsidered”, *The Calcutta Historical Journal* 16, no. 1 (1994): 125–56; Binay Bhushan Chaudhuri, “Tribal Society in Transition: Eastern India 1757–1920”, in *India’s Colonial Encounter. Essays in Memory of Eric Stokes*, edited by Mushirul Hasan and Narayani Gupta (New Delhi: Manohar, 1993), pp. 65–120; M.H. Fried, *The Notion of Tribe* (Menlo Park, Calif.: Cummings Publishing Company, 1975); M. Sahlins, *Tribesmen* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice Hall, 1968).
40. David Hardiman, *The Coming of the Devi: Adivasi Assertion in Western India* (Delhi, etc.: Oxford University Press, 1995), p. 14.
41. See, for example, Devalle, *Discourses of Ethnicity*; Chaudhuri, “The Myth of the Tribe?”, pp. 125–56 (with special reference to pp. 132–34); and B.G. Karlsson, *Contested Belonging. An Indigenous People’s Struggle for Forest and Identity in Sub-Himalayan Bengal* (Lund: Department of Sociology, Lund University, 1997).
42. Karlsson, *Contested Belonging*, pp. 44–45.
43. These same policies were applied to the Untouchables, Harijans or Dalits, who have henceforth been addressed as Scheduled Castes (SC). Numerous publications about the Indian reservation policies have been published since then. For an extensive account, see Marc Galanter, *Competing Equalities. Law and the Backward Classes in India* (Delhi, etc.: Oxford University Press, 1984).
44. *Report of the Commissioner for Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes. Volume 1* (New Delhi: Manager of Publications, 1952), p. 11.
45. Ruth Manorama, “The Situation of Dalit Women”, *Indigenous Affairs* 2 (1995): 4–7.
46. Tanvir Mokammel’s documentary on the Chittagong Hill Tracts, entitled *Teardrops of Karnaphuli* (2005) which has been banned from Bangladesh, includes an interview with a Bengali settler who refers to the local hill people as Thai and he makes it very clear to the interviewer that the Bengalis are the true indigenous people to the area.
47. The term *adivasi* gained popularity in pre-Independence India and continued to be used in India after 1947. It is a recent term which probably originates from the Chhota Nagpur region in Bihar (and present-day Jharkhand) in the 1930s and was popularized at a wider level in the 1940s. Hardiman, *The Coming of the Devi*, p. 13.
48. G.S. Ghurye argues that because many of the so-called aboriginal tribes came to their present habitat from somewhere else in South Asia, they cannot be considered autochthonous to their present home. Nevertheless, he adds that although they may not belong to exactly the same area which they are now occupying, they still

- are the autochthones of South Asia. Thus, to this extent they can be called *adivasis* or aborigines. G.S. Ghurye, *The Scheduled Tribes*, 3rd edition (Bombay: Popular Prakashan, 1963), pp. 11–12.
49. See, for example, Hardiman, *The Coming of the Devi*, pp. 15–16.
 50. Stephen G. Gomes, “The Paharias in Bangladesh: A Case Study of Assimilation and Identification with Policy Implications”, in *Tribal Cultures in Bangladesh*, edited by Mahmud Shah Qureshi (Rajshahi: Institute of Bangladesh Studies, 1984), p. 140. Stephen G. Gomes, *The Paharias: A Glimpse of Tribal Life in North Western Bangladesh* (Dhaka: Caritas, 1988).
 51. Prashanta Tripura, “The Colonial Foundation of Pahari Identity”, *Journal of Social Studies* 58 (1992).
 52. Cf. Van Schendel, “Invention of the ‘Jummas’”, pp. 95–128.
 53. The Bangladesh Population Census of 1991 mentions 68,210 Garos, which is probably too low. Garo members of the two largest Christian denominations, the Baptists and Roman Catholics, totalled 65,076. Not included in these figures are Garos living in the tea gardens of Sylhet, members of other denominations, and Sangsarek, Muslim, and Hindu Garos. *Catholic Directory of Bangladesh* (Dhaka: Bishop’s Conference of Bangladesh, 1992); *Yearly Report of the GBC to the ABMS, 1991–1992* (n.d.). For the Modhupur figures, see Robbins Burling, *Strong Women of Modhupur* (Dhaka: University Press Limited, 1997), p. 13.
 54. When this study mentions “northern Mymensingh”, it really refers to the six northernmost *thanas* of the former Greater Mymensingh district. This also includes the districts of Sherpur and Netrokona.
 55. The majority of the villages are located in the *thanas* Haluaghat, Dhubaura, Durgapur, Netrokona, and Kolmakanda. Nowadays Garos are also found in Sunamganj and Moulvi Bazar, two former districts of Greater Sylhet. Sunamganj Garos have been living there for a long time. The Garos in Moulvi Bazar are all migrants from Greater Mymensingh who came to look for work in the plantations.
 56. In 1956, for example, missionary records of the Catholic Church repeatedly referred to the migration of Garos from Haluaghat to tea estates in Sylhet. See for example, the *Chronicles of Biroidakuni Mission* for 10, 23, 27 February and 27 March. These migrations are attributed to oppression and thievery by Bengali immigrants, and to dire poverty.
 57. Only one study focuses on these migrants. Its authors estimate the total number of Garo migrants in Dhaka at 3,000. Nokmandi Prakashana, *A Census of Garo Housemaids and Others in Dhaka* (Dhaka: Nokmandi Prakashana, 1994).
 58. Stuart Hall, “Old and New Identities, Old and New Ethnicities”, in *Culture, Globalization and the World-System*, edited by A.D. King (Basingstoke, England: Macmillan, 1991), p. 57.
 59. Gerd Baumann, fair enough, writes about *most* [is his word] contemporary studies of ethnicity, that “we have, in effect, created a little island; we study this island, and we usually conclude that the island is, in so many ways, an island.



- What a bore.” Gerd Baumann, *The Multicultural Riddle. Rethinking National, Ethnic, and Religious Identities* (New York and London: Routledge, 1999) pp. 145–46.
60. Playfair, *The Garos*, p. 35.
 61. Ashesh Ambasta, *Capitalist Restructuring and Formation of Adivasi Proletarians. Agrarian Transition in Thane District (Western India) c. 1817–1990* (Unpublished Ph.D. thesis: Institute of Social Studies, The Hague, 1998), pp. 14–15. See also Devalle. *Discourses of Ethnicity*.
 62. See for example, Adrienne Cooper, *Sharecropping and Sharecroppers’ Struggles in Bengal 1930–1950* (Calcutta and New Delhi: KP Bagchi & Company, 1988); Taj ul-Islam Hashmi, *Peasant Utopia. The Communalization of Class Politics in East Bengal, 1920–1947* (Dhaka: University Press Limited, 1994).
 63. Suranjan Das, *Communal Riots in Bengal 1905–1947* (Delhi, etc.: Oxford University Press, 1991).
 64. See also Burling, *Strong Women of Modhupur*, pp. 242–46.
 65. Sangsareks believe that the world is populated by *mite*. *Mite* is generally referred to as “spirit”, but some *mite* were so powerful that they are better thought of as gods. These *mite* can cause illnesses by biting people. The priests, or *kamal*, knows how to perform sacrifices in order to cure the victims. Sacrifices were also performed at various points of the annual cycle, and they were a central part of village festivals. See, for example, Burling, *Strong Women of Modhupur*, pp. 53–56.
 66. Since the end of the nineteenth century, missionaries from a variety of Christian denominations have worked and lived with Garos. See also Chapter 7 of this study.
 67. Important contributions have been made by Robbins Burling and Kibriaul Khaleque, the two anthropologists largely concentrated on the Garos of Modhupur.
 68. In this study, I use the concepts “emic” to refer to views from within or insider views, and “etic” to refer to outside perceptions or outsider views. Although there has been much debate about the two notions, these are the most common definitions. See Thomas N. Headland, Kenneth L. Pike and Marvin Harris, *Emics and Etics. The Insider/Outsider Debate* (Newbury Park, etc.: Sage Publications, 1990), p. 22.
 69. For an elaborate discussion about the use and validity of oral history as a source for historical research, see Paul Thompson, *The Voice of the Past* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989).
 70. To safeguard the privacy of my informants, I have used pseudonyms both for the village Bibalgree as well as for my informants. Suborno Chisim, who I consider a fellow researcher rather than an informant, is referred to by his genuine name.
 71. By Garo village, I mean a village which numbers or used to number a significant number of Garos. With the exception of Modhupur villages, very few villages are entirely Garo.



72. Garos consider Westerners Christians. After all, everyone must have some religion or the other, and Westerners can never be Muslim, Hindu or Buddhist, so must be Christian.
73. Cf. Kibriaul Khaleque's hard work to be accepted by the Garos during his field research. Khaleque found it very difficult to establish friendly relations with the Garos. People did not easily accept or trust him, being a highly-educated Bengali Muslim. See Kibriaul Khaleque, "My fieldwork Experience in a Garo Village of Bangladesh", in *Pains and Pleasures of Fieldwork*, edited by Anwarullah Chowdhury (Dhaka: National Institute of Local Government, 1985), pp. 207–23.
74. Cf. Joan Neff Gurney, "Female Researchers in Male-Dominated Settings. Implications for Short-Term Versus Long-Term Research", in *Experiencing Fieldwork. An Inside View of Qualitative Research*, edited by William B. Shaffir and Robert A. Stebbins (Newbury Park, etc.: Sage Publications), p. 56.
75. Cf. the title of Robbins Burling's ethnography *The Strong Women of Modhupur*.
76. Cf. Lionel Caplan, who ask himself similar questions about the Gurkhas. Lionel Caplan, *Warrior Gentlemen. "Gurkhas" in the Western Imagination* (Providence and Oxford: Berghahn Books, 1995), p. 8.