Origins and Migrations in the Extended Eastern Himalayas

Edited by

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BRILL

LEIDEN · BOSTON
2012

MICRO-MIGRATIONS OF HILL PEOPLES IN NORTHERN
ARUNACHAL PRADESH: RETHINKING METHODOLOGIES
AND CLAIMS OF ORIGINS IN TIBET

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INTRODUCTION

The topic of origins and migrations has frequently featured in descriptions of the hill peoples of the far eastern Himalaya. This interest not only reflects looming, unanswered questions posed by outside observers about where many of these populations originated. It also reveals the currency of interest in, and claims about, these same issues among local communities throughout the region. Unfortunately, most existing writings on this topic are unsatisfactory in that they offer only very speculative and sweeping—in terms of time and space—reconstructions based primarily upon claims found in local oral narratives. As a counter to this approach, herein I will be advocating thorough investigation of exactly how and why hill populations actually move from place to place in this part of the Himalaya, as well as the use of data derived from a broad array of sources. A case study of local population movements within the northern Subansiri River catchment of Arunachal Pradesh is offered as an example of a non-speculative approach to understanding migrations in the far eastern Himalaya, one that opens up different types of questions and hypotheses from those suggested so far. I am introducing the term 'micro-migrations' here to describe the types of human movements in the region that my data demonstrate, and also as a way to break with the existing discourse on 'migrations' in the far eastern Himalaya.

Local oral narratives and scholarly writings which discuss the origins and migrations of hill peoples of the far eastern Himalaya often share the same propositions. Firstly, both types of sources tend to plot routes of migration between an assumed original homeland area or origin place and a present-day dwelling location; direction of movement and itineraries are of shared importance here. Secondly, they both claim identification of contemporary populations with their purported ancestors from past times and distant places, with implicit and explicit claims of ethnic continuity. The occurrence of these shared propositions is no mere coincidence. In most texts on the topic, local oral narratives and their discourses have

simply been adopted and uncritically incorporated by scholars into their writing. In more elaborate cases, local oral narratives about origins and migrations are articulated with written histories and cultural or linguistic data. Instances of this can be found in various treatments of the Adi complex of central-east Arunachal Pradesh by Sachin Roy, Tai Nyori, and Jogendra Nath, or in Robert and Betty Morse's study of the Rawang further to the east.[1] Examples of a less sophisticated order abound in the literature on many of the hill peoples of Arunachal Pradesh.[2]

While it is not uncommon for scholars to incorporate local oral narrative data into their accounts, this process itself demands both theoretical considerations and methodological cautions; neither seems to be much in evidence in the writings I am drawing attention to here. The status of oral narratives as historical data is of course a crucial issue when discussing a region in which almost all the languages of the diverse hill populations lack a script, and where the penetration of organised states and their discourses, practices and institutions is an experience only of the past two or three generations in many places. Among scholars who study hill populations in India's northeast, research approaches to oral narratives tend to be quite firmly divided. On the one hand, local and regional scholars from India widely endorse oral sources as both valid and valuable for recording or reconstructing 'historical facts' with virtually no reservations.[3] On the other hand, the few western scholars working in the same region emphasise ongoing theoretical debates about oral sources, the cautions needed when using them, and their inherent limitations. This latter view holds that while local oral narratives may in some cases be used to reconstruct past events, their main importance lies in understanding the contemporary social contexts in which narratives are spoken or circulated, and their role as a strategic and adaptable resource for certain types of societies, such as non-literate hill peoples.[4]

A second unsatisfactory aspect of existing writings on origins and migrations of the hill peoples in Arunachal Pradesh is the poverty of sources they employ beyond repeating local oral narratives. A minor exception is that some authors have also introduced particular readings

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[1] Roy 1960:11-7; Nyori 1993:chapt. 2, and his map on p.59; Nath 2000:11-27; Morse & Morse 1966. On the actual arguments put forward in these sources, see Blackburn 2003/4.

[2] For recent examples, see Riddi 2008, Pegu 2008, Mibang 1998, and for earlier examples, Bhattacharjee 1972, Dhasmana 1979:21-23 and Shastri 1969.

[3] For instance, see most recently Bath 2008, Bhatttacharjee 2008, Billorey 1997, Biswas 1997, Borang 2008, Rikan 2008, and Singh 2008.

[4] For instance, see Blackburn 2003, Blackburn 2003/4, Huber 2010, and Scott 2009:chapt. 6$^{1/2}$.

of regional history to frame oral narratives; the use of secondary sources on early Tibetan history and the Bön religion to support claims of the origins of local hill peoples in neighbouring Tibet being a case in point.[5] Clearly, the evidence that has most often been ignored or omitted by writers is that which can demonstrate what happens on the ground, that is, reliable and verifiable data revealing how, why, when and where real people actually move through the eastern Himalaya. Such information about human movement might come from a number of sources: the recording of direct observations made over time (in written reports, statistics, photographs, maps, etc.); oral reports by eye-witnesses that can be confirmed or cross-checked against alternative data; material traces, and so on. These types of sources that can inform us about population movements are more abundant than one might imagine for eastern Himalayan regions.

CASE STUDY: MICRO-MIGRATIONS IN NORTHERN SUBANSIRI[6]

People and Region

I will now briefly discuss movements that I term micro-migrations. These are movements that have been made by various small highland communities who have been living in the northernmost parts of the Subansiri River catchment of Arunachal Pradesh, India, and sometimes also just to the north of the de facto India-China border zone[7] (figure 5.1).

I will have most to say about the Mra, an exogamous mono-clan community, but will also mention their near neighbours, the Na and Nilo, as well as the clan-cluster dwelling around the present-day Naba settlement, which includes small numbers of Ngoju, Bai, Puri, and Kyali clan members. With the sole exception of the Na, who partly reside in the administrative unit of Taksing Circle on Indian territory and partly in the Doyü (Doyou on Chinese maps) settlement of the Chayül region of southern Tibet on Chinese territory, all these clans are presently located

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[5] See, for example, Blackburn 2003/4:23-25 for discussion of the 'Tibet hypothesis'.

[6] Since 2006, the research upon which this case study is based has been conducted within the project *Between Tibetanization and Tribalization: Towards a New Anthropology of Tibeto-Burman-Speaking Highlanders in Arunachal Pradesh*, funded by the Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft, Bonn.

[7] The post-1914 McMahon Line between Tibet/China and India has become highly contested and militarized since 1959, and is perhaps better described as a 'zone'; the now common Indian term Line of Actual Control (LAC) points to the highly contingent nature of any border in the region.
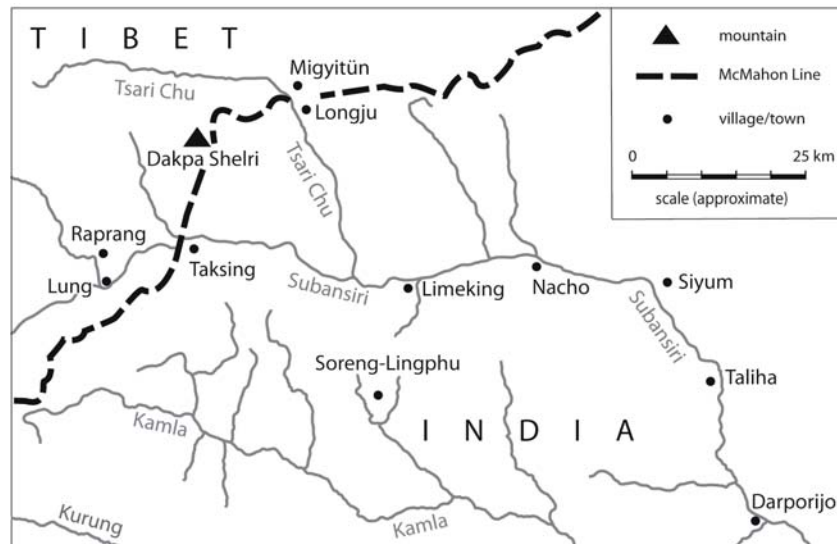
Figure 5.1. Map of the northern Subansiri region.

within Limeking Circle on the Indian side of the border. Each of these communities contains between 200-400 persons living primarily in small, scattered settlements. There is every indication that their populations have remained relatively stable over the period that living memory can report, or for which lineage reconstruction is possible and census data available. All the communities are speakers of closely related Tani languages/ dialects (see the chapter by Post in this volume).

The Mra and their neighbours are typical of hill societies found throughout the far eastern Himalaya both before and after the advent of the modern Indian and Chinese states in highland areas during the 1950s. They were and still are mainly engaged in swidden cultivation, hunting and gathering wild food. Cross-border trade with Tibetan partners was very important to the Mra and Na prior to the Sino-Indian border war of 1962, after which it came to a halt. More recently, a few northern Subansiri households also have access to a cash income by way of employment in a limited number of government posts, or from temporary contracts with state agencies (building or maintaining local infrastructure, firewood collection, etc.), as well as starting small private businesses. According to the Government of India, all the communities living in northern Subansiri are officially classified as members of a Scheduled Tribe known as Tagin, although the application of this identity label is an administrative invention dating from the 1950s only.

In reality, local clan and phratry identities are all that count within the region today. The name 'Tagin' is used with outsiders for convenience of recognition and strategic positioning within the state system.[8]

One significant common feature of these northern Subansiri peoples is that their own origin and migration claims differ from the closely related ethnolinguistic communities who live further downstream in the same region. These northern groups mainly stress their initial descent to earth from ancestors in the sky,[9] followed by a migration off of the Tibetan Plateau southwards to their present locations. This contrasts with many other neighbouring Tani-speaking groups who stress the trickster figure Abo Tani as their originating ancestor (see both Blackburn and Aisher in this volume). Mra and their neighbours also maintain the narrative theme of migration and settlement generated by the social dynamics between sets (often pairs) of siblings—often brothers, sometimes incestuous brothers and sisters—a theme which recurs throughout much of the extended eastern Himalyan region (see chapters by Aisher, Blackburn, Gaenszle, McKhann and Wellens in this volume).[10]

Sources

We are able to reconstruct a certain number of micro-migrations that the peoples of northern Subansiri made over a period of approximately the past one hundred years. This is possible because the upper catchment of the Subansiri and its main tributary the Tsari Chu, and the peoples living in and using the area, regularly attracted the attention of outside observers for a variety of reasons. A major Tibetan Buddhist pilgrimage, the Tsari Rongkor, regularly traversed a section of the areas occupied and used by both Mra and Na; due to this, until 1956, both groups usually

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[8] The Na are the only local group to have actively contested the Tagin label, having petitioned the Arunachal Pradesh state government several times for Na (or 'Nah') to be recognised as a separate 'tribe'. This is now recognised at the state level of administration, but not formally at the national level.

[9] Descent from the sky narratives of various types are maintained by specific societies in what appears to be a distinctive zone of the eastern Himalayas. In western Arunachal Pradesh, they are spread from the Mra and Na area of northern Subansiri westward among the Levai/Bangru and Pukoik/Sulung in northern Kameng, in groups within the Monyul Corridor including Hruso/Aka and Bugun/Khowa, and into eastern Bhutan among ancient Dung (gDung) peoples, such as the Ura; see Huber 2010:308-9, n.18, Aris 1979:125-26, Deuri 1982:47, Kennedy 1914:1, Pandey 1996:15. Notably, most of these peoples speak non-Tani languages, namely those presently classified within Hrusish, Kho-Bwa and East Bodish by van Driem (2001, II:473-481, 908ff.) and others.

[10] On such narratives among the Mra and elsewhere, see Huber 2010.

received a form of tribute from the Tibetan government in Lhasa.[11] The Tibetan border settlement of Migyitün used Mra land at Longju for cultivation and thus Tibetans paid taxes to the Mra until 1959, while the Longju area marked the approximate position of the McMahon Line, and so both Tibetan and British observers collected information on the area and its inhabitants. The area has a very high rainfall, with complex vegetation communities and stark ecological transitions between wet Himalayan and dry Tibetan Plateau zones. It thus attracted the visits of a number of British naturalists, who also reported what they saw. Northern Subansiri was one of the last politically autonomous regions within the claimed boundaries of independent India to be penetrated and incorporated into the new state. As a result, we have a long series of Indian records beginning with reports of the 'first contact' expeditions of the mid-1950s up until the 2001 Census of India and the current Electoral Roles. When I surveyed all of these sources together with extensive oral history interviews that I conducted among local clans between 2002-2008,[12] I was able to discover and cross-check movements into, out of, and around the region as a whole. The results of my research are summarised chronologically in the sections to follow.

Movements

1. Displacement due to Local Conflict

The first significant population movement in the region appearing in our records was due to several conflicts between Tibetans and the Na, a people whom the Tibetans refer to as Lungtu Lopa or Khalo.[13] The first conflict, which was triggered by disputes over trade monopolies, took place in 1906, when 146 Na were killed by local Tibetans from Chayül and troops from the Kurab Namgye Dzong. The Na had originally resided at Lung on the Subansiri River (Chayül Chu), about 8 km above the McMahon Line on the Tibetan side. This conflict dispersed the Na, and by 1919 the survivors had settled around Taksing, approximately 15

[11] See Huber 1997, Huber 1999.

[12] Elsewhere (Huber 2010), I have dealt extensively with local oral narratives that explicitly report notions of origin and migration among peoples of northern Subansiri. My study concluded that such sources vary according to the social location and interests of the tellers, the intended recipients, and the context of delivery, and that without an intimate knowledge of this context and the various languages involved, local oral narratives have very limited value for understanding migrations.

[13] See Huber 2011, for a complete discussion of the sources on the Na-Tibetan conflicts and Tsarong Sharpé's activities in the area.

km downstream from Lung along the Subansiri and technically on the British Indian side of the McMahon Line as it appears on the maps. A second Tibetan military action against the Na at Taksing led by Tsarong Sharpé Dasang Drandul (1888-1959), commander-in-chief of the Tibetan army, followed at the beginning of the year 1920 with subsequent actions several years later. These attacks on Na were partly related to Tibetan attempts to establish experimental tea plantations in northern Subansiri, and partly due to violent conflicts which accompanied the 1919/1920 Tsari Rongkor pilgrimage. Once again the Na were dispersed, and by the late 1920s or early 1930s, the remaining Na population had resettled as two separate groups, one at Raprang, about 7 km above Lung on the Char Chu River, and the other around the Taksing area once again. These two Na populations still exist around the same sites today, on Chinese and Indian territories respectively.[14]

During the late 1920s, the warrior Mra Pusing, who was then the local 'big man' among the Mra, and his clansmen from the Tapuk lineage, had a feud with the Migyitün Tibetans. When Mra Pusing and his party were ambushed at Longju, Pusing, two of his followers and some female servants were executed by the Tibetans. This set in train a series of retaliatory killings of local Tibetans by Mra. Prior to the feud, Mra Pusing and his clansmen had maintained a small settlement at Longju just to the south of Migyitün, mainly to enable trading and to enforce their claims over land in the area for use of which the Migyitün Tibetans paid them an annual rent or tax. Following Pusing's execution, the Mra at Longju were displaced back down around the area known as Gelling Sinyik, near the confluence of the Tsari Chu and Subansiri, a distance of approximately 25 km.[15]

It is worth emphasizing here that such complex political relations between Tibetans and groups of hill peoples in northern Subansiri, and at other points along the frontier between the Tibetan Plateau and far eastern Himalayan highlands, can readily be traced back centuries prior to the examples given here by using Tibetan historical documents. Thus, we can have confidence that these have been much older and ongoing processes throughout the region.[16]

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[14] Following Chinese occupation of Tibet, the Na who remained at Raprang after 1962 eventually moved upstream about another 7 km to Doyü (Doyou on the Chinese maps).

[15] Mra Pusing's story was first recorded from his daughter-in-law by Gita Krishnatry in 1956, about 30 years after the events it describes (see Krishnatry 1956:entry for 5 March, "Lemeking-Ging"). Almost identical oral versions are still maintained by senior Mra males (interviews: Nyamen Mra, Logam Mra, April 2006; Bekab Mra, Taser Mra, Decmber 2006), and Tibetan informants from Migyitün (interviews: Wangdu Dorje, Wangdu Gompo, February 2007).

[16] Events in the Tsari-northern Subansiri area (see Huber 1997, 1999, 2011) offer an

2. Bamboo Flowering and Migration

Around 1950,[17] a major bamboo flowering event occurred in the Subansiri gorges throughout the whole of the area inhabited by the Mra, the Nilo and the clans around Naba, as well as many areas further downstream. The bamboo species concerned was *Schizostachyum arunachalensis*,[18] locally known as *tok*, which is particularly abundant around Naba and areas downstream. All *tok* plants in any given area flower only once but do so simultaneously in mass flowering events after long intervals of 40-50 years; the last recorded (and remembered) *tok* flowering in Limeking Circle was in 1997-1998. Such flowerings are well-known for their profound ecological consequences.[19] Flowerings produce enormous quantities of bamboo seeds—and *tok* has large seeds compared with other local bamboos. Seeds are consumed by jungle rats, which then breed rapidly due to the sudden availability of high quality food. When the seeds germinate and are no longer available to rats as food, mass infestations of these rodents then migrate into adjacent areas where planted crops, granaries and human habitations are located, and they consume every type of edible foodstuff in an area, which leads to human famine. High rodent numbers can also result in the outbreak of plague-like illnesses that infect human populations.

The *tok* bamboo flowering event around 1950 in northern Subansiri resulted in both famine and disease for many local communities between Siyum and Naba, causing deaths and migrations out of the area. Although all Mra settlements also experienced an infestation of rats, they were

example reflecting phases of Tibetan religious, political and economic expansions along the frontier which we can document back four or five centuries with certainty, and that highly likely go back at least eight centuries, if not more. Tibetan conflicts with Dung (gDung) peoples in southern Tibet and subsequent Dung migrations into Bumthang, Tawang-Monyul and other places south of the Tibetan Plateau are events datable with certainty to the mid.-14th century; see Ardussi 2004, Aris 1979:chapt.5. As historical scholarship develops, we are likely to have more such examples available.

[17] Among eight eye-witness informants, the dating of this bamboo flowering varied between 1946, 1949, 1950 (four reports) and 1951. Northern Subansiri peoples had no pre-modern system for numbering years, thus calculating Western calendar equivalents is often impossible. Bamboo flowering events and earthquakes are the two main 'remote' chronological reference points used by my elderly Mra informants to calculate their ages.

[18] I thank Dr. R.C. Srivastava, Botanical Survey of India, Itanagar, for kindly identifying my specimens.

[19] Bamboo flowering events in northeast India take place across 2 calendar years: flowering occurs after the monsoon (Sept.-Oct.); seed shed continues from December into May the following year; seed germination then commences in June when the monsoon begins, at which time seed is no longer available to rodent seed predators, and they move en mass into adjacent areas of cultivation and human habitation to seek food; see John and Nadgauda 2002, Nag 1999, Kumar and Pathak 2000.

buffered against its effects since they practiced little cultivation and instead derived their income mainly from trade with both the Tibetans and their partners in the Kamla Valley. The Kamla peoples, who experienced no bamboo flowering and the food crisis it entailed, continued to supply the Mra with all their staple food grains. The higher altitude Na area of Taksing was not affected at all by the crisis. Thus, the upstream Mra and Na territories were seen by refugees from Nacho and Naba as the only possible place to try and survive, and over one hundred persons from downstream clans (including Puri, Bai, Ngoju, Kyali, Serrah, Rai, Chokkar, Nalo, and Singming) eventually migrated up the Subansiri and resettled around Nilo, in the Mra areas of Nyaré and upper Ging on the south bank of the Subansiri, at the abandoned Mra site of Longju on the Tsari Chu which they resettled, and in Na areas around Taksing. A few migrants also went higher up into Tibetan areas when recruited as porters and labourers.[20]

The resettlement distribution of these migrants during the mid-twentieth century bamboo flowering was not random. Individuals and households from downstream clans who already had established contacts through friendship, marriage or trade relations with Nilo, Mra and Na went directly to their respective partner families seeking permission to move into nearby jungle and live by swiddening, gathering and hunting, or to join the domestic labour force as porters ferrying trade goods back and forth to Tibetan settlements. All of these migrants were displaced back down to their home areas again during the Sino-Indian war of 1962 along with most of their Mra and Na hosts. However, their dozen years living among Mra and Na resulted in quite a number of new marriages to Mra and Na partners. This was significant since Nacho and Naba clans were the least favoured marriage partners among Mra and Na prior to this time. Additionally, a number of these migrant households returned back to Taksing after 1983 and were absorbed into the Na community where they still live today.

3. Movement via Slave Trading

Slave trading was a normal part of economic life among the communities of northern Subansiri. The practice was only effectively brought to a halt in the region by the Indian administration during the mid-1960s. The trade throughout northern Subansiri gradually moved almost all

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[20] Interviews: Chabé Cheddar, Jay Cheddar, March 2004; Tamey Ngoju, Logam Mra, Yaming Cheddar, March 2005; Talok Mra, March 2006; Yayak Mra, November 2006; Tabin Puri, Bekab Mra, Taser Mra, Nyamen Mra, "Bai Tara" February 2007.

enslaved persons northwards towards the Tibetan border. Downstream slaves generally entered Mra and Na possession in two ways: as part of economic transactions involving Tibetan goods being traded southwards/ downstream; or as part of negotiated settlements for marriage contracts and compensation payments to resolve disputes. Mra households tended to keep few slaves during the mid-twentieth century since they were viewed as a potential security liability in maintaining the travel and trade blockade against downstream communities. Thus, most slaves acquired by Mra were traded directly up to Tibetan buyers at Migyitün. The Na, on the other hand, not only traded slaves into Tibet but kept quite a few in their own domestic labour force.

While slaves could originate in neighbouring communities, the vast majority were persons from more distant communities who had been initially acquired as kidnap victims or prisoners during raiding, or who had already been passed on one or more times between a series of adjacent groups as payment for trade deals and negotiated settlements. Detailed data is available on slave holdings by the Na settlements around Taksing for the period when the Indian government first contacted the area,[21] and this provides a good impression of the distances that slaves had been forced to migrate away from their original home areas. In 1957, Na households kept a total of 63 slaves (28 male + 35 female) who were identified as Bangni (32), Sulung (i.e., Puroik) (23), Tagin (7), and Tibetan (1). At least 41 of these slaves (Bangni and Sulung) are recorded as originating in the Khru Valley. At its closest, the Khru is 50 km as the crow flies from Taksing, a pre-modern land journey which would entail crossing at least two major ranges and one major river valley and passing through numerous separate clan territories.

While many slaves were integrated into the household structure and worked and lived alongside other household members, they were subject to various social and ritual restrictions. Low status[22] slaves could not marry into local clans and could only marry other slaves. Certain slaves who were from highly regarded families or lineages (typically kidnap victims or prisoners of war) could become socially integrated via marriage and permanently join local communities. Slavery was also intergenerational since the offspring of established slave families within a household also served their owners. Thus, through such mechanisms, many slaves subject to forced migration into northern Subansiri became

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[21] Sailo 1957:Appendix "C".

[22] 'Low status' in this context refers specifically to persons who were Sulung/Puroik, or from known poor families (and thus not worth having alliances with), or from the families or lineages of known enemies.

long-term or permanent residents. While all Na domestic slaves were freed by the government after 1965, a separate community consisting entirely of former Sulung/Puroik and Bangni slaves still resides in the Na area today.[23] One informant who resided at Taksing for 4 years during the early 1950s reported that Sulung/Puroik males from the Khru Valley voluntarily migrated to Na settlements where unwed Sulung/Puroik female slaves were being kept in order to marry them and to join the Na domestic workforce.[24] Thus, slavery could also generate voluntary migration.

4. Patrilocal Marriage

Another significant form of human movement throughout the region has resulted from marriage practices. The Mra have always been an exogamous community, and almost every married woman in all Mra households has migrated in from elsewhere. In larger polyganous households, one could find co-wives from three or four completely different regions. Similarly, virtually all Mra girls who married would migrate out to new patrilocal households in other distant areas. Prior to the 1970s, preferred Mra marriage alliances were nearly all arranged with trading partner communities and immediate strategic allies. Brides were exchanged especially with clans in the Soreng-Lingpu area of the Upper Kamla River, with the Na clans settled around Taksing, and less so with the Nilo and the Naba clans immediately downstream. Soreng-Lingpu was three days travel southwards from Mra lands across the high Ketch Pass, Na was three days travel westwards up the difficult Subansiri gorges, while Nilo and Naba were only one day's travel away down the Subansiri. Each of the distant clans with whom the Mra preferred to exchange brides also maintained several additional favoured communities with whom they in turn forged alliances via marriage, and who themselves all lived even further afield. Every elderly Mra woman I interviewed knew at least the home place of her mother and grandmother—but occasionally also great-grandmother. It is thus easily possible to trace how arranged patrilocal marriages with constellations of favoured partners continually moved women through a series of adjacent areas and also mixed each community via matrilineages.[25]

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[23] This is Redding village in Taksing Circle, with a population of 63 persons in 14 households during 2001; see Directorate of Census Operations 2006: village no. 00185000.

[24] Interview: Tamey Ngoju, March 2005.

[25] Fürer-Haimendorf 1947:84 gives evidence of family and community migration between marriage partner groups in the Mengo-Panior region during the mid-twentieth century.

5. *Labour Migration*

With the incorporation of Mra and Na territories into the Indian state during 1956-1957, administrative headquarters (H.Q.) were established at both Limeking and Taksing. Each H.Q. consisted of an Assam Rifles post, a civil administrator and his support staff, with various agencies to build and maintain mule and porter tracks and bridges up to the McMahon Line boundary zone, plus supply depots for airdrops, and other facilities. At the time of the initial 'first contact' expeditions into the area during 1956-57, and prior to any direct contacts with the northern Subansiri populations, the Indian state had to rely on recruiting large numbers of local labourers from settlements further downstream of Limeking Circle to work as porters, guides, track-cutters and runners. These peoples, from areas such as Nacho and Siyum, had never or only very rarely ever visited the upstream areas due to the travel and trade monopoly with Tibet that the Mra had enforced for their own economic benefit. There was thus a history of mutual hostility and competition between the Mra and their downstream neighbours in Nacho and Siyum. Yet government penetration into the Mra area now meant that down-stream groups could travel freely into the upstream areas due to their employment as labour corps for the administration. At the same time, the Mra were resistant—and mostly refused—to be engaged as menial labourers for the government because they had been enjoying a superior economic and political status due to their relations with Tibet vis-à-vis other clans. They considered such work fit only for slaves. This meant that government agencies came to rely almost entirely upon porters and labourers from the poorer downstream areas of Nacho and Siyum. Initially, all such local government staff were merely transient residents at Limeking H.Q. However, by the late 1960s, many Nacho- and Siyum-based workers moved to and settled in Limeking.[26] They resided there in houses they erected on small plots of land loaned to the government by Mra belonging to the Runyu and Runya lineages upon whose swidden area the Limeking H.Q. was established. Many of these workers married and had children, and these families still live in Limeking today.[27]

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[26] Interview data is confirmed in the Census of India 1971; see Barthakur 1972:45-54,70-71, 104-05, 108, 112-13: The total Scheduled Tribe (ST) population of Limeking H.Q. was 97, with 78 males and 19 females (note that in Mra villages sex ratios are close to even); total 'workers' was 110 male and 11 female (including non-ST persons), of whom 5 male and 11 female were 'cultivators' (note that in Mra villages 'cultivator' is the only recorded occupation for all workers), and 105 males were listed as engaged in 'other services'. The surplus of male ST non-cultivators in these figures are non-Mra labourers settled at Limeking.

[27] The extent and origins of these non-Mra Scheduled Tribe residents in Limeking H.Q.

Labour migration has had specific social effects upon the Mra population. One development has been due in part to the presence of the children of migrant labourers from Nacho and Siyum alongside Mra children in the only government school in the area established at Limeking H.Q. in 1973. Parallel to the existence of the school, and other social factors, a strong increase in preference for love marriages has developed since the 1970s. A number of Mra love marriages in recent decades have been with partners from Nacho and Siyum migrant labourer families whom the Mra partners met and got to know as co-students in the Limeking school. Previously, Nacho and Siyum clans had been among the least favoured marriage partners for Mra arranged marriages.

6. International Conflicts and Temporary Migrations

Chinese military occupation of the Tibetan Plateau throughout the 1950s eventually resulted in a mass migration of Tibetan refugees south across the McMahon Line into Indian territory during 1959. Refugees from Tibetan border villages adjacent to the Subansiri who where trading partner communities for the Na and Mra sought and were given refuge among them. Thus, Chayül Tibetans became settled with Na at Taksing and Tsari Tibetans were settled with Mra at Ging. The Indian government permitted this settlement, and the Tibetans desired it. All parties needed to wait and see how the situation would develop, and there was initial hope that it might be possible for the refugees to return home again before too long. Any hopes of return were dashed in 1962 when the Sino-Indian border conflict began to break out along the McMahon Line, and all the refugees who had migrated into northern Subansiri and remained there for 3 years had to move southward ahead of a Chinese invasion. They never returned to the region again, being resettled in official refugee camps in far distant locations.

   With the 1962 Chinese invasion south of the Himalayan watershed, including the Tsari Chu and northern Subansiri valley down through the whole of Taksing and Limeking Circles, many Na, Mra, Nilo and Naba inhabitants migrated out of the area either down the Subansiri Valley to Taliha and Darporijo, or southwards across passes into the Kamla Valley where there were no Chinese troop movements. The remaining Mra deserted their settlements and migrated upwards into the dense

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is clear from the clan names from Nacho and Siyum Circles on the current electoral role, especially Singming, Siyum, Rai, Nacho, and Ebiya: see Electoral Registration Officer 2008:2-9.

forests on the higher slopes of the main Subansiri Valley. There they were well removed from the actual fighting between Indian and Chinese troops, which mainly occurred along the strategic government trail and around administrative centres like Limeking next to the river. Messages dispatched by both armies had made it known that neither side wanted to involve or harm the local population in any way during the conflict, provided they did not take sides and stayed out of harm's way. Thus, Mra refugees only needed to wait out the short war in the high hills, where they easily survived by harvesting wild sago palm and tree fern pith and by hunting game. These refugees returned back downhill to their settlements along the river within weeks of the Indian retreat from the area, to be warmly welcomed by the temporary Chinese occupation force. Those Mra who had fled down to Darporijo with the Indian troops or crossed into the Kamla Valley to shelter with their affines and trading partners were slower to return and in some cases stayed away from Limeking Circle for up to 6 months before moving back to their homes. Almost all the movements by local individuals and families in and out of and around the area during this period were transitory, and residential status quo was restored once again within half a year.

7. Roads, Resettlement and Migration

One of the most profound and accelerating population movements throughout the eastern Himalayas in recent decades has been due to infrastructure development in the form of new roads extending into highland areas. While the increasing southward flow of rural migrants out of middle hill villages and down to growing administrative and commercial townships in the valleys and lower hills is a well-known phenomenon in Arunachal Pradesh, such migration has to date not taken place in northern Subansiri to any significant degree. The main reason for this local lag behind the regional trend is that the first road only reached Limeking H.Q. a decade ago, and it has yet to be connected to Taksing H.Q. Nevertheless, the presence of the new road caused immediate micro-migrations to occur throughout Limeking Circle in the form of settlement relocation.

Up until the first Indian government administrative penetration in 1956, the main Mra trade route through the area up to the Tsari Chu and Tibet followed along the north bank of the Subansiri River. Apart from a few households of the Runyu and Runya lineages, all Mra maintained their settlements on the north bank since the south-facing slopes there provide sunnier sites for dwellings and swidden plots, not to mention

a series of rock bluffs which allowed for highly defensible settlement locations in case of surprise attack. While this last strategic advantage ceased to be important after the Indian administration took control of the region, most Mra swidden plots continue to be worked on the sunnier north bank even today. The Indian government chose Limeking, on the south bank, as its administrative H.Q. for two reasons: it was the only open site in the otherwise steep, heavily forested upper valley where airdrops could easily be made and recovered; and it possessed a small, flat area for conversion into a helipad. Thus, the porter and mule track to supply Limeking and points north was constructed along the south bank of the Subansiri to reach Limeking without the need for expensive and difficult bridge building across the main Subansiri. The new road of today follows this original government supply track along the south bank. As soon as the road got near to Limeking during the late 1990s, all north bank Mra settlements began to relocate themselves across to new locations on the south bank.[28] Today, Mra abandonment of the north bank is virtually complete, with only a few lone households remaining there, and each of these is now serviced by its own durable hanging bridge and thus better connected with the south bank than at any time in the past. The readiness and speed with which this movement of dwelling occurred is not surprising when one considers that Mra and their near neighbours have no history of constructing permanent dwellings or using fixed village sites. The main reasons for Mra migration across the Subansiri to the south bank are—as in so many similar communities throughout the highlands—the local wish for direct and easy access to transportation possibilities, goods and services, and new economic opportunities which the road has brought with it.

Complex Micro-Migrations

In this attempt to move beyond speculative and narrowly sourced discussions of origins and migrations among hill peoples of the eastern Himalaya, the types of data I have employed will never allow us to probe very far back in time. Nevertheless, the data can tell us with certainty about why, where and when specific hill peoples have actually moved

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[28] Interview data is confirmed by the both 1991 and 2001 Census of India. The 1991 map of Limeking Circle still marks Muri and Mepu, the major Mra settlements on the north bank of the Subansiri, as 'villages with a population size below 200' (Senapati 1995: Limeking Circle) while the 2001 map of Limeking Circle marks them (along with 'Orak Camp', formerly also on the north bank) as 'uninhabited villages' (Directorate of Census Operations 2006:90, map 24 (II)).

with a historical depth of about 100 years. The first four examples of movement I presented, those involving local conflicts, bamboo flowering events, slave trading and patrilocal marriage practices, are all phenomena we can safely assume have a longer history of occurrence throughout the region. The remaining three examples, involving labour migration, international conflict and road-building are all effects of modern state formation in the region and clearly have no direct parallels in the first group of examples. However, if we consider the ways in which the hill peoples under study here have responded to all of these different phenomena—whether pre-modern or modern—in terms of their movements, some commonalities are evident. What we see in responses to these various push and pull factors are generally small numbers of individuals or smaller-sized groups moving relatively short distances, that is, movements I characterise as 'micro-migrations'.[29] We also find that such micro-migrations are not only simple or unidirectional: some moves can be temporary, with return back to the original sites occurring; temporary movements can produce a social—not to mention a linguistic—'residue' in the form of persons remaining behind at a temporary residence when others return to original sites of departure; also persons can flow in two or more directions as part of processes of socio-economic exchange, such as marriage and slaving, and so on.

The century of known movements of northern Subansiri peoples presented in our case study equates to a complex whole in terms of their number, causes, distances, directions and destinations, and participants. This complexity contrasts strongly with the longer distance, unidirectional, *en masse* types of movements of hill people that have been described or assumed so often under the heading of 'migration' in the literature on the eastern Himalayas. Furthermore, in social terms, the results of all the movements documented above indicate long-term processes of ongoing mixing and diffusion, rather than the maintenance of any essential and tightly bounded ethnic corporate, such as the monolithic 'tribes' who populate the recent literature on Arunachal Pradesh. Another departure that our results take from the existing literature concerns the nature of push and pull factors. When a reason has been put forward to explain the migration of a particular eastern Himalayan group, one of the most common proposals by various authors is 'increase in population' and perhaps a subsequent 'search for new land'.[30] At least for northern Subansiri (see

[29] Here, one might compare Fürer-Haimendorf's 1955:160-61 observations on small-scale, gradual movements of population which he termed 'infiltration' in the Mengo-Panior region during the mid-twentieth century.

[30] For examples, see Nyori 1993:41, Bhattacharjee 1972:23, Bhattacharjee 1983:14, Roy

also the Bokar of northern Siyom below), we know that these factors have not played any role in precipitating micro-migrations.[31]

Rethinking Claims of Origins in Tibet

Our case study of the known movements of northern Subansiri peoples in relation to the neighbouring Tibetan Plateau should also cause us to challenge a persistent claim in the existing literature that many of the highland 'tribes' of Arunachal Pradesh must have had their origins in, and migrated from, Tibet.[32] Authors making this claim mostly base themselves upon local oral narratives collected from hill peoples in the region. As a clear example of many such claims in the scholarly literature, we find the respected linguist Tian-Shin Jackson Sun stating, "A number of facts suggest that the Tani speakers represent relatively recent waves of Tibeto-Burman migrations to Arunachal Pradesh…First, the migration routes recorded in the oral traditions of many northern Tani tribes, such as Ramo, Bokar, Tagin, and Simong, point unambiguously to southern Tibet as their original habitat."[33] Other writers also freely interpret such narratives of migration using speculative readings of an older generation of largely superceded scholarship on the early history of Tibet, the Tibetan Bon religion, and so on.

   Our data reveal that small groups of hill people managed, when necessary or to their advantage, to migrate back and forth between lower hill and valley areas and higher altitude sites along the southern margins of the Tibetan Plateau. Such migrants came from societies of swidden cultivators and hunter-foragers with a material culture based heavily upon bamboo and other sub-tropical forest products, and dwelling in an altitudinal zone of ca. 1300-2500m. However, they were able to relatively easily adapt to living at altitudes up to around 3500m by selectively borrowing from and adapting Tibetan material culture and productive systems—typically in terms of dwelling construction, clothing and

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1960:17, Sarkar 1999:1-2. All such statements can only be speculation, since there was no usable demographic data for the entire eastern Himalayas prior to the 1960s.

   [31] All peoples of northern Subansiri regularly rotate their use of swidden plots around different areas; however these rarely result in residential migrations, and the rotation cycle is fairly fixed and predictable as far back as we can ascertain. Hence I do not consider them as micro-migrations.

   [32] Blackburn 2003/04 reviews most of these sources.

   [33] Sun 1993:10. Here Sun refers to Sachin Roy's oft-cited 1960 work Aspects of Padam-Minyong Culture, which seems to have played a key role is shaping the 'Tibet origins' discourse among scholars, based upon Roy's particular presentation of oral narratives.

Figure 5.2. Partly Tibetanized Na living near Taksing, northern Subansiri
(photograph by L.R. Sailo, 1957).

animal husbandry. While we have only discussed the Mra and Na (see figure 5.2) here in our case study, other parallel examples of such small, adaptive migrant groups can also be found along the entire far eastern Himalayan-Tibetan Plateau interface. Like the Na population of today, many of these transient frontier groups became divided between India and China after 1962, and now live separated on either side of the contested international border.

Another such case I know of firsthand is that of the Bokar people of northern Siyom, who developed small and often semi-permanent enclaves in neighbouring Tibet along the Neyü Phu Chu just north of the Dom La pass, mainly in order to trade with nearby Tibetan settlements.[34] Bokar adopted certain aspects of Tibetan dress (e.g., heavy woolen cloth,

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[34] By the mid-1950s, there were 15 small Bokar hamlets in the Neyü Phu Chu across the Dom La pass; Haldipur 1957: 'Political' annex following p.52. These people are often depicted as examples of the 'Lopa' ethnicity (Chinese: Luobazu) in Chinese publications about Tibet (see the photographs in Cai Xiansheng 1981:144-7), although they only represent one of several quite different ethnolinguistic groups encompassed by this blanket but official *minzu* classification. On the political and economic relationship between the Bokar of northern Siyom and Tibetans, see Huber 2011:264-65.

Figure 5.3. Bokar man wearing Tibetan wool tunic and *nalong* earrings,
Monigong, Siyom (photograph by Toni Huber, 2002).

and jewelry), albeit worn according to their own particular style[35]
(see figure 5.3), and many spoke some Tibetan language. However,
Tibetans maintained a strict pre-modern marriage bar towards Bokar,
which—together with trading—ensured a regular circulation of people
up and down between the southern Monigong and northern Neyü Phu
Bokar settlements.

As a result of their Tibetan outposts, the Bokar became rather unique
among neighbouring Tani-speaking hill peoples in the region prior to
the 1960s in adopting a simple form of Tibetan diary production. Dairy
products are in fact a culturally proscribed (*ari*) food for the Bokar
themselves, and not traditionally consumed; the butter they produced
was solely for trade and tax payments to their highland Tibetan neigh-
bours. In addition to material culture, linguistic evidence provides
another enduring and typical marker of strategic adaptation by such
forest-dwelling, swidden cultivating hill peoples of Arunachal Pradesh
to higher altitude Tibetan Plateau enviorments. During fieldwork in

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[35] See figure 5.3. Bokar men always wear pairs of the Tibetan gold/silver and turquoise
earrings known as *nalong* (*rna long*) in southern Tibet. Whereas Tibetan men only wear a
single *nalong* in their left ear, it is Tibetan women who always wear a pair. Similarly, the
Tibetan sleeveless tunics made of heavy, dark wool and belted at the waist which Bokar men
wear are primarily a woman's garment in neighbouring Tibetan regions to the north.

northern Siyom (2002), I discovered that the Bokar, who have a Tani language highly cognate with those of all their hill-dwelling neighbours, and one rich in terminology for swidden cultivation and hunting, have borrowed virtually all of their vocabulary for diary production directly from neighbouring Tibetan.[36] Between 1959 and 1962, due to political tension and military action, some Bokar living north of the Dom La pass migrated southwards back onto Indian-controlled territory, while others remained in Chinese-controlled territory. Other, very similar examples of such pre-modern, shifting frontier populations can also be found scattered along the Tibetan Plateau-Arunachal Pradesh interface north of the Kamla River, in the upper Siang River, and around the Mishmi Hills region.

Thus, rather than scholars uncritically claiming (and accepting local claims of) the origins and past migrations of eastern Himalayan hill peoples from Tibet on the basis of a handful of oral narratives, we can now propose a much more sound hypothesis based upon our current knowledge. In the past, some groups could indeed have migrated from the southern fringes of the Tibetan Plateau to their present territories in neighbouring highland regions of Arunachal Pradesh. However, such moves would have been part of longer cycles of *shifting back and forth between higher and lower sites* in response to a range of chang-ing conditions, including known economic, political and ecological factors of the kind we have presented in our examples above. We can historically prove that certain factors propelling these movements are many centuries old in the region (i.e., political relations), and safely assume that others (i.e., recurrent ecological events) are too. Such move-ments back and forth between higher and lower sites, as we have ample evidence for in northern Subansiri, northern Siyom and elsewhere, do not offer any explanation for the origins or "original habitat"—to use Tian-Shin Jackson Sun's phase—of highland Tani-speakers and their hill neighbours on the Tibetan Plateau. Nevertheless, local memories of more recent movement phases down from Tibetan areas southwards may have indeed been preserved in the surviving oral traditions which various authors have exclusively focused upon when claiming origins in Tibet for highland peoples in Arunachal Pradesh.[37]

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[36] For example, Bokar have borrowed *ba lang, o ma, mar, mar khal, mar phye, mdong mo, 'o mdong* and other terms for dairy production from neighbouring Tibetan speakers.

[37] For example, it is hardly surprising that peoples in the Siang River basin here reported they came 'from the north', given the known history of regular incursions down the river by Tibetans and their Tibetanzied agents, which usually triggered displacements; see Huber 2011.

This single case-study of northern Subansiri hill peoples cannot be simply simply generalised for the entire the entire eastern Himalayas. However, it does demonstrate the value of a different and more sophisticated method of documenting and understanding origins and migration in the region. A focus on relatively recent history within a limited geography enables us to look at the detailed and textured pattern of population movements and their causes. As small populations living right along the frontier, groups such as the Mra, Na and Bokar might be viewed as somewhat atypical, yet patrilocal marriage, bamboo flowering events, slave trading, armed conflict and new roads have all been common to the expereince of most groups throughout the region. Similar studies of micro-migration may also help us to build up a more accurate picture of distant events and identify their underlying causes throughout the extended eastern Himalayas.

Appendix: Romanized Tibetan Names and Proper Spellings

Char Chu	byar chu
Chayül	bya yul
Chayül Chu	bya yul chu
Dom La	dung la
Khalo	kha klo
Kurab Namgye Dzong	sku rabs rnam rgyal rdzong
Lhasa	lha sa
Longju	lung mjug
Lung	klung
Lungtu Lopa	klung tu klo pa
Migyitün	mi khyim bdun
Neyü Phu Chu	gnas yul phu chu
Raprang	rab 'phrang
Tsari	tsa ri
Tsari Chu	tsa ri chu
Tsari Rongkor	tsa ri rong skor
Tsarong Sharpé Dasang Drandul	tsha rong zhabs pad zla bzang dgra 'dul

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