

# VU Research Portal

## Performing Ethnicity to Resist Marginalisation The Tangsa in Assam

Barkataki-Ruscheweyh, M.

2015

### **document version**

Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

[Link to publication in VU Research Portal](#)

### **citation for published version (APA)**

Barkataki-Ruscheweyh, M. (2015). *Performing Ethnicity to Resist Marginalisation The Tangsa in Assam*. VU University Amsterdam.

### **General rights**

Copyright and moral rights for the publications made accessible in the public portal are retained by the authors and/or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing publications that users recognise and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

- Users may download and print one copy of any publication from the public portal for the purpose of private study or research.
- You may not further distribute the material or use it for any profit-making activity or commercial gain
- You may freely distribute the URL identifying the publication in the public portal ?

### **Take down policy**

If you believe that this document breaches copyright please contact us providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.

### **E-mail address:**

[vuresearchportal.ub@vu.nl](mailto:vuresearchportal.ub@vu.nl)

## Summary

“Either you assimilate, or you learn the tricks of the plains people so well that you can hold out on your own in their midst, or you go back to the hills, ” one of my field consultants had told me once when I had asked him about the fate of small ethnic groups such as the Tangsa and the Singpho in Assam. My years in the field working with the Tangsa have borne out the truth of that statement. This work puts together much of the evidence I have collected over six years while doing ethnographic field work amongst the Tangsa.

The Tangsa living in the state of Assam in Northeast India are a tiny minority community, living together with people of other communities, in mixed villages scattered over a relatively large area. Assam has more than hundred such minority groups, some of whom, like the Bodo, have more than a million members. Hence the Tangsa living in Assam are marginal even amongst the minority communities living in Assam. Although there are Tangsa also living in the neighbouring state of Arunachal Pradesh (hereafter AP), the situation for the tiny Tangsa population in Assam is much more complicated. While AP is a tribal-majority state, Assam is not, hence the Tangsa in Assam cannot take advantage of the special privileges reserved for tribal communities in Arunachal. At the same time, the states of Assam and AP, as well as the larger region of India called Northeast India to which they belong, are also locationally peripheral and politically marginalised areas compared to most other regions of India. Thus the Tangsa in Assam are, in some sense, at the *very margins of the margins*, and hence face an existential threat of being completely ignored and forgotten.

Given this scenario, this study focuses on a number of steps some Tangsa community members living in Assam have taken in order to negotiate a place and identity for themselves in the world around them. It also documents a range of their attempts to reformulate and rearticulate their past traditions in forms more amenable to present times, and such that they can then be used to create a new pan-Tangsa identity.

The fact that the Tangsa speak a mindboggling variety of languages, many of which have very few speakers left, is the principal reason why the Tangsa are of great interest for linguists. Most of the work for this study was done as part of a project which was primarily focused on documenting endangered languages; my brief in the project, however, was to analyse what it means for people to be Tangsa, despite their linguistic divisions. This work is the outcome of that exercise.

Referred to previously by the British as the Patkoi Nagas or the Rangpang Nagas, there is some (Dutta 1969) but not a lot of literature about the Tangsa to date. Moreover, in the last few decades, rapid changes have occurred to the lifestyles and traditional practices of the Tangsa, as a result of their migration down from the Patkai hills in Myanmar to the plains of Assam and their consequent exposure to and acceptance of a ‘modern’ way of life as well as their participation as citizens of the Indian state. However, most recent literature on the

Tangsa, such as Rao (2006), as well as on the Nagas, such as Saul (2005), almost completely ignore the impact of these changes, as well as the fact that many Tangsa have converted to Christianity in the last few decades. This study wishes to correct this misrepresentation and present a more plausible portrait of the everyday life of the Tangsa. Furthermore, this present work is the first detailed study of the Tangsa living in Assam.

Many Tangsa groups still live over the Patkai ranges in Myanmar, where they are known as Tangshang or Heimi Nagas. Some Tangsa claim that at least some Tangsa groups are part of the larger Naga umbrella. The Nagas have been engaged in a long-standing conflict with the Indian government ever since Indian independence over the question of creation of a sovereign Naga nation. The current leader, Khaplang, of one of the major factions of the NSCN, a radical insurgent organisation that is currently spearheading this struggle, is a Heimi Naga, and operates out of Myanmar. Although the rival faction NSCN (I-M) based in Nagaland, India have entered into a ceasefire agreement with the Indian Government, Khaplang has rejected the ceasefire offer; resulting in frequent ongoing inter-factional and cross border violence. Therefore an understanding of the Tangsa situation and their struggles to survive as a community within the Indian state could contribute towards a better assessment of the situation on the ground in order to foresee what the future can hold for the Nagas as a whole, as well as for the Tangsa in particular.

### **Main themes**

This work is first and foremost an introduction to members of some Tangsa communities living in Assam. It examines the internal divisions amongst various Tangsa groups in terms of language and cultural practices, their past and present ways of life, and their culture and traditions. It also focuses on the changes that hill-communities have had to accept after moving down to the plains and after beginning to participate as small minorities, but nevertheless as equal citizens, of a democratic state. A linguistic classification of the different Tangsa tribes is included in the third chapter. It shows how complex the picture is and hence how complicated the project of creating a pan-Tangsa identity could be. This study also places the Tangsa in their geographical and historical context by studying their migration histories and their interactions with neighbouring groups.

As a piece of ethnography, this work explores the Tangsa trail via three distinct but related objectives in the main ethnographic chapters. The first is an investigation of life in three Tangsa villages in Assam, chosen because they are interesting for different reasons. Namely, religious affiliations and location, as well as their livelihood patterns, linkages with others and attitudes towards change and resistance. While drawing out these different aspects, I explore the internal logic of the differences among these villages and the mechanisms by which they function as units. I also show how these village communities negotiate amongst themselves and with other groups around them for economic as well as political space, in an effort to secure their lives and existence. Moreover, I put the situation of the Tangsa in Assam in perspective, comparing and contrasting their situation with that of the Tangsa living in the neighbouring state of Arunachal Pradesh. This is the first narrative, the aim being to give the reader a general introduction to the Tangsa people and also a sense of what it is like to be a Tangsa living in one of these villages.

The second aim is to carry out a detailed documentation of specific Tangsa festivals in order to record and understand community attempts at preservation, revival, and revitalisation of some of their past cultural traditions, as well as their deliberate attempts at creating new ones. In doing so, I examine how village festivals ‘reflect’ as well as ‘cause’ cultural change in a community. By analysing the factors that determine the form of the festivals themselves, and also the impact of these representations on the self-image and cultural identity of the Tangsa, I seek an answer to the complex question of what it means to be Tangsa, at least for my interlocutors, and to those around them in the present-day-context.

A number of Tangsa I have met are actively involved in the process of “constructing, deconstructing and reconstructing” (Richard Handler 1994: 27) their cultural identity by selecting and modifying elements from their past as well as incorporating new elements. I therefore explore what terms like ‘culture’ and ‘ethnicity’ could mean for my Tangsa interlocutors, and how they use their perceived notions of these concepts to construct their new pan-Tangsa identity. These perceived notions, depend, as I will show, on a host of factors, including external factors like state policy, and the views of outsiders (like our project team) and those of other communities around them.

Observing the processes of identity construction and self-projection of the Tangsa becomes even more interesting in the light of ongoing debates, both inside and outside the community, about how to use their ethnicity and their particular cultural assets to their best advantage in order to promote their demands for recognition and to win a place in the political and social arena of the state. I claim that they seek to project a new pan-Tangsa identity which draws not only from their past but also from their modern present reality -- they wish to assert their ethnicity and their uniqueness, but in modern terms, and made evident in modified rituals and performances that are intelligible even to outsiders.

This study of the Tangsa in Assam explores not only the relationships among some members of the Tangsa community living in Assam, but also those between these Assam-based Tangsa and at least three other groups. First, the majority and dominant Assamese community that has administrative control and wields political power in Assam (so much so that most of the representatives of the state the Tangsa come into contact with, such as the police and administrative officials, are Assamese). Second, other minority groups, such as the Singpho, living in the same geographical area, and finally the Tangsa living elsewhere in India, i.e. in the Changlang district of AP, and to a lesser extent, those living in Myanmar. Intertwined in this net of group relationships is another network of individual relationships that I, as a researcher, as a member of my research team and also as an individual belonging to the dominant Assamese community, already had with the Assamese community and those that I developed with my Tangsa and non-Tangsa interlocutors during the course of my field work.

Finally, the third and final aim is to follow my own personal journey in the field in order to reflect at every stage on the relations between the Tangsa and others around them in general, and my Tangsa interlocutors and me in particular. I have deliberately chosen to tell this story as it unfolds at the end of each chapter rather than compress it into a chapter at the beginning because I believe that the ways and attitudes of the Tangsa ‘others’ have a huge role to play in the determination of the Tangsa ‘self’.

Moreover, my somewhat unusual position as an almost native Assamese researcher and as an intermediary between my Tangsa interlocutors and my foreign project colleagues has revealed many insights into the nature of doing ethnography, and the tensions and affinities in the field work situation. Therefore I also wish to place on record “our own role in the creation of the phenomenon we study” (Moerman 1993: 90). Neither my interpretation of the Tangsa world nor my analysis of Tangsa festivals would be complete or honest without this critically reflexive component.

The recurring theme that binds together the different locations and the different perspectives in this study is my claim that the performance of ethnic identity as evidenced at festivals, for marginal groups like the Tangsa, is a strategy for survival, and for negotiating a place for themselves in the world around them. In this sense, my Tangsa interlocutors instrumentalise their ethnicity, and their identity is suitably adjusted and articulated, case by case, in forms which are amenable for achieving other larger ends.

However, rather than considering these actions as calculated or manipulative, it is more productive to consider them as acts of self-preservation and of self-definition, stemming from their fear of being overlooked and forgotten in the world they inhabit and call their own. In many Tangsa persons I met, there was a strong inherent sense of belonging -- a perception of Tangsaness -- even if they could not really define what it meant, but which none of them was willing to give up. It is this sense that forces them to do something, even play the game according to the new rules of their dominant neighbours if required, with the hope that if not everything then at least something about them and their Tangsaness will remain in the end.

And this is important because although many of my older interlocutors know and live their Tangsaness they can see that, given the increasing impact of external influences on their world, it will be harder for their children to hold on to just vague notions. To survive as Tangsa in the world around them will require more concrete definitions, which in the Tangsa case -- fraught with divergent religious affiliations, varied cultural traditions and diverse linguistic repertoires -- is asking for something extremely difficult, if not impossible. This study seeks to place on record some of these attempts at self-definition in order to resist marginalisation and possible erasure.

On a more general level, this study is also about relations between the hill men and women and those living in the plains, between tribals and non-tribals, and in particular, between predominantly non-Hindu tribal communities, such as the Tangsa and the Singpho, and caste-Hindu non-tribal people, such as the Assamese and the Nepali. It is also about the growing inter-tribal solidarity to be seen amongst the tribal groups who have been living in the area for centuries, as a reaction to their gradual loss of land and priority to settler communities -- both tribal and non-tribal -- that have recently arrived and continue to come. At the core, this study is about marginality and its consequences, and the compulsions which can force individuals from small minority groups, even against their own wishes at times, to make decisions which turn their worlds upside down and make them lose their sense of who they are and who they want to be.

## Conclusions

My main underlying claim is that marginality is central to any analysis of the Tangsa in Assam. It is their marginality that makes the Tangsa, in the most part, behave the way they do or take the decisions they take. When a community is forced to perform its ethnicity in order to remain in the reckoning, then this performance is not so much a show of their agency as it is proof of their marginalisation. In this sense, festivals can be seen as assertions of difference and of self-worth in the face of existential threats of being subsumed by the Assamese, (or more immediately by the Nepali and the Singpho), by Christianity, or of being rejected by the Nagas. Hence festivals also reflect a sense of insecurity and nervousness.

Tangsa society, as I analyse it in the eight chapters of this study, is in flux. However, unlike a regular predictable oscillation following Leach's (1954) *Gumsa-Gumlao* model, there are no predictions that one can make in the Tangsa case; different segments are pulling in different directions, evolving in different ways, transforming into different and separate entities. What is more, contrary to the theory forwarded by James Scott (2009), I demonstrate how the valleys and plains dwelling Tangsa in Assam are in many senses relatively less 'developed' economically, in terms of their education, as well as otherwise in comparison to many of their hill-dwelling relatives in AP. I argue that this is mainly because they are also relatively less advantaged in Assam, due to the different ways in which the two states of Assam and AP handle their tribal populations. The incentive structure is different in AP because of the way 'tribal' politics works in the scheduled tribe majority hill state. Therefore the contexts are different, and this makes the Tangsa also perform their identity at festivals differently in Assam than in AP.

The Tangsa case is a good instance to observe the twin forces of consolidation and fragmentation in action. While ethnically and politically, the different Tangsa groups try to come together under a common banner, in terms of religion there is an ever-increasing splintering amongst the Christian denominations within the Tangsa. And as I demonstrate with the example of the Hakhun Tangsa community, a section of the leadership is trying to forge a special identity for themselves, even while remaining under the broader Tangsa umbrella. These processes are neither uniform nor do they have the same effect on different parts of the Tangsa whole.

And while this tendency amongst the Tangsa to splinter and divide might be an impediment towards formation of a pan-Tangsa identity, their fractious character is in some sense part of their identity, just as it is for the Naga. Moreover, it is this tendency that forces Tangsa community members to be creative with regard to construction of their common identity. It also permits them to participate in the production of their own image, by being selective about which elements of their traditions to revive, which to abandon and which to reinvent.

As already mentioned, festivals are not only shows of self-confidence, they also reveal an inherent diffidence; they are attempts at conformity rather than just flaunting difference. The professed culture is no longer something simply practised but something also performed. Furthermore, I claim that the surprisingly thin cultural and ritual content, and casualness with which these festivals are organised, is not accidental; the Tangsa in Assam are just too few in number and too deeply divided and too weakened by various problems -- they cannot do

much better. But they still need to perform their identity in whatever way they can in order to make themselves visible and remain in the reckoning. This also pays off for some individuals on certain occasions. But these are small gains compared to the bigger problems that afflict Tangsa society.

Most of all, what some Tangsa decide to do at festivals and how they go about doing it reveal the marginality and insecurity that small groups such as the Tangsa have to face on an everyday basis, so much so that a sense of being victims, of being victimised, can become a part of their identity. Festivals can best be understood as platforms where such communities attempt to turn the very facts of being discriminated against and of being forced to perform their ethnicity, into instruments for securing special privileges and concessions for themselves, hence subverting the dominant discourse to serve their particular ends. But these acts do not only give evidence merely of their ingenuity or of their ability to strategise, they also reveal the helplessness and desperation of such small communities in Assam, that are constantly haunted with the fear of being further marginalised or of being completely annihilated altogether.

In summary, this work is first and foremost about analysing and interpreting a range of strategies Tangsa individuals use to gain agency and to resist marginalisation. Next, it is about how Tangsa leaders go about constructing a new pan-Tangsa ethnic identity which is both modern as well as traditional, analysed through how they (re)present themselves at festivals. This study is also about discovering how 'culture' is sought to be preserved, by reinventing it first, if required, to fit new definitions and then articulated. Finally, I also seek to explore and expose the role that significant 'others' of the Tangsa, notably the state and the larger communities around them, have had in influencing the above processes as well as in forcing the Tangsa into a precarious position of vulnerability and insecurity. This is the position where they find themselves at present and from where they are being forced to speak up for themselves to secure their place in the future. In this sense, their performing their ethnicity at festivals is not so much a sign of their agency as it is of their marginalisation.