

## NOTES ON THE SOCIOPOLITICAL HISTORY OF NOMENCLATURES IN NORTHEAST INDIA

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### Abstract

This study discusses the different types of ethnolinguistic nomenclatures before and after British colonial rule in Northeast India. Before the colonial era, every community had endonyms/autonyms and exonyms for regional ethnic groups, often with inclusive cultural terms meaning ‘our people’ for themselves, while they often used derogatory terms for their neighboring communities based on features of food choice, clothing, and other ethnic features. After the British established an administration and settled in the region, they started naming the tribes of North India based on the names provided by the plainsmen under their control, often with meanings along the lines of ‘savage’, ‘uncouth’, ‘wild’, and so on. Whilst most of the names were denounced later by speakers of the languages because of their pejorative connotations, others survived, such as ‘Naga’, and more groups have embraced ‘Naga’ as their ethnic identity despite its derogative meaning, while others, such as ‘Kuki’, have divided into various tribes with their own ethnonyms. This study also deals with other factors affecting nomenclatures, namely, ‘scheduled tribe’ recognition (a constitutional safeguard for the promotion and protection of the rights of minorities belonging to a social category of scheduled tribes) and the influence of Western education in shaping nomenclatures the way they are.

**Keywords:** Nomenclature, Northeast India, Ethnolinguistics, Sociopolitical history

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### 1 Introduction

The notion of nomenclature around which the sociopolitical rhetoric revolves is a subject that concerns scholars from various disciplines, ranging from cultural studies, social sciences, media studies, language studies and so forth. Subtle differences exist in the way nomenclature is employed in various fields. For instance, a political scientist employs nomenclature to differentiate groups of people in conflict situations and what their rights are, while a historian is more inclined to describe the relationships between groups of people in the past. An economist or sociologist uses it to measure the economic or social disparity that exists between groups of people, while an anthropologist may use it as a marker of cultural differences between groups of people. A linguist uses nomenclature to distinguish groups of people based on the languages they speak. But in the common parlance, the way nomenclature is used may not necessarily imply any of the above.

As far as the nomenclatures in Northeast India are concerned, they may be construed as the identity tag that a group of people associate themselves with differently from other groups who do not associate with the

same identity tag. This can be as small as a clan (i.e., a group of people bound by family ties), a tribe (i.e., a group of clans) which may equal a language<sup>1</sup> (i.e., a group of people who speak the same dialect), or it can be as large as an ethnic group (i.e., a group of tribes), so long as there is a social, cultural, and/or political reason that bind them together. Thus, for the people of Northeast India, nomenclature is a way of representing the feeling of ‘WE’ versus ‘OTHERS’ that emanates out of the social and political issues surrounding them, be it at the level of clan, tribe, or ethnicity.

Contrary to the view that people of certain ethnic groups professing the same nomenclatures are homogeneous, in the sense that they belong to the same ethnolinguistic groups<sup>2</sup>, nomenclature in Northeast India is often subjected to a certain degree of fluidity and fragility. That is, people’s loyalty toward a particular nomenclature may keep changing depending on the social and political situations over time. This study argues that the social and political factors that go into the making of nomenclatures are at times so crucial that they may override groups’ cultural and linguistic affinities.

Nomenclatures are fluid and fragile owing to the factor stated above, and the terms associated with groups of people are also far from uniform. In fact, rare is a group in this region of Northeast India who are known by a single name. A particular tribe may be known by various ethnonyms depending on their geographical location. A tribe is often divided into numerous clans, but seldom with the same name. For an outsider not acquainted with how nomenclature works in the region,<sup>3</sup> caution should be exercised when using nomenclatures as designations for ethnolinguistic groups. The task of identifying nomenclatures and assigning them their proper places within a tribe or clan is complicated by the changing nature of nomenclature. After the British colonial period, the way people aligned themselves was no longer confined to clans or families. That is, clans expanded to become tribes and tribes into ethnic groups. The common traits of language and culture that once bound members of a clan or tribe no longer become the basis for people to come together as tribes and ethnic groups. Rather, what binds people together in this region are their sociopolitical and economic issues that are paramount for their safety and survival and not so much whether they speak the same way or practice the same culture.

Examples of communities for whom linguistic affiliation is less important than that of sociopolitical and economic factors mainly come from those communities who affiliate themselves under the ethnic umbrella ‘Naga’ discussed in Section 4.2. These include all of the tribes in Nagaland and the adjoining hills of Manipur (e.g., Tangkhul Naga, Rongmei Naga, Mao Naga, etc.), Arunachal Pradesh (Nocte Naga, Wancho Naga, Phom Naga, etc.), and across the borders in Myanmar. The change in ethnic affiliation of Anal who were considered former tribes of ‘Old Kuki’ to Naga, and other ‘Old Kukis’ who follow suit, namely, Monshang, Lamgang, and Purum, are also instances of communities for whom sociopolitical and economic factors are more important than linguistic affiliation. Cases of such affiliation may also include the affiliation

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<sup>1</sup> In Northeast India, most tribes’ names are also the names of languages they speak. For example, the Ao tribe speaks Ao, the Angami tribe speaks Angami, the Dimasa tribe speaks Dimasa, the Thadou tribe speaks Thadou, the Rongmei tribe speaks Rongmei, and so on. See Burling 2011 on the topic.

<sup>2</sup> Srikant & Ngaihte (2012) argue that several studies on ethnic groups, especially those dealing with ethnic conflicts in Northeast India, use terms such as ‘tribes, ethnic communities and nationalities’ or to be specific names of tribes, ethnic communities and nationalities interchangeably to distinguish one from the other. When these terms for tribes, ethnic groups and nationalities are freely used without proper definitions in conflict situations in Northeast India, it sends a message that groups of people on either side of ethnic conflicts are one people (in terms of the language and culture) which is seldom not the case. Skrikant & Ngahte (2012) further point out that most conflicts in Northeast India although packaged in the name of kinship, culture and traditions are actually motivated by material concerns regarding land, jobs and political power. The irony is that these materially motivated factors get enforced in the names of tribes or ethnic groups as if they are truly distinct groups when that is not always the case. As Skrikant and Ngaihte (2012) also show, it is not uncommon to find instances wherein some culturally related communities (e.g., the Kuki-Chin tribes) start espousing separate identities and the apparently unconnected communities bonding together with one identity (e.g., the Naga tribes).

<sup>3</sup> There are a number of similar looking names, probably village names, such as Chakrima, Chokri, Chekrama, Chakru, Chakroma (Matisoff 1996:5) all belonging to Angami Naga which, on prima facie, appear confusing to anyone with no familiarity about these names in Angami Naga. Similarly, tribes are known by various alternative names, such that they can be easily misunderstood as representing different groups rather than different names for the same language. Some examples include Thado/Thadou/Thadou-Kuki, three representations of the same name; Rongmei/Kabui/ Kapwi/Koupooee, Kachcha Naga, Nhruangmei; Sema/Rengma and so forth.

of Inpui<sup>4</sup> as one of the members of the socio-cultural umbrella term ‘Zeliangrong’, and the people who called themselves Megam in the Garo Hills (discussed in Section 4). I have come to this conclusion through studying the history of the community’s affiliation and the linguistic relation among the affiliated communities in this study.

The remainder of the study is as follows: Section 2 discusses the sources and method of data contained in the study. Section 3 shows how the people of Northeast India called themselves and their neighboring tribes before the arrival of the British. Section 4 discusses the naming of various hill tribes after the British. Section 5 discusses the factors affecting nomenclature. Section 6 highlights the influence of Western education on the nomenclatures of Northeast India and Section 7 presents the change of nomenclatures as a continuity. Finally, the study concludes by pointing out the implications of nomenclatures on the languages of Northeast India.

## **2 Data sources**

The data on the naming system of the tribes of Northeast India is the result of my experiences with the native speakers of the languages of Northeast India, about their perceptions towards their group and other groups regarding the nomenclatures. My experience comes from years of having lived in Manipur (my birthplace), Barak Valley Assam, where I taught at Assam University for over a decade and my brief stay in Nagaland University for over a year, where I taught at Nagaland University. During this period, I was able to make sense of how different communities feel about themselves and others concerning the use of nomenclatures. During this period, I interacted and discussed with speakers from different communities about their perceptions and what they think about their nomenclatures. It was in 2023 when I met a group of native speakers from different universities of Northeast India at Northeast Regional Institute of Education (NERIE) Shillong that provided me with the much-needed data for the study.

The languages are mainly from the Tibeto-Burman family, including Ao, Khezha, Sema, Lotha, Konyak, Nocte, Tangkhul, and Maring. For the remaining languages, including Aimol, Uipo (Khoibu), Liangmai, Dimasa, Kokborok, and Molsom, I depended on my linguist friends from these communities for information through personal communication. I also depended on information from native speakers of Mising for vital information on the Tani languages of Arunachal Pradesh and Assam.

For the remaining information, secondary sources, especially those written by colonial scholars and administrators are consulted for older names, which are no longer in use in the current times. The colonial sources are further collaborated by recent research publications conducted in different parts of Northeast India for authenticity and accuracy.

## **3 Nomenclature before the arrival of the British**

Before the British arrived, the hill people of Northeast India had already developed a naming system for their own groups and their neighboring communities different from what the colonial administrators and scholars used. Thus, every group has its own endonym/autonym and exonyms for neighboring groups. Many of the names the tribes of Northeast India used to refer to ethnic groups are often derogatory in nature. In the past, the tribes of Northeast India referred to each other based on what they ate and wore, the color of their skin or clothing, and so forth. These pejorative words were highly localized systems that rarely spread out of a community. The hill people of Northeast India make a distinction between their immediate neighboring communities and people from the plains. Such issues for the various ethnolinguistic groups are discussed below.

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<sup>4</sup> An examination of Inpui grammar (Devi 2014) shows great lexical similarities, especially the so-called Northwestern (Old Kuki) languages of Manipur and Barak Valley (Southern Assam). The phonology and morphology of Inpui are no less different from the rest of the ‘Old Kuki’ languages described in Haokip (2018 & 2009), save the verbal agreement and verb stem alternation not found in Inpui and other ‘Old Kuki’ languages. But on account of their geographical separation from the rest of the Kuki-Chin languages, speakers of Inpui had developed closer social and political ties over time with the Zeliangrong tribes (Zeme, Liangmai, and Rongmei) and are thus considered an integral part of the Zeliangrong cluster which is more of a sociopolitical conglomeration than a linguistic union.

### **3.1 The Kuki-Chin tribes**

The inclusive name Kuki-Chin speakers call themselves is *eimi*, which translates as ‘our people’. The term they use to refer to people of the plains of Assam and beyond is *vai* in Mizo and Hmar, *kol* in Thadou-Kuki or *koor* in Molsam (one of the Kuki-Chin languages of Tripura). But the term they use for their immediate neighboring tribes is *milong* in Thadou-Kuki for the Nagas and *meitei* or *meilhei* for the Manipuris. Similarly, the Aimol, a small Kuki-Chin community of Manipur, refers to the plainsmen of Assam and beyond as *vai* or *kor*, but they describe the Naga and Kuki from the color of their clothing or the color of their skin; *a-sen* (NMZ-red) ‘red people’ for the Nagas and *a-vom* (NMZ-black) ‘black people’ for the Kuki. The Tibeto-Burman people generally have brownish skin color, but the terms red for the Nagas and black for the Kuki are used to distinguish a group with a lighter skin tone from one with a darker skin tone. In addition to the general attributes with which people of Northeast India refer to neighboring ethnic groups, they also use certain derogatory words to refer to their neighboring tribes who do not speak the same language. Thus, the derogatory term the Aimols use to refer to all the Naga tribes is *ukei*, which roughly translates as people who walk like dogs.

The former Lushai Hills of the present-day Mizoram extending down to the Chin Hills of Myanmar were and are the traditional home of ‘Kuki-Chin’ tribes of which Lushai, or Mizo, is a principal language (see Section 4.1 for detailed information on the colonial history). The former ‘Kuki’ tribes called themselves by their respective clans’ or tribes’ names. For instance, the people who we know as Mizo were known by their neighboring cognate tribes (the Thadou, Ranglongs, Hmars, and Hrangkhols) as Lushai. The Mizos in turn called the various former ‘Kuki’ tribes either by their respective clans or tribes’ names. For instance, the Changsen, Singson, Thado for the present-day speakers of Thadou-Kuki, Hrangkhols for Hrangkhols, Ranglong for Ranglong, Bete for Bete/Biete, and so forth.

The reason could be that there were no significant differences between them in terms of their language and culture. However, some of the names that the former Lushai tribes used for their neighboring cognate tribes may be construed as derogatory in the present time. That is, the Lais refer to themselves as *Lami* ‘people of Lami’ or *Laifa* ‘children of Lai’ and to their tribe and language as *Lai Hawlh* or *Lai holh*, but the Lushai called them *Pawi*, which Vanlalhruaia (2018:74) says, without specifying the meaning, that the term *Pawi* was a derogatory name given to them by the Lushai tribe. Another name which we might consider derogatory is ‘Lakher’, which the former Lushai tribes used to refer to the Maras. Lehman (1970) conjectures that ‘the source of the name Lakher is the word for a Mara-manufactured cotton gin that was popular in neighboring language communities’ (cited in Aden 2010). Perhaps, the term ‘Lakher’ was given to the Maras in connection to their profession of cotton cultivation. The term the former ‘Kuki’ tribes used for the Chakmas is *Tuithek*, which translates as ‘people who live near water’, *Takam* or *Tikam* by the modern Mizo (Chakma 2018:46).

### **3.2 The Naga tribes**

Having discussed the names by which the Kuki-Chin tribes called themselves and other tribes outside of their own, we now move on to discussing the names by which the Naga tribes called themselves and other tribes or ethnic groups outside of the Naga fold.

First, we discuss the case of the Naga tribes of Manipur. The Khoibus, who prefer to call themselves *uipo*, refer to the Manipuris as *meitlei*, the Kuki as *kongchai*, the Tangkhuls as *khà má*, the Kabui/Rongmei as *kappui*, and the Marings (to which they were part of) as *mongmi* or *yong*. The immediate neighboring tribes of the Marings are the Tangkhuls, the Kukis and the Manipuris. The term the Marings use for the plainsmen of Assam and beyond is *yang-nga* [*yaŋ-ŋa*]. But the terms they use for their close neighboring tribes are *lu-burra* (head-dirty) ‘dirty head people’ for the Kukis, *khama* ‘people who moved out from cave (mythical origin) before the Maring’ for the Tangkhuls, and *pai-rom* (dung-wrap) ‘the people who wrapped their defecation’ for the Manipuris (the logic being, as opposed to the hill people who disposed of the defecation of their babies in the open fields, the Meitei wrapped them before disposal). The Tangkhuls refer to the plainsmen as *mayang*, which is a Manipuri term for the mainland Indians. Like the Marings, they refer to the Manipuris as *pairom*, but they refer to the Kukis as *nap-ko* ‘people with much mucus’. Rongmei speakers of the Tamenglong district of Manipur refer to themselves exclusively as *haomei*. But they refer to the plainsmen of Assam and beyond as *tajongmei*. For the immediate neighboring tribes, they use *taimei* for the Manipuris and *khongsaimi* for the Kukis. The Rongmeis also refer to the Kukis as *pok-tu-mei* (rat-eat-NMZ) ‘rat eaters’ or *bi-tu-mei* (yam-eat-NMZ) ‘yam eaters’. The Kukis, in turn, refer to the Naga tribes as *ui-sa-du*

*te* (dog-meat-fond-people) ‘people who are fond of dog meat’. The Liangmais, a close neighboring tribe of Rongmeis, use the term *charamei*, which roughly means ‘dark color ghost’ for the plainsmen, *meitei* for the Manipuri, *kongchai* for the Kukis, and *marongmei*, which roughly translates as ‘empty land people’ for the Rongmeis. All white foreigners are known as *kakamei*, which translates as ‘white skin people’.

In the state of Nagaland, more than a dozen Naga tribes share close or distant borders with the Assamese and Bengalis. The Khezha share close borders with the Chokri, the Poumais, the Angami, the Lothas, the Semas and to some extent with the Manipuris. The Kheza term for the plain people is *metrinu*. For their fellow Naga tribes, they use *sahami* for the Chokri, *thepfami* [*thepfami*] for the Poumais, *enggami* for Angami, *kavabami* [*kāvābami*] ‘bamboo shoot eaters’ for the Lothas, and *jachemi* [*dzaʃfemi*] for the Sema. They use the general term *meitei* for the Manipuri. The close neighboring tribes of the Lothas are the Aos, the Sumis, and the Chakeshang. The term the Lothas use for the plainsmen is *osam* ‘fried food eaters’. The Lothas refer to their fellow Naga tribes based on their manner of eating. Thus, the Aos are referred to as *ayo-na echo-i* [*ayɔ-na ɛtsɔ-i*] (left-INST eat-NMZ) ‘left-hand eaters’, the Sumi as *namə ɛtsɔ-i* (smelly eat-NMZ) ‘smell food eaters’, and the Chakeshang as [*oma echo-i*] *oma ɛtsɔ-i* (salt eat-NMZ) ‘salt eaters’. The close neighboring tribes of the Aos are the Lothas, the Semas and the Eastern Nagas. The term they use for the plainsmen (Assamese and Bengali) is *chamar* [*tzūmar*] from *tzü* ‘water’, *ma* ‘above’, and *-r* ‘agent’ meaning people who live on the water.

On the other hand, the Aos describe their fellow Naga tribes based on their manner of living. For instance, they refer to the Lothas as *cha-han-er* [*tzə-hən-er*] (water-carry-NMZ) ‘water-carrying people’ and the Semas as *moyar* ‘not hungry’. There is a story for this term: an Ao and a Sema were travelling. On the way, the Ao asked his fellow Sema friend whether he was hungry, and the Sema answered *moyor*, meaning that he was not hungry. Finally, the term the Aos use to refer to the Eastern Naga tribes is *ma-rir* [*mə-rii*] which translates as ‘people who could not cross the river directly’. The story behind the meaning is that the Nagas while walking up to *longchok* [*lɔŋtsɔk*] ‘six stones’ have to cross a river. It so happened that while other Nagas like the Aos were able to swim through the river, the Eastern Nagas took another circle to reach Longtsok because they could not swim. Hence, the Aos called them *ma.ii*.

The close neighboring tribes of the Semas are the Aos, the Lothas, and the Eastern Nagas. The term they use to refer to the plainsmen is *khalau-mi* ‘outsiders’. For their fellow Naga tribes, they use *Cholimi* to refer to the Aos, *chuami* for the Lothas, and *chungi* [*tsüngi*] for the Eastern Nagas. What these terms mean is not known to the author because the consultants were not able to tell their exact meanings. The Konyaks share close borders with the Changs and the Aos. The term they use to refer to the plainsmen is *suang* [*süanʔ*] ‘outsiders with dark skin’. The Konyaks call the Aos *tíkpa* ‘stingy people’. The story is that while the Naga were migrating, they built a bridge together. The Aos went ahead and destroyed the bridge so that other tribes would not be able to cross the river. The immediate neighboring tribes of the Sangthams are the Aos, the Changs, and the Yimchungars. They termed the Aos as *ami makah* [*əmi məkəʔ-ia*] (stomach pain-NMZ) ‘stomach-pain people’, the Changs as *ma-chung-ra* [*mə-tsüŋ-ia*], the Yimchungar as *yang-chung-ra* [*yaŋ-tsüŋ-ia*], and *samra* [*səm.ia*] for the Semas. The meanings of most of the terms are not clear to the author.

**Table 1: Ethnolinguistic and ethnonyms of Naga tribes**

No	Naga Group	Ethnolinguistic Group/subgroup	Ethnonyms	
			Exonyms/ Colonial names	Endonyms
1	Khoibu	Maring Naga	Khoibu	Uipo
2	Rongmei/Kabui	Zeliangrong	Kapwi/Koupooee (LSI), kowpooe (Hodson 1911), Kabui, Nruanghmei.	Haomei/Ruangmei
3	Liangmai	Zeliangrong	Kwoireng, Liyang (Hodson 1911)	Hamai (not popularly in use today)
4	Zeme	Zeliangrong	Empeo/Arung/Kachcha Naga (LSI)	
5	Inpui	Zeliangrong	Kabui	Inpui
6	Maring	Naga	Maring	Maringaa/Ringaa (in short)
7	Tangkhul	Naga	Lahupa/Luppa	
8	Mao	Naga	Sopvoma, (E)memei	
9	Poumai	Naga	Poumai	Poula (Veikho 2021)
10	Tarao/Thangal	Naga	Khoirao, Kolya, Mayangkhang (Hodson 1911)	
11	Maram	Naga	Miyangkhang may be a dialect of Maram	
12	Monsang	Naga	Monsang	Sirti
13	Moyon	Naga	Moyon	Bujuur
14	Khezha	Naga	Kezhama, Kezami, Kezama, Kheja, Kheza	Közhami/kuzami/kozami (Kapfo 2005)
15	Chokri-Kheza	Naga	Chokoso, Chakhesang, Eastern Naga	
16	Angami	Naga	Tenyidie/Tenedyie (Post & Burling 2017)	
17	Ao	Naga		Chungli and Mongsen
18	Lotha	Naga	Lhotha	Kyon
19	Sangtam	Naga	Thukumi is the Sema term for Sangtam and Lophomi is a specific name for the Northern Sangtam, (Coupe 2020)	
20	Yimchunger	Naga	Yachumi	Yimchungrü/ Yimkhiung. Tikhir, which is now recognized as a separate Naga tribe also speak Yimchunger.
21	Konyak	Naga	Colonial names include Angwanku, Tableng, Angphang, etc.	Wakching is the standard dialect.
22	Chang	Naga	Mazung	
23	Phom	Naga	Kahha/Tamlu/Chinmengnu	
24	Rengma	Naga	Rengma	Terüpvunyu (Western Rengma); Ntenyi (Northern Rengma); Tseminyu (Central Rengma); Ketenenyu, Azonyu and Nzonyu (Southern Rengma).
25	Sema	Naga	Sema/Simi	Sumi. A number of dialects have been reported for Sema of which the major ones are Zhimomi, Zümomi, Lazemi, and Yepothomi (see Teo 2014)

### 3.3 The Kaboroks and their neighboring tribes

In the state of Tripura, the speakers of Kokborok which constitutes the major chunk of the tribal population refer to the Muslim Bengalis as *wanzwi/wansa* or *Thuruk*. Besides speakers of Kokborok, there are many smaller Kuki-Chin groups, who were referred to as ‘Old Kuki’ by British scholars and administrators. The Kaboroks describe the Old Kukis as *sikam* and the Old Kukis in turn refer to the Kokboroks as *vai*. The speakers of Riang (believed to be a dialect of Kokborok) refer to the other Kokboroks as *gurpai* ‘buy guru’. Like their counterpart Kukis of Manipur, the Old Kukis of Tripura, namely, the Molsoms refer to the Bengalis as *kôor*, the Tripuris as *mithar* ‘new people’ and the white people/Englishmen as *saapkaangte* from *saap* ‘an Indo-Aryan equivalence of officer’, *kaang* ‘white people, and *te* ‘plural suffix’.

### 3.4 The Dimasas and their neighboring tribes

In the Autonomous District of Dima Hasao (formerly North Cachar Hills) of southern Assam, the Dimasas, who constitute the dominant linguistic group among the tribes share close borders with the Kukis, Zeme Naga, Karbis and so on. The Dimasa’s term for the Kukis and Hmar is *Thangumsa*<sup>5</sup> [thəŋgumʃa]. What this means is not clear except to say that *sa* means ‘male or son’. But they use more specific meanings for the close relatives of Thadou-Kuki; *Dakhinsa* ‘south people’ for the Hrangkhols and *khelma* for the Sakacheps. The Sakacheps were named *khelma* because it was believed that the Dimasa king gave them *khel*, a system of local government known as the panchayat system.

The names by which the Dimasas referred to the Nagas and Karbis, with whom they also share close borders in the past and to a large extent even to this day, are somewhat mysterious as it appears that the local names for the Nagas and Karbis are from Austroasiatic peoples with whom the Dimasas also have close ties. For instance, the term they used for the Nagas is *mgamsa* or *magamsa*, which appears to be a distorted form of Megam, an Austroasiatic language.<sup>6</sup> Similarly, the term they used for Karbi is *pnasa/phnasha* which appears to come from Pnar. We assume that the Dimasa speakers must have mistaken the Nagas and Karbis to be Megams or Pnars. But the terms for the plainsmen are straightforward. Thus, the Bengalis are known as *hadisa* ‘plains people’ and Manipuri as *monglaisa* ‘Mongoloid people’ respectively. For now, we have no information on how other tribes refer to the Dimasa, except to say that the Kukis referred to them as *kaaili*, whose meaning remains obscure.

### 3.5 The tribes of Arunachal Pradesh

Our understanding of the naming system before the colonial annexation of the state of Arunachal is minimal. The people of Arunachal use their ethnonyms to refer to the Assamese and plains people. For instance, the Mising<sup>7</sup> term for people outside of their own is *mipak* from *mi* ‘person’ and *pak* ‘outsiders’. The same is known as *nipak* by the Tagins of Arunachal Pradesh. The Misings, particularly those residing in villages, refer to the Assamese as *yerung abor* from *yerung* ‘ear’ and *abor* ‘one’, but the term is not used widely today. The Assamese, in turn, refer to the Misings as *Miri*, which the latter (the Misings) consider derogatory. The Mising term for Muslims is *goriya*, which translates as ‘beef eaters’, or *tamedoné* [tamedonə], which translates as ‘tail eaters’. The Noctes, a close neighboring tribe of Mishing, refer to the Wancho as *machcho* or *kongete* [ko-ŋe-te] (hill-DIR-people), which translates as people from the hillier

<sup>5</sup> Longmailai (2012) explains how the term *mai-khu-di* (rice-bubble-water) ‘rice water bubbles’ has been codified to refer to the Hmars, a Kuki-Chin language of the Tibeto-Burman family, in place of the older endonym *Thanggumsa* after the ethnic clash erupted between the Dimasa and the Hmars as a new inner group name to refer to the Hmars whom they had earlier called *Thangumsa* when talking to them in public.

<sup>6</sup> While the term *mgamsa* or *magamsa* that the Dimasas use to refer to the Nagas and its connection to Megam requires further investigation, it is clear that Lyngngam and Megam are two different names of the same language living in the western part of Khasi hills, right along the border with the Garo hills (Burling 2011). Lyngngam is what the Khasis call them, while Megam is what the Garo call them. They are considered a subtribe of Garo and their speech form as a dialect of Garo by the Garos in the Garo hills and vice-versa by the Khasis in the Khasi hills. Also, what is not clear is how the Dimasas referred to the Nagas as Megam and not as Lyngngam, but what is clear is that the speech of the Lyngngam-Megam is clearly allied to Khasi rather than to Garo (Burling 2011:41)

<sup>7</sup> Mising is a Tibeto-Burman language of the Tani branch spoken in upper Assam (Tinsukia, Dibrugarh, Jorhat, Sibsagar, Dimaji, and Lakhimpur districts) and in Arunachal Pradesh bordering upper Assam.

region. Similarly, the Noctes refer to Tangsa as *Tangcha*. The term Tangsa must be a recent term which came to be used in the public domain. According to Grierson (1903:573), the two clans of Aka, namely, Hazari-Khowa and Kapās Chōr, were known as ‘eaters of thousand hearths’ and ‘cotton thieves by the Assamese. See Section 4.4. for a detailed discussion on the naming system of the tribes of Arunachal Pradesh after the British.

#### **4 Nomenclatures after the end of British administrative control in India**

Having discussed the endonyms/autonyms and exonyms of Northeast India before the arrival of the British, we now move on to discussing the nomenclatures and the circumstances leading to the change in nomenclatures after the British left Northeast India. A number of nomenclatures associated with languages/tribes have changed between then and now; some have been abandoned because of their derogatory connotations, and others, on account of social and political reasons. Before the arrival of the British, the social organization of tribes in the hills of Northeast India was one of homogeneity, in that, each group chose to live in separate hills equidistant from other groups that did not share the same languages as theirs. As discussed in later Sections, the use of the term ‘tribe’ by colonial administrators had more to do with the categorization of hill people based on their geography and not so much on language.

When the British came to Northeast India, they had no prior knowledge of the tribes on the hills surrounding the plains of Assam. As a result, they had to depend on the people of the plains who were already under their control to assign ethnonyms for the hill people of Northeast India. First, the British designated the hill people in broad terms depending on the hills on which they were located. For instance, all the hill people occupying the northern hill ranges between the Brahmaputra and Chindwin rivers on both sides of the Indo–Myanmar border were designated as Nagas, while other tribes inhabiting an area from the Naga Hills in the north down into the Sandoway district of Burma (Myanmar) in the south were designated as Kukis<sup>8</sup> (Grierson 1903, 1904), and those in Khasi hills as Khasi, and so forth.

Even after the end of British administrative rule in 1947, the names the colonial administrators had already assigned to the hill tribes of Northeast India continued to be used and were later entered into the Scheduled Tribe<sup>9</sup> list in subsequent census reports by the government of India (GOI) with or without modifications. The tacit understanding that the GOI adopted for the listing of languages was that every speech form of a tribe was a language, including those spoken by subtribes as dialects irrespective of whether they are mutually intelligible or not. Because the criteria the GOI applies to the recognition of language do not correspond to a linguist’s definition of language, one should not be inclined to accept a tribe-language correspondence without verification. Indeed, people who belong to a particular tribe may end up speaking mutually unintelligible languages, as in the case of Tangkhul, and people speaking similar and sometimes mutually intelligible dialects may end up as separate tribes, as in the case of Kuki-Chin languages in Manipur. A detailed discussion of the Tangkhul and the Kuki-Chin languages of Manipur is provided in Sections 4.1 and 4.2, and also in Haokip (2011, 2018).

Other instances of the same group of people speaking the same language but considered separate tribes come from the state of Meghalaya. Burling (2011) reports that the people who call themselves Megam in the Garo Hills and Lyngngam in the Khasi Hills speak the same language<sup>10</sup> but the Megams are considered a subtribe/dialect of Garo in the Garo Hills, while the Lyngngams are considered a subtribe/dialect of Khasi in the Khasi Hills. The people who live in the Garo Hills call themselves Megam and identify themselves as Garos, while those who live among the Khasis in Khasi Hills call themselves Lyngngam and identify themselves as Khasi. Khasi is an Austroasiatic language, while Garo is a Tibeto-Burman language. Another example comes from the state of Arunachal Pradesh, where there are distinctions between lower-level tribal classification even when the ethnic identity and language are the same. The people known as Phong (known exonymously as Pontai) have a single language and cultural identity but are considered different in different

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<sup>8</sup> The difference between the Nagas and Kukis is that the former is composed of different tribes speaking disparate languages, while the latter speak closely related languages and practice many similar cultural practices.

<sup>9</sup> Scheduled Tribe refers to the indigenous communities or tribes the government of India recognized for special protection and assistance in areas of educational, economic developments, social injustice, and exploitation.

<sup>10</sup> Despite the speech of Lyngngam-Megam being allied closely to Khasi than to Garo (Burling 2011), the Megams claim that they speak a dialect of Garo while the Lyngngams claim to speak a dialect of Khasi.



districts. The Phongs are considered to be Tangsa if from the Changlang District but Nocte if from the Tirap District (van Dam p.c). A third example comes from the state of Manipur, where the Mates, one of the clans of 'Kuki', have been demanding a separate tribe status despite speaking the same languages as the Thadou-Kuki (See Section 5.1 for further discussion).

This brings us to the question of what constitutes a tribe or what factors those in this region look for to identify tribes in Northeast India. I argue that aside from living in the hills, sociopolitical interests are crucial for people's affiliation as tribes. Thus, when a group of people in Northeast India claims to belong to a tribe, what they mean is that they share the sociocultural and political aspirations of that particular tribe, though every member of the group may not speak the same language. This brings us to conclude that so long as every member of the group shares the same sociopolitical aspirations, a tribe's unity is likely to last longer. Otherwise, a tribe's unity may disintegrate as soon as that sociopolitical bond is no longer intact or when some members of the group develop a new aspiration. In sum, the most important factor communities consider when it comes to the question of affiliation under certain nomenclatures is to ensure that whichever affiliation they choose, that affiliation should be able to secure the social, economic, and political interests concerning land and resources of the people. With increased demand to take control of land and resources (which was not so much the case in the past), most conflicts in the region have land and resources as a common point of contention. Hence, the issue of land and resources plays an important role in which way the hill peoples affiliate and not so much towards linguistic or cultural identity.

To support these claims, the following subsections discuss the nomenclatures which fall under the broad terms: Kuki, Naga, Cacharee/Kachari, and those from Arunachal Pradesh.

#### **4.1 Kuki**

Kuki, along with Chin, is a denomination used by the colonial administrative writers as a cover term for a number of tribes speaking related languages on both sides of India and Myanmar (Burma): Kuki on the Indian side of the border and Chin on the Burmese side. Grierson and Sten Konow (1904) viewed the denomination Kuki-Chin as purely a conventional one and admitted that there is no proper name comprising all the tribes. As Grierson (1904:1) writes, "Kuki is an Assamese or Bengali term, applied to various hill tribes, such as the Lusheis, Rangkhols, Thados, etc.". Other colonial writers who used the term 'Kuki' include Stewart (1855), Soppitt (1887), and Shakespear (1912) to name a few.

After India's independence, the Lushai tribes started abandoning the old colonial term in favor of their traditional name *Mizo* 'hill men' from *mi* 'man or person' and *zo* 'hill'. The Lushais, who constitute the largest tribe of all the Kuki tribes, favored Mizo for their language/tribe and Mizoram for their newly created state, which was carved out from the union of Assam in 1987. The rationale for the change from Kuki to Mizo was that a traditional name would have a better appeal than the old colonial term. In doing so, they managed to resolve their differences through a common language called Mizo from Duhlien, one of the dialects of Lushai which was considered the standard dialect at the time. Since the newly created state of Mizoram failed to extend its territory to other Kuki areas in Manipur, the new term Mizo could not absorb other Kuki-Chin languages beyond the territory of Mizoram. Rather, some of the tribes of the former Kuki tribes preferred to be identified as Zomi, which has the same meaning as Mizo, but differs only in the interchange of syllables (i.e., metathesis). Despite the abandonment of the old colonial term 'Kuki' in Mizoram and in parts of Manipur, the term Kuki has continued to be used by a majority of the so-called Thadou speakers and by the other subtribes in Manipur and other parts of Northeast India when referring to all Kuki-Chin speakers.

The colonial name Kuki was also applied to the so-called 'Old Kuki' of Manipur and southern Assam extending up to the adjoining hills of Tripura. A number of former Old Kuki tribes from Assam and Tripura came together under a new nomenclature called "Hallam". These include Ranglong, Rangkhols, Chorei, Saihriem, Sakachep, Thangkachep, Kaipeng, Molsom, Morsephang, Bawngcher, Bawng, Kaipeng, Koloi,<sup>11</sup> Rupini, Saihmar, Rupini, and Saihmar. However, Darlong, the most dominant Kuki-Chin language of

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<sup>11</sup> Koloi is certainly not a Kuki-Chin language. I also suspect that Saihmar, Rupini, and Saihmar may not belong to Kuki-Chin languages. I have found that Thangkachep is an alternate name for Sakachep. The other alternate name is Khelma spoken in North Cachar Hill district of Assam. What I am not sure of is whether Bawng, Bawngcher, Kaipeng, Kaipeng, Molsom, and Morsephang are dialects or not.

Tripura along with Chorai, Bete and Saihriem, still prefer Kuki as their collective identity. Some of the former old Kuki tribes of Manipur, namely, Anal, Lamkang, Moyon, and Monshang joined the Nagas (see Section 4.1 for further discussion). Other old Kuki tribes of Manipur, namely, Aimol, Chiru, Koireng, Kom and Purum, chose to be equidistant from Kuki and Naga and formed a union of their own called Komrem.

Not much has been written about these languages, and there is little information about their internal relationship and how distinct they are from each other. Tarung Kom, a native speaker of Kom (2009), states, “the Kom tong or Kom-rem tong ‘Kom language or Komrem language’ is considered a common language of the Komrem”, and tribes communicate through this language. However, this is only partially true, in the sense that, there exist some (elderly) speakers from the related tribes who understand Kom, for Kom is the largest of all the tribes. It is not true to say that all the tribes of Komrem understand Kom. While some speakers from other tribes can understand and speak Kom, the speakers of Kom may not understand other languages of the Komrem tribes. The reason why the languages of the Komrem are not mutually intelligible as would be desirable for the group is that, despite their linguistic and cultural relatedness, they are sparsely located in different parts of Manipur and often interspersed between other speakers of the Kuki-Chin languages (such as the Thadou-Kuki) and Manipuri. Unlike the case of other Kuki-Chin languages, which show greater mutual intelligibility (Haokip 2011), the Komrem languages lack such mutual intelligibility among themselves. One of the reasons for the lack of intelligibility among the Komrem languages is due to their geographical separation which prevents contact among the tribes regularly. To fill in their communicative needs, they use Manipuri as the medium for inter-tribe communication.

While most of the Kuki tribes discussed so far are distinguishable from the respective languages/dialects they speak, the same cannot be said of many tribes which appeared in the writings of colonial administrators and scholars. For instance, Shakespear (1912) in his book *The Lusei Kuki Clans* mentioned several nomenclatures which fall under the Lushai clans and non-Lushai clans. But whether these clans speak a language or dialect of their own is not indicated. The names Shakespear included under Lushai clans are Chongthu, Kiangte, Ngēnte, Paotu and Chawte. Some of these tribes who were able to exert power in the Lushai Hills before and during the British Raj no longer enjoy the status and are now fully submerged within the Mizo fold and speak Mizo as their language. Other tribes listed under the Lushai clans, namely, Chothe (Chawte), must have emigrated out of the Lushai hills to Manipur long before the colonial occupation of Northeast India. As far as can be ascertained, the Chothe are confined to Lamlanghupi, near Bishnupur town and a few villages in the Chandel district of Manipur. Manipuri and other Tibeto-Burman languages pose an immense threat to the Chothe language and culture. The Chongthu clan is now interspersed between the Thadou in Manipur and Mizo in Mizoram. The Chongthu, who live along with the Thadou, speak Thadou and identify themselves as Kuki,<sup>12</sup> while the Chongthu of Mizoram speak Mizo and are considered Mizo.

Other clans, namely, the Fanai and Zahao<sup>13</sup> which Shakespear (1912:136) believed are not Lushai clans but influenced by the Lushai, are fully submerged within the Mizo fold and speak Mizo as their language. However, the Rangte (better known as Gangte), who now live mostly in the southern Churachandpur district of Manipur, speak Gangte as their language. Shakespear (1902:149) also lists a number of tribes which he believed belonged to the Old Kuki. According to Shakespear, Lonte or Ronte lived close to Chawte hamlet along the Burma Road. Our understanding suggests that there are no languages or dialects which correspond to Lonte or Ronte. Most probably, these must be the names of Chothe clans or close tribes of the Chothe. Similarly, Shakespear (1902:149) lists Kolhen and Tikhup along with other Old Kuki tribes, namely, Chiru, Aimol, Chawte, and Purum, which he said were influenced by Manipuri and have abandoned their ancestral architecture. Grierson (1904:234) in *Linguistic Survey of India* (LSI in short), volume III, part III, describes Kolhen as the name which the tribe selected themselves, and Koireng is probably a Manipuri corruption of this name. I think that Tikhup is probably the name of one of the clans of Koireng or other Old Kuki tribes closest to Koireng. Another tribe whose name often appears in the writing of colonial writers as one of the Kuki tribes is Lakher (Parry 1932). The term Lakher<sup>14</sup> is no longer used by the tribe themselves who

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<sup>12</sup> See Haokip (2011) for discussion on Thadou and Kuki.

<sup>13</sup> In Myanmar (Burma), Zahao, or its variant spelling Zahau, is ‘often conflated with several languages spoken in and around Falam township under the general name Falam Chin’ and is barely distinguishable from its more prominent counterpart Laizo (Button 2011).

<sup>14</sup> Mara is spoken in the Mara Autonomous District of Mizoram and in the south Haka sub-division of the Chin Hills of Myanmar. See Arden (2010) on the use of Lakher.

preferred to be known as Mara. The Lakhers speak mostly Mizo in Mizoram, but in Myanmar, the language is spoken with dialectal variation (Arden 2010).

Besides the colonial names that the colonial administrators and scholars used to refer to the Kuki tribes of India, other exonyms are also applied to Kuki tribes, such as *Khongzai* in Manipur. The term *Khongzai* was used by the Manipuris to the Kukis (including all the Kuki-Chin tribes) of Manipur. About the use of the term *Khongzai/Khongsai*, it may be conjectured that they were named so because of their fondness for drums that accompanied their songs; *khong* means ‘drum’ and *zai* ‘beat’. The general term the Manipuris use for all the hill tribes of Manipur is *hao*, which has a derogatory and pejorative meaning. The Manipuris refer to all the Naga tribes by the general term ‘Naga’, but specifically refer to the Rongmei of the Imphal valley as Kabui.

#### **4.2 Naga**

The different Naga tribes of Northeast India are not a unified ethnicity in terms of language. In the 19th century, British writers used the term Naga for the tribes in the hills to the southeast and east of Sibsagar. As the British power reached further into the hills, the term Naga was gradually extended to denominate more tribes as far as Manipur, and east as far as the India-Burma border, and even beyond the upper Chindwin valley (Marrison 1967:12). It was not until recent times that any of the tribes called themselves Naga or claimed that they were one group. The languages of the Naga tribes are so diverse from one another that Burling (2003) even goes on to say that the languages of the Naga tribes may be divided into three or more subgroups within the Tibeto-Burman family. Marrison, who worked extensively on the Naga languages, claimed, “they are not homogeneous, either in race, culture or language” (Marrison 1967:15). However, they live in a continuous belt of hills between the Brahmaputra plain and the Chindwin.

Before the arrival of the British, the only name the Nagas identified themselves with was a village (Wettstein 2012, Coupe 2022). The term ‘Naga’ as a collective identity came about during World War I, during which around 2,000 Nagas were recruited by the British as a labor force to build roads in France (Wettstein 2012). According to Wettstein (Ibid.), following the experience during World War I and the formation of a modern state after the British left India, the Nagas realized that only as a united people would they have a chance to withstand the newly formed Indian and Burman nations. Thus, the driving force for different Naga tribes to come together as a united people was not on grounds of language, but rather their experience at the hands of the colonial rulers during World War I, and their political inspiration for freedom after the British left India.

After India’s independence, a number of nomenclatures which hitherto did not exist were formed among the smaller Naga tribes by combining the first syllables of the names of the confederating tribes. These include the Chakhesang—formed from the first syllables of Chakri, Kheza, and Sangtam—and Zeliangrong—from Zeme, Liangmai and Rongmei. The political motives behind such nomenclatures are not clear. But what is clear is that these tribes are geographically close to one another. Within these nomenclatures, there can also be a sub-nomenclature, such as Zeliang in Nagaland which is again a combination of the first syllables of Zeme and Liangmai, but minus Rongmei. The next example of a group of people united by tribe is Tangkhul in the Ukhrul district of Manipur. The people who are known as Tangkhul consider themselves as a single tribe and the varieties that exist among them as sub-tribes. It is well-known to linguists in the region that the different speech forms of Tangkhul differ from one region to another and are not mutually intelligible with one another, and yet they are united as one tribe under the Tangkhul. To fill in the communicative gap that exists among them, the speech form spoken in the Ukhrul town has emerged as the local lingua franca.

Starting with Anal, other smaller groups of tribes who were designated as ‘Old Kuki’ in the writings of colonial administrators and scholars, namely, Anal, Lamkang, Moyon, Monshang, and Chothe, now affiliate themselves with the Nagas. The affiliation of the Old Kuki tribes with the Naga is more of tribal alignment on social and political grounds than linguistic affinity. Nobody disputes that the languages of the old Kuki tribes are related to Kuki-Chin languages. The prevailing social and political situation in which they are situated makes it necessary that they choose social and political affinity over linguistic affinity. In other instances, some of the Naga tribes, who were considered as one tribe are now divided into two tribes. These include Paomai and Mao in the Northeast of Manipur and Khoibu and Maring in the southeast of Manipur. As discussed further in Section 5.1, the reason for the split is more of a political aspiration to be recognized as separate tribes than on linguistic grounds.

Having discussed the various nomenclature under Naga, we now turn our attention to the names of languages Grierson and Sten Konow (1903) provided in their classification of Naga languages. Grierson and Sten Konow (1903) divided Naga languages into five subgroups as shown below:

**Western group:** Angami, Sema, Rengma, Khezhama  
**Central group:** Ao, Lotha, Tengsa, Thukumi, Yachumi  
**Eastern group:** Angwanku/Tableng, Chingmegnu/Tamlu, Banpara, Mutonia, Mohongia, Chang/Mojung, Assiringia, Moshang, Shangge  
**Naga-Bodo group:** Mikir, Kachcha Naga, Kabui, Khoirao  
**Naga-Kuki group:** Sopvoma, Maram, Miyangkhang, Kwoireng/Liyang, Luhupa/Luppa, Maring

Many of the names which Grierson and Sten Konow (1903) provided have either become obsolete or are no longer in use. The names of languages under the Eastern group<sup>15</sup>, namely, Moshang and Shangge, were actually sub-tribe names that the British authorities used to describe the various groups of Tangsa-Nocte, their local names being Muishaung and Shecyü respectively (Morey 2019). Other names are older names of modern Naga languages. According to Post and Burling (2017), Tableng/Angwanku is the older name for Konyak, Thukumi for Sangtam, Kezhame/Khezhama is the older name of Khezha spoken in Khezha Khonoma near Kohima, and Phek district, Yachumi for Yimchungrü, Sema/Simi for Sumi, Namsangia for Nocte, Banpara for Wancho, Chingmengnu/Tamlu for Phom, Lhota for Lotha, Tangshang in Myanmar for Tangsa. Tengsa could be a spelling variant of Tangsa. The modern names of languages under the Bodo-Naga<sup>16</sup> group are Karbi for Mikir, Rongmei for Kabui/Kapwi/Koupooee, and Thangal for Khoirao. The term Kachcha Naga is specifically used to refer to Zeme (Grierson and Sten Konow 1903). Finally, the modern names for languages under the Naga-Kuki group are Mao for Sopvoma/(E)memei, Liangmai for Kwoireng/Liyang, and Tangkhul for Luhupa/Luppa. The name Miyangkhang may be a dialect of Maram.

### **4.3 Cacharee/Kachari and Meekir/Mikir**

One of the nomenclatures that is often used to describe the former tribe of the Cachar district of southern Assam is Cacharee or Kachari. The term Cacharee was used by colonial administrators to denote the people who we now know as Dimasa spread across the Dima Hasao Autonomous Council (formerly North Cachar Hills), Nowgong, Dimapur and Barak Valley. According to Stewart (1855), the Cacharee were in possession of the plains and kingdom of Cachar proper, before they were gradually driven northward. Stewart (1855) divided the Cacharees into two categories: Hazai (plain) and Purbuttia (hill) Cacharees. Stewart further stated that the plain Cacharees were Hindus and that there were no significant differences between the hill and the plain Cacharees, except that the hill Cacharees were ruder and more unsophisticated. Later, the term Cacharee or Kachari was applied to other tribes in the lowlands of Brahmaputra, namely, the Bodo and Lalung (Tiwa), who share similar features. The term Cacharee or Kachari is no longer used by the people. Rather, they maintain their own distinct identities as Bodo, Dimasa and Tiwa. Bodo is found mainly in the recently created Bodoland Territorial Council region of lower Assam, while the Dimasa now find themselves in the Dima Hasao Autonomous District Council (formerly known as North Cachar Hills).

Like Cacharee, Meekir/Mikir is a term the colonial administrators and scholars used to describe the people whom we now know as Karbi. They inhabit the Karbi Anglong Autonomous district of Assam bounded by the Nagaon district in the north and Dima Hasao (North Cachar Hill) in the south. As far as historical records go, the Meekirs are the original settlers of Toolaram under their own chiefs. Stewart (1855) describes how they fled to Jynteah for fear of the Rajah of Cachar and emigrated to their present localities in Assam (Karbi Anglong) and North Cachar and placed themselves under the Rajahs of Assam, who appointed

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<sup>15</sup> According to Eberhard et al. (2023) in the *Ethnologue*, Tableng/Angwanku is a dialect of Konyak spoken in Wanching and Wanching and Wakching regions of Nagaland, Tamlu/Chingmegnu is a dialect of Phom, Assiringia an alternate name of Phom, Banpara an alternate name of Wancho, and Mutonia a dialect of Wancho.

<sup>16</sup> About the inclusion of the Naga-Bodo and the Naga-Kuki sub-groups (Grierson and Sten Konow 1903), Coupe (2012) claims that they were established to account for features that Naga languages share with Bodo and Kuki-Chin languages, in addition to sharing lexical similarities with other languages of the Naga group.

a chief over their clan, granted lands, and exacted revenue. Like their neighboring tribes, the Cacharee, the Meekirs were divided into two types: the hill Meekirs and the plain Meekirs. The former (the plain Meekir) reside chiefly out of North Cachar, in the district of Nowgong. Because of the derogatory connotation, the term Meekir/Mikir is being replaced by Karbi.

#### **4.4 North Assam group**

Several names of the tribes that the colonial administrators and scholars used in their descriptions of the tribes of Arunachal Pradesh have become obsolete over the years. The first name we often encounter in the writings of colonial scholars and administrators concerning Arunachal Pradesh is the blending of three tribes: Abor, Miri, and Dafla as Abor-Miri-Dafla. According to Sten Konow (1903), they inhabited the mountains between the Assam Valley and Tibet. Together with Akas and the Mishmi, they formed the North Assam group in the Linguistic Survey of India (1903). Since this group was never well defined and Sten Konow only uses it as a geographical label, Blench and Post (2011) conclude that the North Assam group in LSI roughly corresponds to the modern-day state of Arunachal Pradesh. It is beyond the scope of the present study to discuss the relationship between the languages of Arunachal Pradesh, and hence readers may refer to Blench and Post (2011, 2014) and Post and Sun (2017) for further information. The Abor-Miri-Dafla group in LSI corresponds to modern Tani languages Adi, Mising<sup>17</sup>, and Nishi respectively. The list of Tani languages also extends to Galo, Tagin, and Apatani and other languages spoken by people who were tribally identified as Na and Bangni, in addition to numerous smaller, usually clan-based or village-based self-identifications, such as Komkar (Post and Sun 2017). Post and Sun (2017) caution that not all the people who self-identified themselves as Adi in the *Census of India report* speak this language themselves. The fact that the figure 1,380,878 in the *Census of India Report* (2011) do not speak the same language is a testament that Tani is more of a tribal concept than a language.

As far as relatedness is concerned, Mising is mutually intelligible to Adi, and to a large extent Galo. Furthermore, Nyishi and Tagin are mutually intelligible to one another, but neither is intelligible to Mising, Adi, and Galo. Among the Tani languages, Apatani is quite different from the rest. Other languages listed under the North Assam group, including Aka and Mishmi by Sten Konow, remain unchanged only to say that Aka is now known as Hrusso. The name Aka may be of Assamese origin, while Hrusso appears to be an autonym and should thus be preferred (Blench and Post 2011). Blench and Post say that ethnically, Hrusso has been grouped with the Koro Aka of East Kameng, but linguistically with Miji, and this shows that what Shafter (1947) calls 'Hruso A' is clearly Miji and 'Hruso B' is Hrusso proper. Based on a comparative list, Blench and Post (2011) show that Koro Aka is quite unrelated to either of these. Sulung is another colonial name of the language which is changed to Puroik (a more favorable local name). Blench and Post divide Mishmi into two closely related languages: Idu (Luoba in Chinese sources) and Taraon (= Digaru). They further claim that Miju seems to have nothing in common with Mishmi. Another example of an older term many groups apply to themselves, despite speaking quite distinct languages, is Monpa. Blench and Post (2011) attribute this to the prestige of the Tawang monastery, which gives Monpa a high-status marker.

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<sup>17</sup> The term Miri is still used as hill Miri in Arunachal, but not in Assam.

**Table 2: Colonial names of tribes and their modern names**

No.	Modern names	Colonial names
1	Tani	Abor-Miri-Dafla
2	Adi	Abor
3	Mising (in Assam)	Miri
4	Nishi	Dafla
5	Karbi	Mikir/Arleng (LSI)
6	Kokborok	Tripuri
7	Plain Dimasa	Hazai/Plain Cacharee
8	Hill Dimasa	Purbuttia/Hill Cacharee
9	Dembra	Hojai (Dimasa)
10	Tiwa	Lalung
11	Deuri	Deori, Chuti(y)a (Post & Burling 2017)
12	Hrusso	Aka
13	Puroik	Sulung
14	Tutsa	Muthun
15	Tangsa	Tangshang in Myanmar
16	Nocte	Namsangia
17	Wancho	Banpara
18	Konyak	Tableng
19	Phom	Chingmengnu, Tamlu
20	Kaman	Midzu, Miju
21	Meyor	Zakhring, Zaiwa, Zhá
22	Bugun (Khowa) and Mey	Sherdukpen
23	Idu	Chulikat(t)a, Bebejia, Yid(ō)u Luòbā/Lhoba (Post & Burling 2017) says that Idu and Tawrā were traditionally grouped with Kaman in India under the common ethnonym ‘Mishmi’

## 5 Factors affecting nomenclature

A number of factors are responsible for the change in nomenclatures in Northeast India. The change in nomenclature took place at two levels: at the level of tribes and the union of tribes (loosely referred to as ethnic group or ethnic identity in Northeast India). The change in nomenclature at the level of tribe has occurred due to two factors. First, many of the names the colonial administrators applied to the tribes of Northeast India were often “*exonyms*—names used by a group’s neighbor rather than by the people themselves... [and] are often pejorative, with meanings along the lines of ‘savage’, ‘wild man’ and ‘barbarian’” (Post and Burling 2017:216). While it is true that many of the colonial terms have derogatory or pejorative connotations, not all instances of change of nomenclatures can be attributed to this. As people became more aware of their tribal identities, they adopted their own native names which are culturally more appropriate for their tribes and languages or have invented new names. The second reason for the change in nomenclature is the recognition of tribes which hitherto were not listed in the constitution of India (see Section 5.1 for further discussion on the topic). Names of new tribes which have been added in the *Census of India Reports* 2001 and 2011 from the state of Manipur are Poumai, Tarao, Kharam and Mate.

The next change affecting nomenclature is the ‘union of tribes’ where a number of tribes come together for a common social and political cause, a process commonly referred to as ethnic identity in Northeast India. In the case of ethnic identity, people belonging to different tribes come under a single nomenclature for a larger social and political cause. These include the Naga identity we saw in Section 3.2 or the invention of a new term as in the case of Komrem in Manipur (Section 4.2), or the coming together of ‘Rabha’ and ‘Koch’ formerly regarded as separate tribes but united as one tribe to strengthen their political agenda through unity with the slogan ‘Rabha are Koch, Koch are Rabha’ (Post and Burling 2017).

Another scenario of ethnic identity is the formation of new ethnic identities in lieu of older nomenclatures. The change of nomenclature from Lushai to Mizo by the former tribes of the Lushai clans in Mizoram, the formation of ‘Zomi’ by a number of tribes from the former Kuki tribes of Manipur, and the

formation of 'Halam' in Barak Valley (southern Assam), and the adjoining hills of the Tripura, who were formerly described as 'Old Kuki', as discussed in Section 4.1, belong to this category. The motive of the tribes who were formerly referred to as Abor, Miri, and Dafla to Tani, aside from the derogatory connotations, is not clear. But what we can conclude is that the newer name 'Tani' is culturally more acceptable than the old term 'Abor, Miri, Dafla' and may well turn out to serve their social and political aspirations better.

### **5.1 The demand for inclusion into the scheduled tribe list**

One of the reasons for the emergence of new nomenclatures that previously did not exist is the demand for the status of scheduled tribe recognition. Thus, a number of new tribes added to the list of scheduled tribes show how high the demand is for people to be included in the scheduled tribe list. Because of the highly tangible benefits that are provided for tribes included under the Scheduled Tribe list in the form of political representation, reserved seats in schools, and government jobs, the number of Scheduled Tribes has expanded from 225 in 1960 to 700 today (with overlapping communities in more than one state) (Haokip 2018). In the context of Manipur, where the demand for a separate tribe recognition is more prominent, a number of tribes that were not formerly found in the census of India were added in the 2001 and 2011 censuses of India. These are Poumai, Tarao, Kharam and Mate. Our understanding is that Poumai was formerly under Mao, and Mate was under the 'Any Kuki tribe' in the previous census. According to my Poumai friends, Poumai and Mao are mutually intelligible with one another, except for accent differences. However, the possibility of some village varieties not being mutually intelligible with Mao and Poumai cannot be ruled out. But the Mate speak the same language as the Thadou or Kuki in the state of Manipur. The trend to disintegrate from an existing tribe is also felt by the so-called Khoibu, who were thus far considered as part of the Maring tribe. The reason seems to be that Khoibus, who preferred to call themselves Uipo, feel that Maring is different from and not intelligible to them.

The demand for scheduled tribe status is not only from minority communities but also from more dominant communities. The case in point is the demand by the Manipuris to be included in the scheduled tribe at par with the Kukis and Nagas in terms of constitutional benefits. But this demand is opposed stiffly by the tribal communities on the ground that such recognition if given to a more advanced community, such as the Manipuri, will undermine the rights and privileges of the tribal groups who are socially and economically weaker than the Manipuris. At the time of writing the present study, the issue over the recognition of Manipuri into the scheduled list has been blown out of proportion, leading to the loss of lives and properties that Manipur has never seen before.

Not all the tribes have been officially recognized as scheduled tribes. For a tribe to be officially included in the *Census Report of India*, it must have a population of at least ten thousand. Because of this benchmark number, many of the tribes in Northeast India could not make it to the list of 'scheduled tribes' in the *Census Report of India*. Many of these tribes come from the so-called 'Old Kukis' of southern Assam and the hills of Tripura adjoining southern Assam that were discussed in Section (3.1). The *Census Report of India* lump them together as smaller tribes of a smaller population. The names of tribes not included in the *Census Report of India* from the state of Manipur include smaller tribes, such as Aimol, Inpui, Chiru, Chothe, Monsang, Moyon, Lamgang, Purum, etc. The list is likely to grow as our understanding improves over time.

## **6 Influence of Western education on nomenclature**

The influence of Western education may not necessarily lead to change in nomenclature. But it certainly has a role in the standardization of certain languages/dialects over others as far as writing is concerned. The hill tribes of Northeast India who were oblivious of any writing systems were introduced to writing first in the Devanagari script but later shifted to the Latin/Roman script after the British made inroads to the hills of Northeast India in the 19th century (Pappuswamy 2017). The missionaries set up different centers of learning, including night schools, and taught local groups how to read and write in their languages using the Latin script. Religious books, such as the Bible and hymns, were translated into the local languages using the Latin script. The translation of religious texts into Khasi and Mizo (Lushai) in the dialects of Cherranpuji and Duhlien led to the standardization of all the other regional dialects. However, when the missionaries reached Manipur, they were not able to translate the Bible into one of the Kuki-Chin languages, which could have become the standard language, among the mutually intelligible Kuki-Chin languages. As a result, the various Kuki tribes started translating the Bible into their respective dialects. The Bible as a piece of literature

became one of the most influential forces for the assertion of separate tribes among the Kuki-Chin tribes of Manipur (Also see Haokip 2011).

## 7 Change in continuity

Many of the nomenclatures in Northeast India are names that are associated with demand for the creation of a separate territory by people embracing a particular nomenclature. Thus, there is a close relationship between nomenclature and separate territories for the people of Northeast India. In other words, nomenclatures were created whenever a new demand for the creation of a separate territory arose. For example, Bodo for Bodoland, Dimasa for Dimasa land, Karbi for Karbi land, Mizo for Mizo land, Naga for Naga land, Khasi for Khasi land, Kuki for Kuki land, and so forth. While the Mizos, Nagas, and Khasis have been able to secure their own separate states, and the Bodos, Karbis, and Dimasas have been able to secure separate administrative arrangements in the form of Autonomous Councils from the government of India, others, such as the ‘Kukis’ and the ‘Rabhas and Koch’, have been demanding a separate territory from the government of India to govern themselves separately. The composition of people under different nomenclatures also varies. For instance, the people who called themselves Bodo, Karbi, and Dimasa are separate linguistic groups, with each group having a separate language of their own. The people who called themselves Kuki likewise speak mutually intelligible languages. But various groups of people who call themselves ‘Naga’ speak languages that are mutually unintelligible. As the demand for separate territories keeps growing by the day, it will not be surprising to see fresh nomenclatures cropping up on ethnic grounds in the near future. Because of the kind of attention that politically created nomenclature receives from the media, the public has become accustomed to such nomenclatures easily without a proper understanding of their internal compositions.

Not only are the nomenclatures with which people of Northeast India associate themselves subject to change, but the languages they speak are also subject to change on account of contact among themselves or with people outside of the region. The past two decades or so have witnessed an increase in the movement of people from Northeast India. The previous hill tribes that were confined to their traditional settlements in the remote hills unaffected by the outside world can no longer resist the developments that have been taking around them. People have started moving out of their traditional settlements in search of better opportunities to sell their agricultural produce as well as education and jobs for their children. While the movement of the people is primarily on account of economic factors, it has linguistic and other social effects. As regards language, it is often the case that speakers of minority languages will have to carry out their social functions in the languages of the dominant communities with whom they come in contact (O’Shannessy 2011), thereby bringing linguistic changes to the languages in such contact situations (Chelliah and Lester 2016). Depending on the nature and intensity of contact, the languages of the minority speakers become endangered in the short-term and long-term.

An example of change in the structure of language due to movement comes from Uipos<sup>18</sup> (exonym Khoibus). The Uipos who have moved to Imphal for economic or educational purposes have started dropping *ka*, a sort of verbal prefix, under the influence of Manipuri, which does not require verbal prefixes in the formation of a clause or sentence as shown below.

<b>Village speech</b>	<b>Migrant speech</b>	<b>Manipuri</b>
<i>cak ka-ca-ra</i> <sup>19</sup>	<i>cak ca-ra</i>	<i>ei cak cha-re</i>
food PRX-eat-ASP	food eat-ASP	1 food eat-ASP
‘I have eaten food.’	‘I have eaten food.’	‘I have eaten food’

This example from Uipo shows how children start picking up items of everyday use and substituting them for their native words as a result of being exposed to Manipuri, the lingua franca of the state of Manipur. Finally, children who no longer maintain contact with speakers from their place of birth will gradually give

<sup>18</sup> Before the redistricting of districts in Manipur, Uipo was spoken by around 2,000 speakers in the Chandel district. But after the redistricting, the population of Uipo in Chandel is found in a few villages/suburbs such as Khadungyon, but the Uipo Centre and the “traditional” area are in what is now Tengnoupal district.

<sup>19</sup> Maring, which is very close to Uipo, has retained the preverbal prefix.



up their language in favor of dominant languages (Blench 2015:2), for language contact in bilingual situations and the various shades of bilingualism can be induced by migration.

## **8 Conclusion**

This study has presented changes in nomenclatures before and after the colonial period and how many of them have been denounced in favor of native names owing to pejorative connotations contained in the names given to them by colonial administrators. The information presented in this study shows how other nomenclatures that have survived even to this day, such as ‘Naga’, have undergone a process of accommodating more tribes despite its derogatory meaning, while the former ‘Kuki’ tribes have created new nomenclatures which are more culturally native to them, in lieu of the colonial term ‘Kuki’. The information presented in this study shows that membership in a given nomenclature is often based on social and political considerations and not so much on language.

Because of the social and political considerations that go into the making of nomenclatures, people who are not aware of how nomenclatures are formed may end up believing that people who professed these nomenclatures are homogenous in terms of the languages they speak and the culture they practice. Furthermore, because of the nature of conflicts on tribal and ethnic lines which Northeast India is prone to, nomenclatures associated with tribe and ethnic groups get widespread coverage without a full understanding of the internal composition of nomenclatures in the region. Because of the complex nature of nomenclatures in Northeast India, the information in this study shows the importance of understanding the social and political factors that go into the marking of nomenclatures in Northeast India and the need for caution while using them to denote linguistic groups that are also often known by the same name.

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## **Abbreviations**

NMZ	=	nominalizer
INST	=	instrumental
PRX	=	prefix
ASP	=	aspect
DIR	=	directional
LIS	=	Linguistic Survey of India

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