



**From Hybridity to Singularity:  
The Distillation of a Unique  
Buddhist Identity on the  
Borderlands of South and  
Southeast Asia**

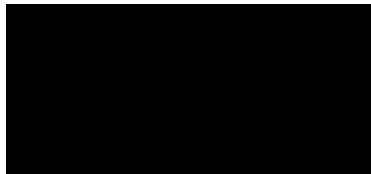
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## **Abstract**

The thesis is an exploration of identity on the borderlands between South and Southeast Asia. Specifically, it establishes the nature of the cultural distinctness of one of the largest ethnic groups in the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT) in Bangladesh. The thesis presents the historical processes behind the hybridity of this ethnic group and how it eventually came to be under one self-identifying label - the Marma. The study employs various approaches to understanding the creation and reproduction of identity. From the maintenance of the boundaries of culture to the processes at work within culture through concepts such as creolization, syncretism, and entanglement. These latter theories point towards a fluid process of reconfiguring and recasting of structure or creating order from chaos, in response to changes in the environment. The research also explores other essentially different approaches that have similar conceptual outcomes, such as the theories that stress that traditional practice and ethnic identity are invented afresh according to present historical contexts and in response to both internal and/or external pressures. These different approaches help to piece together the various components of Marma cultural identity. The ethnographic data is presented in three parts with each section drawing upon the relevant theories to examine the field data on the Marma group. The thesis contributes a detailed monograph on the study of borderland cultures and demonstrates the value of applying several lenses to the study of identity in complex areas of the world.

Keywords: Marma; Chittagong Hill Tracts; Bangladesh; Buddhism; Burma/Myanmar; Ethnic Identity; Invention of Culture; Hybridity; Syncretism; Entanglement; Borderlands; Migration; Zomia

## Impact Statement

This anthropological research project at UCL illuminated the different ways of exploring identity processes for one minority ethnic group in the complex environment of the borderlands. The research employs a gamut of ethnographic tools and theoretical approaches to unpick the processes of cultural reproduction and constant reinvention, demonstrating the benefit of transgenerational research, observation of rituals and the narratives around material culture. The result is an in-depth study across time where no such study has taken place before in the region. The research is of importance to academia as the project grapples with not how groups on borderlands become entangled and assimilate with other groups and the nation state but how some groups work on boundaries to do the exact opposite. To both differentiate, demarcate and through these processes, achieve legitimacy and some freedom in an otherwise highly militarized and politicized zone.

The findings from this research will offer potential new insights into the struggles faced by borderland ethnic minorities in both Bangladesh and Myanmar. The insights into the Marma community and their work on boundaries as a Buddhist group in a majority Muslim nation inversely mirrors the experience of the Rohingya Muslim minority in Buddhist Myanmar. For example, the research will raise awareness of the Marma group's challenges of surviving in a region where the centre - the nation state - no longer recognizes the ethnic groups in the peripheries as separate ethnic entities, but rather as a non-Bengali non-Muslim buffer zone to India and Myanmar.

Working with material culture and capturing the group's narratives on film has meant that the story of this group has reached a wider international audience. In 2018, The World Gallery exhibit in the Horniman Museum (London) displayed Marma material culture - the coin garland and marriage bracelet - alongside other objects from throughout the world and in the context of climate change, migration, and displacement. The short 15-minute documentary "To Be A Marma" was created in collaboration with an independent film-maker and was awarded *Inspiration in Research in Film* by the Arts and Humanities Research Council in

November 2020. Both the museum exhibit and the film has helped to disseminate knowledge on the Marma community to a wider and more international audience.

Finally, this thesis is an example of how an ethnography can work towards decolonizing a research project. I am a Bangladesh-born anthropologist studying minorities on the borderlands of my native country. This led me to reflect on my role as ethnographer when writing about 'another culture' from a semi-insider point of view. I have an emotional connection to the region, sharing some of the same history and language (Bengali) with the people of study. By drawing on local literature and helping the Marma people to lead the narrative on their history and lived identity on the borderlands - both in the thesis and on film - this research has helped a little towards decolonizing ethnographic research.

## **Acknowledgements**

This research was originally made possible due to the help and guidance of Professor Willem Van Schendel. Thanks to him, I developed my first insights into the region and was introduced to Prashanta Tripura who then gave me my initial orientation experience in Bandarban town. I would like to express my gratitude to Shwe Aung Prue and Rob Stoelman for organizing my host family and base in Bandarban district and for much needed advice and discussions. My special thanks go to Sai Sing, his family - including his monk grandfather - and his musical circle of friends for incorporating me into the spiritual and joyful rhythms of their lives. I am extremely grateful for getting to know Lily, Kai and Dauki, and that we eventually became good friends.

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My thanks also go to Jerry Allen for sharing much of his experiences of the region, to Fiona Kerlogue (Horniman Museum) and Ed Owles (Postcode Films) for the

exciting projects around material culture and film that helped to make the Marma narrative take on another life beyond the written word.

Back home in London, I am grateful for the invaluable guidance, energy, and support of my supervisors at UCL - Dr. Allen Abramson and Professor Roland Littlewood.

For Sami and Hana

“History seems to do more than describe beings to us from the outside, or at best give us intermittent flashes of insight into internalities, each of which are so on their own account while remaining external to each other: it appears to re-establish our connection, outside ourselves, with the very essence of change.”

**Claude Lévi-Strauss in *The Savage Mind* (1950)**



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of a Unique Buddhist Identity on the  
Borderlands of South and Southeast Asia**

# **Part 1:**

## **The Project, The People, and The Lens**





## Chapter 1: Introduction to Thesis

Borderlands have received much attention from scholars in the last 30 years as they became central to political and academic debates around globalisation, migration, and security. In Europe, for example, the expansion of the European Union, the collapse of the Soviet bloc, the shaping of new nations, and the mass movement of peoples from east to west and south to north, are but some of the factors that have not only transformed borders in Europe but also stimulated new kinds of scholarship around it. Anthropologists have been part of these efforts, specifically focussing on the cultural effects of globalisation and movement on border cultures. Moreover, anthropological research has studied identity and identification to understand the ways in which people negotiate the frontiers that seem to separate and join groups of people who express similar or different notions of being and belonging. Studies on identity explore concepts such as hybridity, creolization, multiculturalism, and post-colonialism (Hannerz 1987; Thomas 1991; Latour 1993, 2005; Herskovits 1937; and M. Scott 2005). Some border studies in anthropology employ the issues of identity and cultural change as windows into wider processes in the political and economic systems of the nation states that meet and often overlap in the borderlands.

This thesis is an exploration of identity of one ethnic group - the Marma - who live on the borders between Bangladesh and Myanmar. The thesis will focus on a region called the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT) which has experienced different groups migrating to the area, pushing out or rubbing alongside earlier migrants, whilst being governed by different external political powers over time. James Scott in *The Art of Not Being Governed* (2009) describes these types of borderlands as the “shatter zones” of Asia. In these areas, few anthropologists have studied identity in great depth, and those ethnographic monographs that do emerge from the region point to ethnic groups that are constantly adapting and slowly assimilating to each other or the majority culture. In contrast, and as part of the process of identity formation, the Marma community appear to be accentuating

their differences rather than their similarities to other groups in the region. In fact, through this and other processes, the Marma people seem to have distilled over time a unique identity of their own. This thesis will contribute to the debate on identity on borderlands but specifically on the process behind how hybrid groups develop a singular identity that help to differentiate themselves from other groups in complex and fluid regions of the world.

## 1.1 The Project and the People

I was born in Bangladesh, or East Pakistan as it was then, and my family left the region towards the end of Bangladesh's War of Independence in 1971.<sup>1</sup> In 2013, I visited the Chittagong Hill Tracts in Bangladesh for the first time in 20 years to begin the fieldwork. On my previous visit to the CHT in 1993, I travelled the country on holiday as a young adult and met for the first time the Chakma people in and around Rangamati. The area was off-limits to foreigners but as a Bangladesh-born citizen, I was able to travel the area unhindered. What struck me then was the contrast with 'mainland' Bangladesh with its expansive, flat delta and densely populated towns and cities. The CHT, in sharp contrast, was sparsely populated with 15 ethnic groups living in small rural towns and villages scattered across a hilly jungle landscape. Moreover, the people in the hill tracts looked, dressed, and acted differently to the Bangladeshis that I had encountered.

Returning in 2013, the contrast was if anything even greater. Departing from Chittagong, by then the second largest city in Bangladesh with a population of circa 4 million, I travelled to Bandarban town in the CHT which at the time had a population of approx. 32,000.<sup>2</sup> The district of Bandarban in the CHT and Bandarban town is home to approximately 11 ethnic minorities (Uddin 2010). In and around Bandarban town, alongside the numerous mosques calling Bengali Muslims to prayer, stood several Arakan-style<sup>3</sup> royal palaces built by various Bohmong *Rajas* - chiefs or kings – and an impressive Golden Buddhist temple of

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<sup>1</sup> A bloody secessionist struggle against West Pakistan, which was fought along ethnic and linguistic lines, costing 3 million lives.

<sup>2</sup> <https://worldpopulationreview.com/countries/cities/bangladesh>

<sup>3</sup> I will be using *Arakan* often in this thesis. *Arakan* was an independent kingdom for most of its history. It was also ruled by Indian kingdoms and Burmese Empires. Today, the territory forms the Rakhine State in Myanmar.

another ethnic group called the Marma. My first impressions of Bandarban were like that of J. P. Mills in 1927:

“To one who has become used to the Bengali atmosphere of the Chakma and Mong circles, to visit Bandarban, the headquarters of the Bohmong, is to enter a new world. It is pure Burma, with yellow-robed priests, Bhuddhist temples and a populace clad in Burmese dress of all the colours of the rainbow. There Bengali culture is disdained as something alien, and all regard Burma as their spiritual home. This clear-cut and striking difference between the Bohmong’s circle and those of the Chakma Chief and the Mong *Raja* cannot be too strongly emphasized.” (Mills 1927: 75)

When staying with a Marma family in a compound of five households, I experienced even more interesting juxtapositions. This Marma family spoke fluent Bengali<sup>4</sup> to non-Marma visitors, so it seemed that Bengali had become the lingua franca of the region. They spoke Marma to each other, a language that has a written script which mostly the elder members of the family know how to read. The family loosely followed Bengali eating customs and mealtimes, but the content of the food was very different to a typical Bengali meal: fried strips of wild boar, river oysters, bamboo shoots and many soupy cabbage dishes. There was a photo of the Prime Minister of Bangladesh - Sheikh Hasina<sup>5</sup>- in their communal rooms. However, tucked away in the most private rooms of their homes was a family Buddhist shrine.

The Marma dress style was Burmese in origin and the envy of the other ethnic groups of the CHT who seem to have either adopted Bengali clothes – a sari or shalwar kameez – or tribal renditions of Bengali-style clothing. I came to learn that Marma people practice ethnic endogamy: a custom of marrying within the limits of the clan or ethnic group. Inter-marriage with tribal groups, if they were Buddhist, was tolerated but Muslim marriage partners was frowned upon. I was also informed of the most recent scandal in the royal family when the daughter of the Bohmong *Raja* (King) had married a local Bangladeshi Muslim who was also an officer in the Bangladeshi army. There were riots and protests against the marriage, but the Bohmong *Raja* ultimately stood by his daughter’s decision.

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<sup>4</sup> In this thesis, I will be using the term “Bengali” in reference to language and ethnicity, and Bangladeshi to denote citizenship of Bangladesh.

<sup>5</sup> Sheikh Hasina Wazed is the current Prime Minister of Bangladesh, and she has been in office since January 2009.

During this first visit to Bandarban, I became acquainted with the history of the Marma people. My understanding came from both oral history accounts and from a huge Bohmong family genealogy chart that stands as a museum object, prominently positioned at the entrance of the local Tribal Cultural Institute (TCI) in Bandarban town. When I came back to London, I checked the Marma migration narrative against the historical reports of J.P. Mills (1927, 1931) to the British Government concerning the CHT, archived in the India Office Records at the British Library. I discovered that the Marma history that I had heard was also recorded history in these official documents.

As part of this historical account, I observed that the Marma group are Buddhist but were originally made up of different ethnicities from Burma – Burmese, Mon, and Arakan – who through various waves of migration, had settled in the Bandarban district to be ruled by a long line of Bohmong chiefs. The Marma people are an ethnically hybrid group that share common values, eating customs, marriage rules, religion and they speak dialects of the same language. Consequently, the group has managed to give the impression, despite their hybridity, of having a singular identity.

A key marker that differentiates the Marma from other ethnic groups in the CHT as well the mainland Bangladeshis was the bedazzling amount of gold or shininess in the landscape in which they lived. *Alan raung*<sup>6</sup> or the shininess of power could be seen everywhere in the landscape, radiating from certain people and from objects and rituals. From the huge structures of glittering golden stupas within and around Bandarban town, to specific sacred sculptures such as the golden bell hanging from a golden dragon at the largest Golden Temple. To the shininess of clothing and props around funerals of both revered Buddhist monks and senior members of the royal family. The royal sword with its glittering golden hilt that is handed down from generation to generation of Bohmong chiefs. And finally, to the shininess of the coin garlands given to brides on their marriage day to protect them during widowhood and divorce.

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<sup>6</sup> There are two Marma words to describe shine: 'taukte' and 'lanre' with an additional 'al' to mean strength or power. 'Alan raung' can cover both shine and power. The root of these Marma words relate to Rakhine or Burmese language.

“Shininess” seemed to represent “an undetermined quantity of signification” for the Marma people in the way ‘floating signifiers’ can be void of precise meaning but be available and thus apt to receive any resonant meaning.<sup>7</sup> In sum, the group appeared to employ “shininess” to acknowledge the radiance and reach of their Buddhist faith, the legitimating shininess of material objects that gave power to the royal family and the protective shininess of bridal gifts in marriage.

I was fascinated by the Marma people, the pride in their historical roots but more importantly, how they appeared to maintain a singular cultural heritage, despite their ethnic hybridity, whilst living alongside different ethnic groups in a majority culture that was very different to theirs.

## 1.2 General Research Approach

The hypothesis of the thesis is that the Marma community appears to have responded to living on the borderlands by not assimilating to the dominant Bangladeshi group or to the mix of neighbouring cultures. Instead, the Marma people seem to have undergone a cultural process of distilling, revisiting, reproducing, renewing, and consolidating a Marma identity - directed by the royal family - that sits at the core of their cultural life. Presumably, this explains why the ethnic community give the impression of an eternal group with deep rooted claims to a Marma homeland in the CHT, whilst setting themselves apart from other groups in the area.

The thesis will explore the long history of the community to illuminate the forces and processes that led to the creation of a Marma identity, which continues to this day to differentiate the group from other ethnic groups in the region. The thesis will examine historical and ethnographic data to understand the resilience and creativity of the Marma people and the more recent resources employed to help negotiate their existence in a rapidly transforming environment. The thesis will develop an approach to studying the identity of one ethnic group on the

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<sup>7</sup> “I believe that notions of the *mana* type...represent nothing more or less than that *floating signifier* which is the disability of all finite thought...” (Mauss and Lévi-Strauss 2003: 63).

peripheries of the State and contribute to the existing body of literature and theories on identity on the borderlands.

## 1.3 Setting and Methodology

### 1.3.1 How My Ethnicity Affected Fieldwork

Since I was born in Bangladesh, I did not require a visa or permission to carry out research in Bangladesh as a whole. However, I was required to inform the local police and the army about my plans and movements throughout the research period.<sup>8</sup>

It was not easy to gain the trust and acceptance of the community. For the Marma, being Bangladesh-born meant that although I spoke very broken Bengali, I also represented the majority culture which was historically seen to be oppressive to minorities on the borderlands. I was perceived by some as representing the State and therefore the Enemy. However, the people who came to know me understood that I had never lived in Bangladesh and that I had spent most of my life in the UK and Europe. Moreover, the world of East Pakistan - before Independence - was a time of peace and stability and seen by the Marma as a happier time. After independence, mainland Bangladesh experienced successive military rulers whilst the minorities on the borderlands suffered military occupation.<sup>9</sup> Overall, it appeared that the people I worked with had stepped over the uncomfortable fact that I was a Bengali Bangladeshi, believing instead – or choosing to believe instead - that I was one of the acceptable ones that left before independence and was therefore untainted by what had happened afterwards.

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<sup>8</sup> In order to stay in Bandarban, I needed permission from the local power structures such as the Bohmong *Raja* and the District Commissioner. I presented a letter from University College London and from the Horniman museum in London, detailing my objectives for the research and requesting that the Tribal Cultural Institute of Bandarban assist with my work.

<sup>9</sup> In 1991, an independent fact-finding commission - the Chittagong Hill Tracts Commission - described the Chittagong Hill Tracts as "a military occupied area. The military dominates all spheres of life." As a counter-insurgency measure, there is a large number of armed personnel in the Hill Tracts, and the human rights violations in the area have been attributed in large measure to their continuing presence. In 1980, an estimated 30,000 regular and paramilitary troops were stationed in the Hill Tracts and the number of police stations doubled in the four years from 1976 to 1980. Inevitably, the presence of the armed forces in such large numbers has provoked conflicts and tribal people feel intimidated by the armed presence.

Interestingly, during my first visit to BD, the news was dominated by the trials of former perpetrators of the 1971 Bangladesh War of Independence. Many of my Marma informants would include me in the discussions around the trials as if I was also part of their cultural experience.<sup>10</sup> The biggest issue that I faced was the fact that I was born a Muslim. This appeared to be at the forefront of people's minds as I was offered on numerous occasions "the pork and *arrack* test". *Arrack* is locally brewed rice wine which is drunk on social and ritual occasions and the local pork was a rice-fattened wild boar. If I were truly not part of the majority enemy State, I would sit with the Marma and drink *arrack* and eat fried sweet boar. No Bengali Muslim would do this. This test emerged often in the company of both young and older members of the community and, since I am not a practicing Muslim, I stepped up to the challenge. Moreover, when my family came to visit the region for the Sangrai Water Festival in April 2014 and for one of my informant's weddings, the fact that my husband was Dutch also helped counter the anxieties about my Bengali heritage as they had not seen an ethnically Bengali woman in a mixed marriage before.

There were some advantages in being a "cultural semi-insider" (Tsuda 2015: 14-17). I could speak and understand Bengali but most importantly, I could see what was Bengali and what was Marma in their cultural practice. For example, fried sweet pork aside, the Marma people had assimilated more food eating patterns than they had probably realized. They ate at Bengali times which was late at night, the portions of rice were huge compared to their South Asian neighbours and they ate with their hands – not with chopsticks or spoons as would be expected from a Burmese origin group. Dishes that they called Marma pitas (cakes) were Bengali pitas, as I had grown up with them in my own household. However, I was told with total conviction that they were local Marma traditions. It was interesting to note that whilst rejecting all things Bengali Bangladeshi, somethings Bengali had become part of the Marma cultural food script over time.

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<sup>10</sup> "People are busy looking back and feeling the pain and trauma of the 1971 War of Independence. The Shabag movement is an example of this – a lenient verdict on a war criminal from 40 years ago sparks off a revolution in Shabag square in Dhaka. It spreads to the CHT. The country is still dealing with its past and not getting on with the problems of now." (Fieldnotes 12<sup>th</sup> December 2013 - Butcher of Mirapur or Abdul Quader Mullah – is hanged in Dhaka.)



### 1.3.2 The Field Site

My ethnographic study of the Marma envisaged 12 months of fieldwork between November 2012 and December 2014 in Bandarban town in the CHT. As a mother of two young children, I choose to break up my fieldwork into three stints so I could return to London regularly. The advantage of a broken-up period of fieldwork over a longer time frame allowed for the possibility of continuously reviewing the findings, developing new questions, and finding new ideas to follow up on, as well as providing ample time for reflection.

When selecting the field site for this research, I was advised to work in the Bandarban district and then specifically in Bandarban town. Both the Mong and Chakma districts of the CHT were experiencing a rise in insurgencies, the ambushing of vehicles on major roads in the CHT and hostage-taking of Bengalis and foreigners. From a security standpoint, staying in Bandarban town was the safest option as both the military police and the local police could watch over me, which they did in a fastidious manner.

Bandarban district is part of the Bohmong Circle and the dominant ethnic community in the capital, Bandarban town, is Marma. The Marma are also the second largest minority group in the CHT and they live not only in the Bohmong Circle but also in the Chakma Circle (Rangamati area) and Mong Circle (Khagrachari) as well as the coastal areas of Cox's Bazaar. The Bandarban district is widely claimed to be the most peaceful in the Hill Tracts. Local people put this down to the fact that in addition to the Golden temple, there are three older Buddhist pilgrimage sites in this district which house sacred Buddha relics that were transported to this region during the migration from Pegu (now Bago) in Burma in the 1600s. Moreover, because of historical circumstances and the legacy of British protection, the Marma community in Bandarban have managed to maintain a system of governance that gives the district the appearance of a semi-independent kingdom. This together with its reputation for peacefulness has meant that Bandarban district is referred to by Bangladeshis and other tribes in the area as 'Little Burma'.

Apart from the in-depth work of Lucien Bernot on Marma rural life (Bernot 1967b), there is little ethnographic detail on the Marma community in Bandarban, and no recent anthropological research has been conducted due to the CHT being closed to foreign visitors for over 30 years. In order to understand Marma cultural strategies, the methodology of the fieldwork was planned to provide a wide range of information on everyday life in the Marma community. The main sources of data which contribute to identifying the core Marma practices come from informal and structured interviews around objects, genealogy, the observation of rituals and primary source literature.

### **1.3.3 Introductions and Experts in the Marma Community**

Even though I am Bengali born, the people of Bandarban greeted me as *Ang ley ma* which means English lady. Some members of the 15<sup>th</sup> Bohmong family could speak English but most were trained in 'Bangladeshi medium' and could only speak Bengali and Marma. Those who knew English were pleased to practise their English on me.

In the very initial stages of the fieldwork, learning the Marma language, staying in a household (my Marma host in Bandarban), and employing a local field assistant helped me to get a foothold in the locality. Language learning was a key activity during the first six months of fieldwork. Although I was able to use broken Bengali to communicate in the CHT, I realized that speaking Bengali would not take me far enough. Most people understand Bengali but women especially have difficulties in expressing themselves in this language and the Bengali they knew was often a local dialect of Bengali called Chittagonian. I worked on learning simple Marma terms so that I could take part in daily greetings and basic exchanges. It seemed that part of my initial acceptance into the community was because I enjoyed wearing Marma clothes and made the effort to learn Marma phrases daily.

Since I was perceived as a Westerner and at the same time, also from the region, I felt that it was important to have access to a good cross section of the community that were Marma. I sought out royal family members across the

generations to hear different generational voices on the same issues. Moreover, having access to cultural experts to discuss ritual steps and meanings, furthered my understanding of the community's identity-making over time.

I was introduced to the area via a young man called Sai Sing who was at the time a local education officer. He not only organized my accommodation, Sai Sing also organized various trips into the surrounding countryside in search of Marma objects for the Horniman museum in London.

Khoka Sir is a senior secondary school teacher and local historian and one of the very few Christian Marma. We met twice to discuss the history of the Marma people and about the waves of migration into the area. He also presided over 2 Bohmong installation ceremonies during field work: that of the 16<sup>th</sup> Bohmong who ruled for only one year, followed by the 17<sup>th</sup> Bohmong.

Princess Lily (34 years) is the granddaughter of the late 15 Bohmong Aung Shwe Prue Chowdhury. I met Lily and her mother at the house *puja* at my compound. Lily confided in me about her family grief: she had lost her only brother in a swimming accident; and her sister to a forbidden marriage with a Bengali Buddhist. Lily was working for a government institute on climate change in the CHT area at the time. Together we created a family genogram on the "15<sup>th</sup> Bohmong" family from Lily's perspective. Prince Kai is the youngest son (33 years) of the second son of the 13<sup>th</sup> Bohmong. He is also the youngest stepbrother of the current 17<sup>th</sup> Bohmong. We made a family genogram on the "17<sup>th</sup> BM family". I met with both Kai and Lily regularly, to chat, sip tea or eat noodles at 6 pm. Whilst I taught them English, they helped me to expand my Marma vocabulary.

Prince Shwe Aung Prue (known as Prue) is about 58 years and is the 3<sup>rd</sup> son of the late 15 Bohmong. He works for UNDP in the CHT and was very helpful in introductions to different Bohmong families and experts on Marma culture. He lives in Rangamati in the Chakma circle. I talked to him occasionally but especially when I needed some distance and guidance on how to approach the royals of Bandarban.

Prince Nue Shwe Prue (46 years) is the youngest son of the 14<sup>th</sup> Bohmong. He is an historian and has travelled many times to Myanmar. I worked with him

intensively to contextualize the Marma people and to write up the history of the Marma migration story.

The Brigadier (60 years +) is also a prince. His father was the son of wife number 3 of the 13<sup>th</sup> Bohmong. The Brigadier was the eldest son of 3 brothers and one sister. He had a great collection of photos on his wall, and some handwritten letters and notes that he had inherited from his uncle – U Tan Prue, who was the eldest son of the first wife of the 13<sup>th</sup> Bohmong. U Tan Prue was educated in the UK and decided to leave the region during the partition of India in 1947 to become an engineer in Rangoon in Burma. I transcribed U Tan Prue's notes and selections of the text will be presented in Chapter 6.

I also regularly consulted two head monks: a royal monk at the *kyang* (temple) patronized by the royal family; and one monk who was called the "people's monk" at the neighbouring *kyang*. Through them, I slowly came to understand more about Buddhism, its role in this community and what practices were specific to the Marma people. I collected data from monks at 3 pilgrimage sites in Bandarban district. These sites were specifically visited by Marma people from all over the Hill Tracts: *Khyangwa Kyang* in Bandarban; *Ching Mrong Kyang* in Ching Mrong Kaptai; and *Rowangchori Kyang* in Rowangchori. It was said that these three temples housed relics from Myanmar that came to this region with the first wave of Marma migration.

I met with the marriage experts and elders at Mro Chyang (Bamboo Stream) village to understand Marma marriage rituals (see Chapter 4) and conducted interviews around material objects in rural areas surrounding Bandarban. Since I had funds to acquire Marma material objects for display at the Horniman Museum, I also negotiated the purchase of tribal objects such as the bracelet from Uyoing Ching who was 55 years old. The bracelet was called *Langajulako*: *lan* (husband), *ga* (protection), *ju* (spikes), *lako* (bracelet). The bracelets were made for a young bride, and they protected her from the beatings of her husband. I also interviewed women around the ownership and value of coin garlands which will be explored in more detail in Chapter 7.

### 1.3.4 Phase 1: Orientation

I moved to Bandarban in January 2013.<sup>11</sup>

“Taxi takes me to VIP lane in Bandarban. Shwe May Prue and her 3 daughters take me to a room and they all watch me unpack and unravel my mosquito net. We agree on a rental price. They are delighted, and the girls start to call me auntie. They then immediately tell me that two of the girls will soon be leaving to join their husbands abroad in Australia and Japan. All 3 girls currently share one bed and will be living next door to my room.” (Fieldnotes: January 2013).

I lived in a compound with a host family, headed by the mother called Shwe May Prue<sup>12</sup> and the father who was an administrator at the Deputy Commissioner’s office. The family were lower middle class and distant relatives of the Bohmong (BM). The compound had 4 other families who were the families of the four brothers of Shwe May Prue. The houses on the compound were also made from a mixture of bamboo and concrete and one house was made purely from bamboo.

Before I could be fully settled in my room, the household of Shwe May Prue arranged a *Pung Ja (puja)* for the house ancestors and the event drew a crowd of locals from the neighbourhood to witness the ritual. The ritual was called *Shotobi Pung Ja* or house spirit offering that would bring blessings to the family. As part of the ritual, women prepared bananas (the small “bangla kola”), coconut flesh, rice flour and sugar cane stalks. These items were blessed by a local spirit priest who presided over the ritual. The men of the house pulped the ingredients to make a drink for everyone to share. The priest then sang old Marma tales of peace in family life and made an offering of candles, cigarettes, and beetle nuts to the house spirit. He invited the house spirits to protect the family, presumably from the threat of my entry and the bad influences I could potentially bring into the compound. Once the ritual was completed, I was welcomed as a lodger into the family household.

My first data collection task was to sketch a map of the compound, the different households in the compound and to understand the shared communal spaces. This map provided talking points within the different households and through interviews, I was able to see the relatedness between the households and how

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<sup>11</sup> In December 2012, I stayed with a family in Bangladesh to improve my language skills. I was able to follow Bengali conversation easily but only speak the language haltingly.

<sup>12</sup> Shwe May Prue means “Woman of White Gold”.

the families fit into a wider kinship structure. During this time, I joined a crowd of early morning fitness walkers who at 6 am, walked along the boundaries of the town which were the banks of the River Sangu and the ridges of the river valley. From many days walking, I decided to create a map of Bandarban town, as none had previously existed.

Through the help of my key contact Sai Sing, I was able to develop a network of interlocutors that included members of the royal family and some voices from the non-royal sectors of society such as local elders, NGO workers, historian teachers and rural women.

### **1.3.5 Phase 2: Data Gathering: Life Cycle and Marriage Rituals**

“A death-defying bus trip sees me weaving through the landscape, 12 hours of high speed over-taking without braking, jolting continuously out of sleep. It takes a team of three men to drive the bus, one person slowing down cars to let the bus slip in. They navigate me through the military post. Swollen ankles, exhaustion. I arrive battered but happy in Bandarban, stepping back in time to 20 years ago. Slower, air cleaner, less traffic. Lily is the same and Shwe May Prue has shrunk in size. Two of the girls are married and living abroad. I’m now in the daughter’s room.”

(Field work report from Bandarban: 21<sup>st</sup> November 2013)

On my second trip to Bandarban, I rented a room with bed and old fashioned *aina* (wardrobe) in the same Marma family. I had access to one gas stove, which I used for heating up water to make a warmish “bucket bath” on the cold winter mornings. My room was in the modern building where the family’s son Mongto lived, who was 22 years old. The lower floor was rented out to a business that sold gas cylinders. I had internet connection in this building. The rest of the family - mother, father and remaining daughter lived in a part brick, part bamboo house on the compound. The family are now considered to be wealthier than the royal family since their two daughters lived in Australia and Japan and had become an important source of funds.

Mongto was my new co-lodger in the block. He was intending to go abroad and whilst waiting, spent his days listening to Hindi loves songs and weight training on the roof of the building. He often spent time entertaining his friends on the roof – an event that was locally called ‘Mongto’s bar’. Once Mongto accompanied me on

a visit to the new Bohmong *Raja*,<sup>13</sup> but Mongto refused to bow to his king. The *Raja* then asked him if he had forgotten what it is to honour. Mongto with great humility bowed several times until the *Raja* told him to rise. Through this incident, I discovered that Mongto's family were not enthusiastic about the royal families because as discussed later in the thesis, the royal family were no longer materially wealthy, and my host family were now well-off due to the funds sent to them by their daughters who lived abroad.

In January 2014, when I returned to stay with the family, I turned my gaze to wider aspects of the society. The first set of interviews was with a local historian and member of the Bohmong family who had researched the history of the Bohmong family. I interviewed the current 17<sup>th</sup> Bohmong on his perspective on their shared history as well as to examine the heirlooms of a Bohmong king. I employed genealogy discussions to elicit stories around the family history and gathered objects that highlighted family and religious identities as part of a grant provided by the Horniman Museum in London<sup>14</sup> and I made a short documentary film (see Appendix F).<sup>15</sup>

## **1.4 Methodology: The Data Generated from Fieldwork**

### **1.4.1 Genograms**

Since this thesis aims to understand how the Marma community has managed to reproduce and maintain cultural boundaries through time, I felt that examining the “transmission of culture” (Stark 2008) within a family life story would help contribute towards this understanding.

The royal family chart positioned at the entrance of the Tribal Cultural Institute was my first introduction into the Marma community. It was created in the 1990s and covers the period circa 1614 to 1996 of the Marma royal family (to be discussed in more detail in Chapter 6). Created by a local historian as a homage

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<sup>13</sup> The 16<sup>th</sup> BM *Raja* had died on my first visit. This was the new *Raja* – the 17<sup>th</sup> BM.

<sup>14</sup> The coin garland collected during fieldwork is now on display at the Horniman Museum in London.

<sup>15</sup> I came to Bandarban with a film director. We had won a grant from an Open City Documentary fund to make a short film on the Marma. This was challenging to organize due to the intense military security in the region. However, since the focus was on the royal family and Marma objects, we were able to carry out the project unhindered.

to the royal descent group, the chart reveals how the royal families in Bandarban were related to each other. It was from this published genealogy that I started a discussion with my royal informants. I met with the current leader - the 17<sup>th</sup> Bohmong - to review the chart in detail as well as to record memories of kingship during his lifetime. This data provided the historical roots of the community. I then proceeded to add a layer of information to the existing chart by interviewing younger members of the royal families. To do this, I employed the tool of genograms – see Appendix A for an example of genogram work carried out with an informant.

The concept of genograms was developed by Estrada and Haney (1998) as visual representations of a dialogue within the family around their family history. It goes beyond the usual drawing of genealogies or family trees because of the extra data captured around members of the family. One key member of the family sketches the family genogram. Once basic family data is collected, the interview changes tack by asking questions that explores systems of meaning. For example, a discussion around deaths, gaps and secrets in the family as well as stories of migration, medical conditions, emotional or mental challenges, religious conversions and family dynamics and coalitions are also noted through symbolic representations in the genogram. The visual representation of the family history is then cross-checked with other members of the family via semi-structured interviews. I applied this approach to two young royals, Kai and Lily, and their genograms added another layer to the official published genealogy of the royals as embodied in the royal chart, helping to update part of the family tree with the next generation's family data.

By working alongside the anthropological interests in kinship, heritage and family networks, family genograms contribute to our understanding of how life-scripts, family myths and a cultural programme<sup>16</sup> can be handed down over the generations. The approach uncovers a life-history perspective that focusses on the transmission of family tradition, customs, beliefs, and behaviours which can

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<sup>16</sup> Cultural programmes include communications of manners, religious practices, gender definitions and role assignments prescribed by wider culture.



occur directly from living relatives or indirectly from absent or deceased relatives. Genograms therefore build on kinship studies in anthropology by moving the study of social relations, insiders, and outsiders to a level of interaction and relatedness within the family system. The approach chimes with the lived experience of Marma families, since it is not uncommon for three generations to be living together in the same compound. Moreover, for the Marma, remembering and honouring ancestors is an important part of their cultural heritage, so a transgenerational approach<sup>17</sup> works well. Genograms are also useful for studying families who have experienced migrations, as this is the lived experience of the Marma, and the effects these factors have had on the process of ethnic identity and intergenerational relationships.

When I interviewed Lily and Kai, there were some restrictions or blockages within their visual representation of the family (see Appendix A). Lieberman (1998) attributes blockages in a genogram as family secrets. These secrets become a way of maintaining a boundary and restricting the flow of information. The older generation have secrets from the younger generation and the nuclear family withholds from the extended family. Family secrets are part of family life, with the restrictions changing as families evolve and new cultural practices become “mutations which mould solidly and permanently into the next generation.” (Lieberman 1998: 3).

In Kai and Lily’s genogram, the blockages were mostly due to the shame of intermarriage with Bengalis and the ostracization that followed. Lily’s sister and Kai’s two sisters had married Bengali Buddhists. These siblings were marked as “dead” on the genogram. Another theme that emerged was cross-cousin marriages of two members of royal blood and marriages between men and other tribal women such as Tripura, Mong and Chakma. In one genogram, the manner of death of a brother provided insights into the cosmology of the Marma people. Lily’s brother had drowned in a lake in Dhaka, far away from Marma town boundaries. His body was buried in an unmarked cemetery outside of the town’s boundaries because of the belief that the body would become a vessel for

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<sup>17</sup> Transgenerational means the discussion of attachments, bonding, responses to losses and replicative, corrective, and skip-generation scripts.

carrying evil spirits into the Marma community. These exclusions and taboos will be explored in various chapters in the thesis.

Another important aspect of the genogram process is to reflect on the effect the interviewer has on the family. As a participant observer in this process, I noticed that I had entered a kinship network as a member of the family, not just the researcher, since I was seen by the younger generation as 'auntie' and by the older generation as 'sister.' As a result, I needed to be respectful towards the power relations within the family and know my own position in the hierarchy. In return, I was trusted with painful and often intimate family stories and became a confidant for the younger generation in particular. This research includes data from the genogram work with the permission of the informants.

#### **1.4.2 Material Culture**

As part of the genogram inquiry, the research asked questions around Marma identity through material objects which were present in the family household as heirlooms or the memory of an object which had been lost, and to elicit a narrative around these objects as vessels of meaning for the family. Narratives around objects according to Janet Hoskins (1998) function to imbue the object with a personal life history and a history of all that came before. Whilst interviewing the family of Shwe May Prue, I asked members of the family if there were objects in their homes that connected them with their Marma culture. One member produced a selection of coins which had been handed down from her mother. We talked about their history and what the coins meant to her; what use the objects would have and how she would explain their value to her daughter when she inherited them.<sup>18</sup> From this initial interview, I was able to understand much about the value that material objects can have for a person, as it is communicated across the generations, and the role of the object in Marma culture.

“Material culture materializes identities, but it is also a medium for understanding the processes by means of which those identities are transmitted.” (Tilley 2011: 348)

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<sup>18</sup> I continued to interview women who collected these coins. They were often kept in “secret places” in the sleeping area or dismantled and buried separately under a tree.

Photos of family members as well as photos of the town and old *rajbari* or palaces before they were destroyed had become part of the biography of the people interviewed, anchored in a landscape that had been their home for over 200 years. Moreover, the destruction of the palaces and the images of that destruction - to be examined in Chapter 6 - elicited emotions that conveyed anxieties around Marma life in the region coming to an end. The photos were handed down from generation to generation as Marma material culture. Because of this transmission, genograms provided a good methodological framework to understanding the emotions around the recounted memories of the palace.

I was interested in the gamut of practices and beliefs that inculcated a sense of being Marma as a result of these practices.<sup>19</sup> Chapter 7 covers the narratives that emerged from interviews on the Bohmong sword and around the coin garland in marriage and its role in protecting women who are widowed or divorced.

#### **1.4.3 Participant Observation and Archival Research**

A variety of techniques have been used to obtain information for this study, but the most important data came from living alongside the Marma people. Participant observation, taking part in daily rituals, ceremonies, and festivities, meant that I was immersed in the culture, watching day to day lives in the compound and witnessing Marma cultural practice. Firstly, I gathered general background data on Marma daily life and life cycle events. And secondly, I turned my focus to specific aspects of Marma life that seemed to differentiate them from other communities in the CHT. I observed Buddhist celebrations, attended naming ceremonies, house *pujas*, and 2 funerals of the royals. Since I was present for the hot and dry wedding season from March to May and before the rains, I attended many weddings.

In this thesis, the data collected from participant observation will be presented in the ethnographic chapters on marriage rituals and the practice of community Buddhist merit-making.

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<sup>19</sup> However, asking questions require the respondent to reflect in order to summarise what the object means to them and who they are. This was not easy as people typically do not spend a lot of time doing this, therefore sometimes responses had little depth.

I had returned to the UK in June to avoid the cyclones in the rainy season in the CHT. Over the summer of 2014, I focused my attention on archival research at the British Library and SOAS<sup>20</sup> library on the history of the Bohmong family. The British Museum has historical images of ethnic groups from this area dating back to the early 1900s which provides a sense of how the Marma people were seen by visitors to this area. The Bohmong family also have a family historian who recorded the history of the family in a book written in Bengali. This process of historical review took two months to complete. This data will provide historical context for the research. The most important primary source document comes in the form of the handwritten notes of U Tan Pru, a Marma historian who described in detail how the Marma people came to be in the region (see Chapter 6). I transcribed these handwritten notes which were written after the partition of India in the late 1940s but also cross-checked these notes against a later publication by the same person (Pru 1994). Secondary data was collected from research papers, journals, magazines, and local newspapers<sup>21</sup> as well as reports from international NGOs working in the CHT.

The approach of using genograms in combination with observations of kinship rules, life-cycle events and rituals and conversations around objects enabled the research to be more narrative-led, and synchronic and diachronic at the same time. It opened-up space to conduct a dialogue between, across and within generations, all of which helped to illuminate the processes at work in the creation of a Marma identity.

## **1.5 Discussion of Methods: Conducting Research under Military Surveillance**

This section examines the success and pitfalls of the methodology when in the field.

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<sup>20</sup> The School of Oriental and African Studies in London.

<sup>21</sup> The news at the time was heavily focussed on two events on the borderlands: 1) The growing Rohingya crisis in Myanmar and the Buddhist groups such as the Marma awaited reprisals from the majority Muslim Bangladeshi population. 2) A TV show called "Bangladeshi Idol" dominated Bangladesh news and social media. One of the contenders and later the winner of the competition – Mong – was a young man who came from and lived in Bandarban town. His victory was a daily topic of conversation in Bandarban, since this was the first time that a small community of 300,000 people in a country of 160 million people was being acknowledged and celebrated.

Studying the Marma group in a militarized CHT was a huge ethical challenge.<sup>22</sup> Until 1998, the CHT was a “Restricted Area,” and foreigners could not visit without special permission from the military. The situation started to become less strained after the CHT peace treaty was signed between the PCJSS and the Bangladesh government in 1997, ending two decades of bloody conflict. But the years of turmoil and killings are still alive in people’s minds and the relations between the dominant Bengali group and the ethnic groups of the CHT remain tense to this day.

I gained access to this region because I was Bangladeshi-born – not a foreigner. Thus, my presence in this region was privileged, even though I continued to feel the tension of my being there throughout my fieldwork.

A few months before I arrived in the area, another British visitor to the region, working for the Bohmong family, was escorted out of the CHT, and blacklisted from returning to Bangladesh. Allegedly, he had been seen taking part in a peaceful demonstration led by the hilly people. Shortly after his expulsion, the NGOs working in the area had also been asked to temporarily leave the Bohmong circle.

Therefore, it was a tense situation when I arrived and consequently challenging to collect ethnographic data using recording equipment. Since I was followed by the security police, interviews in general made my informants feel uncomfortable and unsafe. Quite often respondents whisperingly expressed discontent with the military and shared their anxieties around the future of the Marma group as a Buddhist community in Bangladesh. These conditions could have presented an ethical problem for the research. Thus, safeguarding interviewees from any form of military retaliation became my priority. When I did hear distressing information about military reprisals on the community, I listened with sensitivity and explained to them that their comments would not be included, and their contributions anonymized throughout the thesis.

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<sup>22</sup> Since completing fieldwork, the field site became even more distressed due to the Rohingya crisis.

The key themes that were difficult to research in any detail were: land rights and land ownership; the treatment of tribal women by the Bangladeshi military; and new guerrilla movements that had emerged after the Peace Treaty. To protect the respondents and the Marma community, I kept away from these topics in both the thesis and the documentary film.

I had some initial contact with Princess Nelly, who worked on local gender issues and the Human Rights commission. Through her, I came to understand much about how tribal women were being treated in Bangladesh. However, since she was carefully watched by the local police, I was advised to keep my distance, or I would probably be asked to leave the region in the same way as my predecessor.

During fieldwork, there was much talk about a Buddhist monk in Myanmar called U Ashin Wirathu, who was the face of Buddhist extremism in the region. He led the 969 movement to save Myanmar from the perceived threat of a rising number of Muslims within the country and on its borders. His war on Islam led to an increased number of Buddhist men joining the *Sangha* as monks and being trained abroad. It appeared that U Ashin Wirathu's influence had also reached the CHT.

The Bohmong families were fraught with conflict and internal politics, so discussing family genealogies proved to be a tricky approach. Initially, after my work with younger generations to capture 'their family', I intended to present their genogram to other members of the family for discussion. Kai's family had been fighting for many years to be included in the royal succession register, and Kai had been recognized as a royal prince only a few years before I arrived. His part of the royal family history made discussions around genograms difficult: I was not able to share or cross check his depiction of his family with other members, as the wider family were still recovering from the years of conflict and dispute.<sup>23</sup>

However, working with informants around cultural objects was seen to be a non-political activity. Therefore, I tackled the question of being Marma by talking about

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<sup>23</sup> Moreover, whilst Kai's genogram made him feel part of the royal family, at the same time, the process made him relive the slights to his family.

royal family charts, their history and cultural objects as well as observing life cycle rituals. I tried to stay curious and probing throughout as I was aware that for many of my respondents, this was the first time that a foreigner was researching their culture. The most important insights gained were when I asked this group how they came to be in the CHT. This question almost always resulted in a recounting of the Marma migration narrative, as it was seen - for all the generations - to be an important part of their collective identity.

Ethnographic data often exists in a relatively homogeneous, timeless analytical space – the ethnographic present. However, Marma culture is not a static configuration but an assemblage of beliefs and practices whose parts evolve and change at different speeds, with different effects upon the configuration.

Therefore, the thesis approach is to examine the historical ethnographic past of the group as it helps us to better understand the ethnographic present. The thesis is also concerned with anxieties about the future and how the community are evolving in response to the uncertainties. To conclude, the approach of using historical data, narratives around objects and transgenerational data has enabled the creation of an ethnography of the Marma community that will deepen our understanding of a community that has a unique identity in an ever-changing borderland region in Asia.

## **1.6 Thesis Structure and Terminology**

This thesis will explore how the core elements of a Marma ethnicity and identity have come to be persistently asserted and adapted but also transformed in the fluid borderlands of Bangladesh.

The thesis is comprised of four parts.

In Part One, Chapter 2 will provide contextual background to the present-day Marma community. It will navigate the “choppy seas” (Vigh 2009) of borderland communities by identifying significant landmarks in the history of the region relevant to the main thesis. It will include a study of external forces – the State, the British Empire, and other groups – in their interaction with the Marma group. The

section will also discuss how various communities in the region, almost in a Barthian manner, have created boundaries between each other. Yet during a period of protracted conflict in the region, these same groups buried their differences to speak as one voice - the *Jumma* people.

Chapter 3 explores anthropological perspectives on cultural reproduction and change, including critical discussions on hybridity, the invention of tradition and culture, and structural reproduction and transformation. It will explore how identity can adapt conservatively and progressively to changes in the environment. The theories from this chapter establish the guiding premises of the thesis and provide a variety of lenses to analyse the proceeding ethnographic chapters.

Part Two of the thesis will cover two chapters on kinship and marriage rituals as well an examination of Marma ethnic endogamy. The first chapter on the Marma kinship system covers descent principles, marriage preferences and residence with a section that details the rituals that organize a Marma marriage. The analysis will unpick the complex Marma marriage rituals and their function in perpetuating cultural practice and belief systems. The next chapter will look at how boundaries with other groups are maintained through ethnic endogamy and also outline the contemporary pressures on this Marma practice. It will then conclude with a detailed look at the role of land and inheritance laws in informing Marma beliefs and practice.

Part Three combines both historical and ethnographic data from the fieldwork to study the theme of the “shininess” of kingly power as a cementing force in Marma identity. The first chapter on Marma migration and settlement will explore how the hybrid group has recorded its specific history and will examine the impact of historical events on this community over time. The second chapter will look at the role of material objects, rituals and ceremonies in borrowing and blending in order to tell a coherent story that helps distil a unique cultural form.

Part Four will examine the cementing “shininess” of spiritual power in the Marma community. These final chapters cover Marma Buddhism and the new Ashoka – the royal monk known as Guru Bhante. Field data reveals signs of an innovation in response to a breakdown in structures and a vacuum of power. This has led to the rise of an actor-led transformation of power at the centre, culminating in a new



inflection of local Buddhist practice. The combination of uncertainty in the region and structural change in the community has resulted in cultural processes being adapted to reproduce a new kind of Marma cultural form that has helped the Marma community deal with an uncertain future.

There is much debate around how to name the people who live in the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT).

The term *pahari* is a Bengali word and roughly translates to 'hill people' (Uddin 2010). The term *adivasi* has also been employed in historical literature of the CHT, but the label also applies to non-Bengali communities living throughout South Asia. Furthermore, it roughly translates as 'indigenous', a term which I have stayed away from as it implies that indigenous peoples are the descendants of those who were there before others. Due to ongoing disputes around the indigeneity of communities in the CHT and their ownership of land - which is not the focus of this thesis - this term has been deliberately avoided. 'Jumma' is still prevalent among political groups and organizations, but as with *adivasi*, it is a highly politicized term and therefore sensitive.

For these reasons, in this thesis I have referred to the collection of groups living in the CHT as "hill people" or "ethnic minorities", "ethnic groups" or "ethnic communities". All these terms refer to both men and women as people living in the hill tracts of Chittagong. It considers the fact that they may have migrated to the hills or moved there from neighbouring hilly regions, and that the groups are a minority and different to the majority culture. With regards to the Marma, I have often referred to them as the Marma people. Although the word 'people' can be used as the plural of 'person', it also means a distinct and identifiable society with particular characteristics. When used in this sense, it is a singular not a plural word.

## Chapter 2: “We are Many Flowerbeds in One Garden”: Social and Political Landscape of the Chittagong Hill Tracts

Sundays and Wednesdays are market day in Bandarban town, in the Bohmong circle. As in most towns in the Chittagong Hill Tracts, the market is a public arena where different communities share space for the circulation of goods. The different tribal groups display their produce along the road that begins at the jetty of the Sangu River and ends at the main thoroughfare. The Bengali traders tend to trade in a huge covered market that is set apart from the tribal spaces.

Market day was a much-anticipated weekly ritual for the Marma ladies of my host family compound. The women dressed up in their best *tamis*,<sup>24</sup> make-up and hair accessories, taking with them their loveliest handbags and large colourful baskets to carry their shopping home. They gathered early - between 7 and 8 am - to avoid the crowds and the heat, but also to buy the freshest produce. As they walked together, they greeted friends and family, chatted, and compared notes about the produce. They tended to avoid Bengali traders<sup>25</sup> and headed instead for a narrow track that ran down to the Sangu River. Here the produce came from *jhum*<sup>26</sup> cultivated lands - the produce from shifting agriculture from the rural communities of the CHTs - onto boats and straight to the market in the early morning. *Jhum* cultivation has always had an important significance for the Marma people: the produce is less colourful, smaller and imperfect in shape but nonetheless considered to be full of vitamins and goodness. *Jhum* produce connects the townsfolk with their rural selves and, as most Marma say, it makes them feel good about their heritage. In fact, during the period 1970 to 1997,

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<sup>24</sup> *Tamis* are printed silks or cloths that are made into long skirts and blouses.

<sup>25</sup> Living in a multicultural setting as Bandarban town, the Marma are often confronted with Bengali produce and consumer goods alongside their own produce. I was told that Bengali food is considered to be contaminated by pesticides and chemicals and there is 'Ginya' (repulsion) for the Bengali way of handling food which revolves around perceptions of impurity and contamination. The Marma and Bengali have different practices around food production and handling, and therefore the cross-over between Marma food and Bengali food becomes difficult.

<sup>26</sup> *Jhuming* is the system whereby the indigenous farmers cultivate a number of swidden fields in rotation. This enables the swidden fields to regain their fertility during a fallow period.

*Jumma* became the collective label for the hill peoples as it came to represent group unity and resistance against the State of Bangladesh.

The women selling the produce wear traditional rural Marma clothes and accessories and the older traders smoke pipes over their beautifully presented goods. The produce – which is considered too exotic for most Bengali tastes – encompasses a wide variety of unusual vegetables such as pumpkin flowers, river weeds and stalks, river oysters, crabs, and frogs, as well as many types of dried fish and a fish paste called *nappi*. Also, ingredients for rice wine making - which is forbidden for Bengali Muslims - is prominently displayed alongside cuts of wild boar. Sometimes, the women combine their efforts and negotiate the maximum discount on a bulk purchase for any one item. On their way home, they stop for a breakfast of traditional Marma spicy noodle soup called *moondi* at a pop-up noodle stall. They then pile the shopping onto a rickshaw to take home. Once home, the women organize the shopping and decide which foods should go to the eldest brother of the compound. The rest of the food is beautifully presented on a large metal tray so that they can collectively discuss the dishes that they will make for the week ahead.

This weekly ritual of market day provides Marma people with a connection with Marma food, culture, and norms of behaviour. It not only provides an opportunity for group differentiation but also a group connection of Marma town folk with their rural counterparts. Moreover, market day illustrates two important themes: the diversity of Bandarban with most tribal ethnic groups of the CHT represented alongside the Bengali group; and the cultural preponderance of the Marma population in the Bohmong circle, Bandarban and in public spaces such as the market where one road is dedicated to Marma produce in the main shopping area of the town.

This glimpse into daily life in the major town of the Bohmong circle sets the scene of a multicultural setting, where many ethnic groups live alongside each other, and this set up is replicated throughout the CHT. To understand how this came about, this chapter will examine the history of the CHT and the formation of the three

chiefly circles that ultimately gave the Chakma, Mong and Marma ethnic groups their own kingdoms. The chapter will begin with a section that reviews the historical literature from the region, and the significant historical events and encounters with “the other” over time. The section will conclude with an outline of how the CHT is currently structured and administered, and the challenges that the communities in the CHT have faced, up until the time of the fieldwork (2013-2014). This chapter aims to provide context for the thesis and the ethnographic data chapters: Marma marriage practices, migration history and Buddhist merit-making, where intersections between the social forces in the CHT and Marma agency and transformation with these forces will be explored in greater detail.

## **2.1 The Ethnic Groups of the Chittagong Hills Tracts**

“It just so happens that the upland border area we have chosen to call Zomia represents one of the world’s longest-standing and largest refuges of populations who live in the shadow of states but who have not yet been fully incorporated.” (Scott 2009: 325)

Various contemporary scholars of the Asian borderlands consider them to be distinctive enough to be studied as a territory in its own right. Thus, the region has been labelled the *Southeast Asian massif* (Michaud 1997) and *Zomia* (Van Schendel 2002), which is the eastern part of the Asian massif. The Chittagong Hill tracts are in *Zomia* and the people who migrated and now reside there represent the various cultural shards originating from the valley states. Whether as defeated armies, ruined rice growing farmers, villagers fleeing epidemics and famine or running away from slavery, exiled royal lineages and their entourages, and religious dissidents. This group of people have chosen to live in the little-governed space of the hills, beyond the grasp of valley states and the population is periodically replenished by new waves of migrants.

The Marma community live in the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT) in the southeastern part of Bangladesh, next to India to the north and east, Myanmar to the south and Chittagong district to the west, in *Zomia*. Geographically, as part of the Himalayan range, the CHT region comprises numerous hills, forests and river valleys in complete contrast to the low-lying alluvial plains of Bangladesh. The CHT area is

inhabited by around 11 ethnic communities and the Chakma and Marma people are numerically dominant, living mainly in valley areas and practicing both plough and swidden agriculture - locally known as *jhum* cultivation. The other ethnic groups, such as the Tripura, Bawm, Khumi, Lusai, Chak and Mru occupy mainly the hilly areas and practice swidden agriculture. The CHT borderlands expert Van Schendel observed that all groups throughout their history were continually on the move as swidden cultivators, but also because of raids and warfare (Van Schendel 1992: 99–100).

Nearly all the major regional world religions are represented in this area: Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam, and Christianity. The Chakma, Marma and Tanchangya are mainly Buddhists; the Tripura are mostly Hindu. There are smaller groups, such as Mru, Khumi, and Khang, who still have their own animist religion, but some, for example the Lushai, Bawm, and Pankhuzi, have been converted to Christianity by missionaries. Linguistic diversity among the groups is also significant as there are over ten different languages spoken along with Bengali and Chittagonian.<sup>27</sup> The hill people are generally described by visitors to the region as belonging to the Mongolian group (e.g., Mills 1935: 7) and closely resemble people of North-East India and Myanmar rather than the Bengali population in Bangladesh. According to a government official in the region in the late 1800s, Lewin reported that 'none of them appear to have any general term for all hill dwellers' or to have developed a sense of unity (Lewin 1870: 73).

The largest group in the CHT is the Muslim Bangladeshi population, who do not engage in swidden cultivation but work in trade and commerce, mostly in the towns. The second largest group is the Chakma group. Chakma origins are not clear but their leaders over time appear to have adopted Islamic names during the Mughal period (even though this did not imply any religious conversion) and used titles such as 'mang' and 'khan' which derived from both Buddhist and Muslim traditions, respectively. Only from the 1800s did the Bengali cultural model become dominant among the Chakmas: the chiefly family adopted Bengali titles ('raja', 'rani', 'dewan') and introduced some Hindu rituals in its religious observances, so both Sanskritization and Bengalization are central to the Chakma

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<sup>27</sup> Chittagonian is Bengali with a strong local dialect.

identity (Van Schendel 1992: 107). Finally, the Chakma group have integrated with Bangladeshi culture linguistically as they have no language of their own, and by wearing Bangladeshi-style clothes, albeit with tribal fabrics.

For some time now, the CHT has been experiencing a crisis due to the run-on effects of climate change in Bangladesh as a whole. The rise in delta waters is resulting in the disappearance of cultivable alluvial soils in the lowlands of Bangladesh. With over 160 million people crammed into just 147,570 square kilometres, Bangladesh is desperately short of land. Consequently, there has been a steady migration of the Bengali Muslim population to the higher lands of the CHT. After enjoying over 200 years of peaceful isolation on the borders, the CHT borderlands are now locally perceived as being “overrun” by Bengali Muslims, and the minority groups that live there feel that their independence and access to land is under threat.<sup>28</sup> Moreover, the rise in the number of Bengali Muslim settlers has resulted in a further militarization of the area.<sup>29</sup> Consequently, the Marma people at the time of the fieldwork were uncertain about their future and some were planning to leave the area and return to Myanmar<sup>30</sup> or travel beyond the borders.

## **2.2 Historical and Anthropological Literature on the Chittagong Hills Tracts**

“The hills and sea-board of Chittagong, until the rise and consolidation of British power, were formerly the battle-ground upon which several races struggled for supremacy. Indigenous hill-tribes, Burmese, Portuguese, and Mahomedans, all preceded us as masters of the country, and each had left behind traces of their rule.” (Lewin 1885: 124)

The earliest historical descriptions of the Chittagong Hill Tracts were written by British government officials. Francis Buchanan<sup>31</sup> in 1798, Thomas H. Lewin<sup>32</sup> from

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<sup>28</sup> There were about three million civil and criminal cases in Bangladesh of which 75 percent were related to land disputes, according to the Dhaka-based Association for Land Reform and Development (2000).

<sup>29</sup> Land scarcity and ownership has long been an important topic in this region but due to military control of the CHT, it is impossible to research this sensitive topic in any detail.

<sup>30</sup> Many royal family members moved ‘back’ to Myanmar during the Independence War of the 1970s and now, in response to the influx of Bangladeshis into the region.

<sup>31</sup> In 1795 Francis Buchanan was attached to the embassy at Ava, the capital of Burma, as a medical doctor.

<sup>32</sup> Thomas Herbert Lewin (1839-1919) became a District Police Superintendent in Chittagong in October 1864. He was Temporary Superintendent and later permanent Deputy Commissioner and Political Agent for the unregulated Hill Tracts -

1839 to 1916, Robert Henry Sneyd Hutchinson<sup>33</sup> in 1906 and John P. Mills 1926-1927<sup>34</sup> - all wrote reports that focused on the large ethnic groups of Chakma, Marma and Tripura. German ethnographers Emil Riebeck and Adolf Bastion<sup>35</sup> travelled in the region and published their insights from a trip made in 1882. Before the seminal work *The Elementary Structures of Kinship* (1969), Claude Lévi-Strauss wrote in 1952 the little-known work *Kinship Systems of Three Chittagong Hill Tribes* in which Lévi-Strauss provides an insight into the kinship of the “Mogh” people, later to be known as the Marma. Between 1951 and 1960, the French anthropologist Lucien Bernot and his wife Denise studied language in the area and produced monographs on the Marmas and Sak (more widely known as *Chak*). In 1986, two German ethnographers, Claus-Dieter Brauns and Lorenz Löffler, examined ritual and kinship amongst the Mru. The Dutch historian, anthropologist and sociologist Willem van Schendel studied the borderlands of CHT from the 1990s until today, mapping the historical identities of all the CHT ethnic groups as they experienced political change in the region. And more recently, Bangladeshi scholars Abdul Khan and D.M. Barua have contributed research on the topics of Buddhism (Khan 1999a and b; D.M. Barua 2019), M. Ashrafuzzaman on land rights of indigenous people (Ashrafuzzaman 2014), B.P. Barua on national integration (B.P. Barua 2001), and Nasir Uddin on the politics of cultural difference (Uddin 2010), to name but a few of the many local scholars. The CHT has therefore been a subject of study for British colonial government representatives, explorers and adventurers, and prominent anthropologists and sociologists mainly from France, Germany and The Netherlands, and recently local Bangladeshi scholars.

The following sections will chronologically outline developments in the history of the region that are relevant to the argument of this thesis based on historical research on the CHT combined with selected ethnographies from the time. As can be seen from the timeline of the CHT (see Appendix B for the Historical Timeline

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a post that he held until 1875 – which gave him the powers to govern the remote Lushai and Chittagong Hill Tracts. Based on his experiences, he wrote *The Hill Tracts of Chittagong and the Dwellers therein* (Calcutta, 1869) and *The Wild Races of South-Eastern India* (England, 1870) and *Hill Proverbs of the Inhabitants of the Chittagong Hill Tracts* (1873) and *A Fly on the Wheel* (1885).

<sup>33</sup> Robert Henry Sneyd Hutchinson (1866-1930). In 1905, he was District Superintendent in the Bengal Police Department. In 1906, he published *An Account of the Chittagong Hill Tracts*.

<sup>34</sup> J.P. Mills (1890-196). Mills joined the Indian Civil Service in 1913 and was posted to Assam Province where he became well known for his monographs on the Nagas.

<sup>35</sup> Emil Riebeck (1853-1885) was a German explorer, mineralogist, ethnologist and naturalist. He travelled to CHT with the ethnographer Adolf Bastian in 1882.

of the region), the CHT has been shaped by the governorship of five nation states: the Arakan kingdom; the Mughal Empire; the influence of British India; West Pakistan over East Pakistan; and now Bangladesh.

### **2.2.1 The Three Powers: Arakan, the Mughals and the British**

From the literature on the CHT area we learn that during the 16<sup>th</sup> century, Chittagong was the base for Portuguese merchants who engaged in slave trading with the Burmese Arakan kingdoms,<sup>36</sup> trading captives from the indigenous populations of the area. The first wave of migrations before 1600 saw the Chak (now Chakma), Marma and Tippera ethnic groups migrate into the CHT from various parts of the Burma region. During this first wave of migrations, the kings of Arakan intermittently ruled over the district of Chittagong. The CHT region then became part of the Mughal empire in the period up to 1750 and the hill chiefs of Chittagong paid a trade tribute to the Mughals. At this time, the hill regions were ruled by two leaders - the Chakma and Bohmong "chiefs" or *Rajas*.

In 1760, the East India Company<sup>37</sup> gained a foothold on the sub-continent mainly by trading cotton, silk, indigo dye, saltpetre, tea and opium. The commercial enterprise morphed into military and administrative power that ended up ruling large swathes of India. In 1787, the East India Company made the whole CHT region its tributary after battling with tribal leaders. There were still two prominent leaders in the CHT by the late 18<sup>th</sup> century: the Chakma *Raja* in the central and northern Hill Tracts, and the Bohmong *Raja* in the south. A second wave of immigrants fleeing the vanquished kingdom of Arakan which had been conquered by the Burmese, came into the CHT region in circa 1784.

The first 'ethnography' of this region was written in this period - in 1798 - by Francis Buchanan,<sup>38</sup> soon after the second wave of immigrants had arrived from the conquered Arakan kingdom. Buchanan was commissioned by the Board of Trade to carry out 'an appraisal mission' of the Hill Tracts. During his 3-month trip,<sup>39</sup> he stayed in a tent and travelled by foot and boat with a few servants who

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<sup>36</sup> Arakan was an independent kingdom for most of its history. It was also ruled by Indian kingdoms and Burmese Empires. Today, the territory forms the Rakhine State in Myanmar.

<sup>37</sup> The East India Company was a trading company in East and Southeast Asia and India.

<sup>38</sup> Buchanan (as with Mills and Lewin) was in the region to further the commercial and political interests of the colonial powers.

<sup>39</sup> From March 2<sup>nd</sup> until May 21, 1798.



were a mix of Muslims and Hindus. Shortly after the start of his journey, Buchanan wrote of the trading relationships he saw among the tribes:

“The Hills..are inhabited by three different races of people, by the Bengalese called Joomeas, Tiperahs, and Chakmas. These people all cultivate Jooms, in which they raise cotton, rice, ginger, and several other plants, which they sell to the Bengalese in return for salt, fish, earthenware, and iron.” (Buchanan 1798: 15)

Buchanan was fascinated not only by the soils and their suitability for growing spice crops but was also curious about the people he encountered and in just three months, he was able to write a report which was part factual and part ethnographic by nature. In his writings, the group called “Mugs” will be known later as the Marma and Buchanan met with the Marma leader Kaung Hla Hpru<sup>40</sup> who is the legendary ancestor of the present day Bohmong chief. Buchanan explored power relations between local leaders, *Zamindars*<sup>41</sup> and their tenants. He also recorded tensions between Bengalis and the tribes: Buchanan interviewed a 50-year-old Arakanese refugee who remembered Arakan as a boy, recording the miserable life that these refugees had led, subsisting on trading whilst experiencing strained relations with the Bengali population. This is the first hint of tensions between the ethnic groups and the majority population.<sup>42</sup> What is remarkable about Buchanan's account of the CHT is that he tries to understand ethnic identities from 'within', from the viewpoint of the people concerned. This contrasts with later writers who describe the people of the Chittagong hills in terms of the ethnic categories used by their Bengali neighbours. Only with the arrival of anthropologists in the 1950s does the 'emic' perspective, first hinted at by Buchanan, reassert itself strongly.<sup>43</sup>

East India Company rule in the region lasted until 1858, when, following the events of the Indian Rebellion of 1857, and under the Government of India Act 1858, the British Crown assumed direct administration of India. The CHT was at that point a region on the fringes of British India. However, news of skirmishes and unrest invited direct British involvement. The British decided to take over the

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<sup>40</sup> Kaung Hla Hpru also known as Kong Hla Prue, the 5<sup>th</sup> Bohmong (1727-1811) and the first Bohmong to live in the Bandarban region.

<sup>41</sup> An official in pre-colonial India assigned to collect the land taxes of his district.

<sup>42</sup> He goes on to describe on March 21<sup>st</sup> (Buchanan 1798: 28) how the Bengalis were dismissive of tribal habits and accused some tribes of eating cats and dogs.

<sup>43</sup> These studies, begun in the mid-1950s, came to an abrupt end in 1971 when the hill tracts were sealed off due to insurgencies.

administration of the CHT region primarily to prevent "raids" from the Lushai peoples (Hutchinson 1906: 8-13). Travelling in the area, Lewin had heard "...that if I did go up the river I should never come down again, as my head would be cut off and set on a pole by the Shendus" whom he described "as a predatory and powerful tribe living beyond British limits, who feared neither man nor devil, and who, by perpetual forays to obtain slaves, kept the whole frontier in perpetual terror." (Lewin 1885: 157).

Significantly, in 1860, the CHT region was annexed and became part of the province of Bengal but retained its separate status under the control of an officer with the title of Superintendent of the Hill Tribes.<sup>44</sup> In 1860 the Hill Tracts was also divided into three administrative circles corresponding to the territories of three *Rajas* and in doing so, British representatives in the area recognised a new leader - the Mong<sup>45</sup> *Raja* - of the Palangsa clan of the Marma now in charge of a new circle called the Mong circle. This new circle emerged out of the Chakma kings' former territory in the north-west. The CHT was seen from this point onwards as three revenue circles around the major ethnic groups: the Chakma Circle in the central region of Rangamati; the Bohmong Circle, covering the south and northwest of CHT; and the Mong Circle in Khagrachari district in the north. Moreover, the residents of the 3 circles were seen not as British subjects but as tributaries.

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<sup>44</sup> The appointment of a 'Superintendent of Hill Tribes' was ostensibly: 'to administer justice to the Hill people in our jurisdiction, and to prevent that oppression and plunder of poor and ignorant savages by the crafty Bengallee moneylender which may lead, as in the case of the Sonthals, to violence and bloodshed.' (Government of Bengal, Judicial Proceedings 142-3, December 1862).

<sup>45</sup> "Mong" or "Mang" is the Burmese word for ruler.

Figure 1: Map of Chittagong Hill Tracts (Roy 2000: 20)



**Figure 2: Mong Circle represented by the symbol of the peacock, Chakma circle by the elephant and the Bohmong circle by the sword and the lion**



The separate hill region of Chittagong had therefore become a tax revenue-generating zone but also an excluded area, separated from the Bengal province. In the 1870s, the British administration initiated a process of declaring several areas all over the CHT as *Reserved Forests* with a total ban on *Jhum* cultivation. Within some of these areas, the Government cleared huge tracts of virgin forest to create teak plantations as raw material for commercial purposes. Because of this additional demarcation of land, a recent Bohmong - Aung Shwe Prue - described the CHT as being made up of four circles with the “the Maini Valley under control of the Forest Department” as the fourth circle (Guhathakurta and Van Schendel 2013: 455).

In this British phase, the CHT was administered as the Chittagong Hill Tracts District, with a significant colonial separation of the Chittagong Hills in the 1860s from the plains which was not just topographical, but also cultural: the Bengali

were in the plains and the non-Bengali in the hills. Moreover, despite being protected as an excluded zone, the people of the Chittagong hills became incorporated into British India and from then on subject to British and Bengali commercial interests for the first time in their history.

The most important law to govern the region came with the CHT Regulations Act of 1900, also often referred to as the CHT manual. Article 40 of the Regulations Act outlined the administrative structure of the CHT: it provided a detailed policy for the general, judicial, land and revenue administration of the region and defined the powers, functions and responsibilities of various officials and institutions. As we have already seen, the East India Company and later reinforced by British rule, divided the CHT into three circles or kingdoms. The 1900 Regulations Act took the existing system of chiefs and streamlined and simplified it as part of British efforts to invent a tradition of governance. It provided for the investiture of the chiefs and the appointment and dismissal of the headmen, as well as stipulating the manner and extent of the application of other laws to the region.

Each circle chief was made responsible for the collection of revenues and vested with the power to look after internal affairs such as land disputes and other social matters that emerged out of the circles. These circles were further divided into *mouzas* - clusters of villages with a territorial boundary. Each *mouza* fell under the control of a headman, and every village within the *mouza* was represented by a *karbari* (the village head). The internal matters of each village community were decided by its members, including a council of elders under the leadership of the *karbaris*. The efforts turned the diverse ethnic groups into a single system of chiefs-headmen-village leaders (*karbari*) resulting in a more efficient engine for the collection of *jhum* tax revenue.

The three circles of power with a hill chief in each circle, made it possible for indirect rule of the region by outsiders. It also placed negotiating partners in the hill tracts, who were then held responsible for any trouble that emerged from the region. James Scott (2009) describes this process of indirect rule, initiated by colonial powers, and then continued by valley authorities, as a “hill-chief fetish.”

“The state’s desire for chiefs and the ambitions of upland local strongmen coincided often enough to create imitative state-making in the hills... Local

chiefs had ample reason to seek the seals, regalia, and titles conferred by a more powerful realm...Recognition of a lowland realm's imperial charisma was, at the same time, entirely compatible with remaining outside its administrative reach and with a disdain for the subject populations of these lowland realms." (Scott 2009: 114)

Furthermore, as an excluded area, rule 52 of the 1900 Regulations specifically conveyed the status and special land rights granted to the tribal people of the CHT:

"No person other than Chakma, Mogh or a member of any hill tribe indigenous to the Chittagong Hill Tracts, the Lushai hills, the Arakan hill tracts or the state of Tripura shall enter or reside within the Chittagong Hill Tracts unless he is in possession of a permit granted by the Deputy Commissioner."

This period came to be remembered as the golden age for the ethnic groups of the hills: even though the British Empire benefitted hugely from tax revenue, the local circles enjoyed their support and protection whilst ruling their own people with relative autonomy (Ahamed 2004: 236). Moreover, the CHT in its separateness came to enjoy legal protection of their distinct culture and land rights. However, the situation changed drastically after India's independence from Britain in 1947.

### **2.2.2 Partition of India and The Pakistan Phase (1947-1971)**

As an excluded area, the CHT did not fall under the jurisdiction of the Bengal Boundary Commission headed by Sir Cyril Radcliffe. Because of this exclusion, the hill people had no representative in the Bengal Legislative Assembly and thus had no voice in the deliberations of the 20th of June 1947 which debated the questions around the partition of the region: namely, to which state should the Chittagong Hill Tracts be assigned. As Pakistan received a poorer share in the partition of Punjab and did not gain Calcutta which was given to West Bengal and India, Radcliffe tried to compensate by giving CHT and Chittagong region to Pakistan as part of East Pakistan. CHT was to be treated as the hinterland of the port city of Chittagong - the only major port remaining in East Bengal after Calcutta. However, the verdict of the Commission ignored the right to self-determination of the tribes of the CHT, who preferred to stay within India.

In 1946, the tribal chiefs formed 'The Hill Men Association' and proposed a princely state status for CHT, similar to neighbouring Tripura, and to be under the administrative control of central government of India. But this move failed and by 16 August, the CHT became part of Pakistan. In response to this, the Indian flag was hoisted at Rangamati and at the same time, the Marma, who claimed descent from the people of Burma, hoisted the Burmese Flag at Bandarban (Shelley 1992: 29). The partition of Bengal in 1947 therefore played a crucial role in shaping the future of the hill tribes of the CHT as the new Pakistani government took these events as indicative of a pro-Indian and a pro-Burmese stance. During the next few years, the identity of the CHT shifted from 'excluded area' to 'hill tracts' peopled by 'hill-men' who then became defined by the State as 'tribal people' (Uddin 2010: 288).

More recently, field work interviews with members of the Bohmong family focus on the restraints of being bordered as a result of partition:

"People used to move across this hill to another hill – with permission of the headmen. But now when the Bangladesh government introduced after 1947, when the country was divided with Pakistan. We became bordered. To be honest, in the British period our grandfathers used to study in Calcutta. When we are part of India. They could get on a bus. There was no boundary." Interview with son of 15<sup>th</sup> Bohmong.

Influenced by Levi-Strauss, Lucien Bernot travelled to the CHT between 1951 and 1954 and carried out fieldwork with a knowledge of local languages. Bernot worked specifically with the Marma and his 1967 PhD on this Buddhist group was later published as *Les Paysans arakanais du Pakistan oriental* (Bernot 1967a) followed by another book dealing with the ethnic group the Chak (Bernot 1967b). Bernot brought ethnography and history together and advocated getting to know a village by comparing it to the dominant group. Only then, he asserted, could one understand the meaning of 'us' and the 'other'. Moreover, Bernot thoroughly researched the rural Marma house,<sup>46</sup> including positions allocated to different family members in the domestic sphere, social and religious uses of different rooms, the economic aspects of different divisions, an inventory of all the objects

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<sup>46</sup> Influenced or anticipating Bourdieu's work on the Kabyle house in the 1960s.

kept in each room, how they are kept and what happens if they are lost, and the psychological aspect of the house as refuge. He considered therefore the house to be a crucial object of ethnographic study (Toffin 2010: 142) and a natural starting point for studying the characteristics of one ethnic group compared to another. Bernot's techniques provide a key to entering the social world of the Marma people, to deciphering cultural categories, modes of thought and local values. Bernot also sought to understand the story of migration and diversity in the region by mapping the usage of three words, 'dog, teeth and salt', tracing the history and movement of their use across the area from Burma to Nepal and then back to Burma.<sup>47</sup> According to Bernot, language represented a group's links to the social and material worlds, as well as to their origin and migration story. Although Bernot combined history and language with ethnography, he did not concentrate on questions of how the Marma people became an ethnically separate group and how they reproduced a sense of cultural uniqueness over time.<sup>48</sup>

Shortly after this fieldwork, new policies were adopted by the Pakistani regime in the name of 'national development' and 'national integration', but these policies ultimately served the interests of West Pakistan (Van Schendel 1992). The most significant government-sponsored project was the 1960 Kaptai Hydroelectric Project on the Karnafuli River.<sup>49</sup> From then on, the region experienced commercialization on a huge scale with the building of the Karnafuli Paper Mill, which made full use of forest reserves to secure pulpwood for making paper. The result of these development projects was catastrophic for local hill tribes as the Kaptai project saw more than 40% of the best cultivable land submerged under the reservoir of the Kaptai Dam. This then led to the displacement of approx. 100,000 hill peoples - mostly Chakma - who became environmental refugees overnight, spilling over into other areas of the CHT and migrating to India (Sopher 1963: 337–362). Chakma *jhum* cultivators were the worst affected by the changes as they were not compensated by the government since they had no direct ownership of the land whereas the members of the Chakma royal family were

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<sup>47</sup> This list was eventually extended to 80 words.

<sup>48</sup> Bernot also detailed Marma perceptions of Bengalis: "The Bengali equals the administration, the police, the greedy merchant, the sometimes unscrupulous money-lender, and so on; the Marmas' list is end-less. But the Bengalis are also men who have left behind their wives in the plains ... and among them are beggars, coolies, boatmen, and famine." (Bernot 1967: 749-50) (my translation).

<sup>49</sup> According to Lewin (1885: 123), "Karna-phuli", means an "ear-flower" or "ear-ring". The story comes from the Moghul period, when the wife of the governor dropped her valuable earring in a river and was drowned trying to retrieve it. The local name of the river is Kynsa-khyoung.



compensated.<sup>50</sup> Forced to live on other CHT lands, the Chakma refugees were often met with local resistance, creating further tensions among the tribes which subsequently led to an increase in East Pakistani military presence in the area. Thus, the hill tribes entered this new phase of history with the loss of land, displacement, distrust, and conflict.

The first major changes to the CHT Manual were also made during Pakistani rule in 1964 when Pakistan took away the special status of the CHT as an “excluded area,” redefining it instead as a “tribal area” within the scope of the legislature of East Pakistan (Adnan 2008: 45). As a result, the CHT was no longer officially designated as a separate homeland for the ‘indigenous people’. Instead, under amendments to Rule 34 of the 1900 Regulations, the Deputy Commissioner was empowered to distribute hilly lands to the family of hill or ‘non-hill men’ residents.<sup>51</sup>

The amendment reads as follows:

“Land for plantation and other purposes may be settled with a person of hill or non-hill men residents by the DC from 25 acres to 100 acres. Settlement of lands to the deserving cases exceeding 100 acres shall be made with Consultation of the higher authorities of the Ministry.” (Amendments to Rule 34 of 1900 regulations in March 1979, District Gazetteer, Government of Bangladesh).

This significant change resulted in the transplanting of land-hungry valley populations to the hills as part of a strategy of “engulfment” (Scott 2009: xii).<sup>52</sup> Not only did the State seek to maximize on the natural resources of the hill tracts, but it also took control of the security and productivity of the periphery. The amendment to the CHT manual therefore made it possible to facilitate Bengali immigration to the CHT and this process of legal and commercial ‘Bengalization’ of the hills was perceived by the hill peoples as an invasion of their homelands.<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>50</sup> During East Pakistan, the Chakma king was elevated above others to represent the region in government. The Marma are the second power, and their backseat approach to national politics possibly meant that the group had more freedom to remain culturally Marma.

<sup>51</sup> The notion “non-hill men resident” is a new conception in relation to land settlement in the CHT. Since this provision, influential non-resident Bengalis can now easily apply for land leased directly to the DC.

<sup>52</sup> Since the second World War, *Zomia* has experienced a massive transfer, both planned and spontaneous, of lowland populations to the hills. “There they serve the dual purpose of peopling the frontiers with a presumably loyal population and producing cash crops for export, while relieving population pressure in the valleys. Demographically, it represents a conscious strategy of engulfment and eventual absorption.” (Scott 2009: 325).

<sup>53</sup> In contrast, during the British phase, Bengali entrepreneurial activity was expected to undermine and compete with the British new territorial system of surplus extraction and also lead to tensions in the hills. Consequently, the colonial authorities acted as the protectors of ‘tribal’ rights in the Chittagong Hills. This regulation temporarily halted the tide of Bengalization but also isolated the hill people from the rest of Bengal (Van Schendel 1992: 110-111).

The next phase further incorporated the CHT in the nation state by demanding the ethnic and cultural integration of the CHT with Bangladesh.

### **2.2.3 Bangladesh as an Independent State (1971-)**

The Pakistani period of rule came to an end after the Bangladesh War of Independence. This war was an armed conflict that was sparked by an election result in East Pakistan. The elections had been won by an East Pakistani party, the Awami League, which wanted greater autonomy.<sup>54</sup> The military junta of West Pakistan cancelled the results of the 1970 election and arrested the then Prime Minister Sheikh Mujibur Rahman. The situation became violent on the ground as the Awami League launched a campaign of civil disobedience and as a result, the West Pakistani army flew in thousands of reinforcements to suppress the campaign. On the evening of 25 March 1970, the West Pakistan military launched a pre-emptive strike called “Operation Searchlight” against the Awami League and other perceived opponents, including members of the intelligentsia and the Hindu community, who at that time made up about 20% of the province's 75 million people. The war ended on the 16 of December 1971, with the help of Indian forces, as East Pakistan won independence from West Pakistan and the new nation came to be known as Bangladesh. This violent end to West Pakistan's rule and the emergence of a new state in the region also had an impact on the CHT. Soon after the Pakistani Army withdrew from the CHT, the *Mukti Bahini* (liberation forces of Bangladesh) went on a rampage against the hill people accusing them of working against the Bangladesh liberation war. The Chakma *Raja* had aligned himself with Pakistan and was treated as a war collaborator, whilst the other *Rajas* escaped punishment as they remained neutral.

Immediately after the conflict with Pakistan, the leader of the newly independent Bangladesh, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman,<sup>55</sup> insisted that the ethnic groups of the Hill Tracts should integrate and adopt Bengali identity.

“Assimilation to Bengali culture and the transformation into Bengalis, which was proposed by the Sheikh, was regarded as a way to overcome

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<sup>54</sup> Essentially this was a Bengali language movement that came about in response to West Pakistan's main language - Urdu - being imposed on East Pakistan.

<sup>55</sup> My informants often recounted his political slogan ‘forget your tribal identity, be Bengali’ to illustrate how his leadership increased anxieties in the Hill tracts.

backwardness and adapt to more modern lifestyles.” (Visser and Gerharz 2016: 370)

The settlement of Bengali peasants in the hills throughout the history of the region and especially after 1970 became part of a ‘civilizing process’ that aimed to contribute to the cultural development of the hill tribes. However, the Kaptai project had undermined the CHT’s *jhum* economy and by opening the doors to Bengali in-migration, the developments combined to create an atmosphere of distrust in the CHT. A history of passive resistance against the State in the CHT gave way to open rebellion and Bangladeshi armed forces moved in and full-scale guerrilla warfare ensued. New migrants were brought in under army protection and given arms. By 1990, a continuous war had produced thousands of casualties and led to an exodus of over 70,000 hill people to refugee camps in Tripura state (India) (Van Schendel 1992: 83).

Over time, the people of the Chittagong hills had to come to terms with administrative institutions that had been developed in Bengal: they had to learn the Bengali language to communicate with agents of the State, and local cultures developed a relationship with Bengali culture which was ambiguous. Efforts to adapt to and participate in Bengali culture were counter-balanced by assertions of the worth of each local culture. In 1973, the *Parbatya Chattagram Jana Samhati Samiti* (United People's Party of the Chittagong Hill Tracts - PCJSS) was formed and soon after, a guerrilla tribal military wing - *Santi Bahini* - was created. After the military coup assassination of Sheikh Mujib in 1975, the *Santi Bahini* became more active with backing from the Indian Government and launched continual attacks on Bengali settlers in the CHT. To protect the settlers, the Bangladesh police and the military established an increasing presence in the CHT region.

According to Ashrafuzzaman (2014), a Bangladeshi anthropologist living in the country:

“I would say from my perception that whenever Bangladesh falls under the control of a military regime or an army-backed government, the inhabitants of the CHT become entangled in resurgence, their lands are occupied, and their social, political and economic lives are intervened.” (Md. Ashrafuzzaman 2014: 61)

Studies at this time tackled the human rights violations that came out of a military presence in the CHT<sup>56</sup> and resistance to this presence. Alongside this, British colonial powers, followed by East Pakistan and Bangladesh, perpetuated the classification of the CHT as peopled by “uncivilized hilly peoples”. The social historian van Schendel (1992) argues that this view of “the tribes” in the region needed to be updated and provides instead an integrated approach of anthropological and historical insights<sup>57</sup> to understand the social structures of the hills. Van Schendel examines how the different groups were historically perceived by the majority population of Bengalis. There was a dominant Bengali conception of the hill peoples as being backward. The terms 'Mug', 'Mog' or 'Mogh' were blanket terms often used by Bengalis to refer to the CHT groups and from 1860 the term was 'Joomas' (Lewin 1870; Uddin 2010).<sup>58</sup> Since then, successive governments have taken a position of guardianship over these 'primitive' peoples.<sup>59</sup> As a result, South Asian communities on the fringes of India felt that their identity was shaped by the primitivist depiction that they were tribal and that they shared characteristics with each other which were fundamentally different from civilized people.<sup>60</sup> Van Schendel's study reveals that when dominant communities (including the colonial powers) classify and represent the other, ethnic groups are bundled in broader groupings and general cultural types which overlook the uniqueness of the different cultures within.

Van Schendel outlines the cultural repercussions of the conflict in the CHT since the 1970s and highlights a cultural innovation as reflected in a new term. *Jumma* became the collective label for the hill peoples as it was appropriated from the old pejorative term for 'swidden cultivator' - *Jhum* - in the Chittagonian dialect of Bengali and given the positive connotation of group unity and resistance against the State of Bangladesh. The coming together of different hill tribes under this

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<sup>56</sup> In 1980 an estimated 30,000 regular and paramilitary troops were stationed in the Hill Tracts and the number of police stations doubled in the four years from 1976 to 1980. In 1980, about 300 unarmed tribal people were killed by troops and Bengali settlers (Roy 2000).

<sup>57</sup> He reviews the evidence of ethnic persistence and innovation on the basis of documentation covering the last 200 years.

<sup>58</sup> In addition, Lewin, writing in 1870 (Lewin 1870: 73) explained that Bengalis distinguished two classes in the area: friendly tribes near the Chittagong plain, referred to as 'Joomas', and all others, referred to as 'Kookies', especially if they were unable to speak Bengali.

<sup>59</sup> During British India and the population census, hill tribes were classified as outside the caste system i.e. as “nonscheduled castes” which was created to organize and systematize India's diverse identities (Risley 1891).

<sup>60</sup> In contrast, the perspective of the Hill Tribes on Bengalis is also noteworthy. Older, positive roles for Bengalis (teacher, friend, partner, patron, protector, broker) are absent and have been replaced by negative roles such as rapist, torturer, killer, extortioner and arsonist.

term was a response to the hill tribes' collective marginalization by the dominant culture of a newly independent state of Bangladesh. Van Schendel's research on State perspectives and the formation of a shared identity in response to these perspectives, provides an important turning point in the study of identities in the region.<sup>61</sup>

This phase of armed struggle, military occupation of the CHT and the coming together of hill tribes as one voice under the banner of *Jumma* ended when Sheikh Hasina, the daughter of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, came to power in 1996. A Peace Accord was signed between the BD government and the PCJSS in 1997, 21 years after the assassination of Sheikh Hasina's father. With the Peace Accord of 1997, the larger hill groups were invited to take part in national power and as a result, the momentum for a combined *Jumma* identity waned as concessions were gained.<sup>62</sup>

#### **2.2.4 The Administration of the CHT Today**

The CHT has inherited a unique legal and administrative system that has no parallels in other parts of Bangladesh. Many laws that apply to the rest of the country have no application in the CHT region and, equally, there are many laws that apply only to the CHT.<sup>63</sup> According to the CHT Regulation, the "general" administration of the CHT in civil, criminal, revenue and "all other matters" is vested in the Deputy Commissioner (DC) (formerly the superintendent), who is a government-appointed functionary and heads the Ministry of CHT Affairs (MoCHTA). Since the post was first created in the early 1900s up to the present time, all senior executive posts, including that of the Deputy Commissioner, have been occupied by non-indigenous people, with the Deputy Commissioner being either British, Pakistani or Bengali. Until 1989, the DCs of the CHT were arguably the most powerful functionaries in the CHT, and far more powerful than their counterparts in the districts of the plains. In the first place, the DC is obliged to act in consultation with the chiefs on important matters affecting the administration of

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<sup>61</sup> Moreover, he has brought this area of research to a wider audience, and not just sociologists, historians, and anthropologists, but also human rights activists.

<sup>62</sup> The Bangladesh government saw the CHT insurgencies as a simple conflict - a temporary unified front - and took it upon themselves to tame the unruly periphery. New violent actors have emerged, the military continues to be visibly present and involved in the day-to-day lives of communities and individuals, and for many the Peace Accord is seen as a failure.

<sup>63</sup> The situation is similar to the Scottish system prior to the establishment of a separate parliament for Scotland.

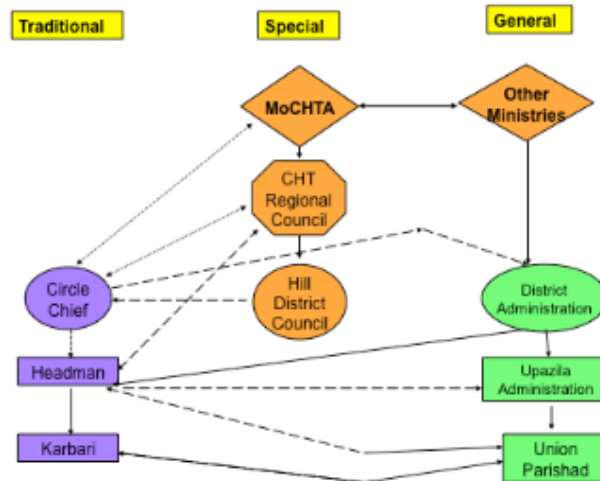
the CHT.<sup>64</sup> The power and influence of the DCs - especially their coordinating role over various governmental departments - have since been significantly reduced, primarily, due to the creation of the CHT Regional Council that oversees smaller local *Hill District Councils* (HDCs). Two-thirds of the seats at regional and local council level are reserved exclusively for elected hill peoples.<sup>65</sup>

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<sup>64</sup> Although the efficacy of this practice seems to vary in accordance with the nature of the relationship between the individuals involved.

<sup>65</sup> This section was written with help from Jerry Allen's unpublished report on *Bandarban Traditional Leadership* (2011).

**Figure 3: CHT administrative structure**



In addition to the DCs and Circle Chiefs, the three members of parliament (MPs) from the CHT also exercise much influence over policymaking in the area. Although the MPs do not hold any *ex-officio* office in the CHT administration (other than as advisers to the CHT Ministry), they are influential because of their standing at the national level. As a result, the general administration of the region is today vested in several authorities, including the DCs, the chiefs and headmen, the HDCs, and MPs although the DCs' role is still perhaps the most authoritative due to his powers over land matters, "law and order" and the issuance of licenses and permits for trade and commerce. The CHT administration, from ministry to the district levels, is still evolving to this day.

### **2.3 Delivering Justice, Collecting Tax**

Whilst the circle chief position may be transferred to another family, the kingly duties and the knowledge therein can become diluted over time. The headmen

therefore have the role of being permanent upholders of the rules and norms of the circles. The headmen are knowledge centres that have upheld the 1900 Act and hill tribe traditions through their duties as magistrates and their interpretation of customary law. In this respect they are like civil servants maintaining a 'status quo', handing down knowledge and wisdoms to support the circle structure as new kings from different families assume power. Once appointed, their role and authority are handed down from father to son.

The administration of criminal justice in the CHT is similar to that of the districts in the plains. Here too, the DC is vested with the powers of a district magistrate. In addition, civil matters concerning the family laws of the hill peoples are tried in the courts of the circle chiefs and headmen. The chiefs may hear appeals against the decisions of the headmen, and while the decisions of circle chief may not be appealed against, any aggrieved party may file a review petition against a decision to the DC and thence onwards to the Divisional Commissioner and his superior authorities in Dhaka.

The headmen and *karbari* also have the responsibility to settle local petty criminal and civil cases. To do this, the local chiefs have access to customary law and for example, in the Marma circle, it is The Book of Manu which contains their customary law. The Book of Manu came to Bandarban district as it travelled with the different Burmese communities that came from Myanmar to the Bandarban area, and therefore acts as a link between the customary traditions of the Marma people in Bangladesh and Burmese traditions in Myanmar. The Book of Manu originated as Hindu law<sup>66</sup> in India and was probably written in Varanasi a long time before the Buddha. It has exercised great influence over the laws of Burma, Thailand, Cambodia and Laos, and therefore it is assumed that it travelled to these areas along with the spread of Buddhism. The Burmese Book of Manu is different to the Hindu original as it is adapted to Buddhism and the cultures of Southeast Asia. The digest of Burmese Buddhist Law, the *Damathat*, is not a sacred law as preached by Buddha, but a Burmese collection of rules based on

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<sup>66</sup> The *Dharmashastras* (or Dharmasastras) are the ancient law books of Hindus, which prescribe moral laws and principles for religious duty and righteous conduct.



custom and precedent.<sup>67</sup> The Burmese Book of Manu is more like Aesop's fables than a law book, as it contains laws with their applications given in the form of notes and examples, often written as stories. For example:

“Once a farmer cleared a hill for jhum cultivation. There was a tree there on which lived a Rouk-kazo deva [spirit of the tree]. The deva was born on the tree and used to look after it. The farmer cut down the tree for his own use. As a result, the tree spirit became homeless. The displeased spirit took the case to the village headman, but the case could not be settled, and at last it was taken to the old sage Manu. Manu decided the case by giving the following verdict:

Since the farmer gives revenue to the King, the King is the owner of the hill. By cutting down the tree the farmer has committed just a misdemeanour; but since he has dispossessed somebody from his home, the farmer will build a chest-high pole, make a shelf on it where the tree deity can stay, and will worship the tree deity by offering daily food grown in the hills. At such a clever verdict both the human beings and the deities started highly appreciating the wise sage.” (Extract from printed copy of the Bohmong Book of Manu)

A more recent visit to Myanmar by the 14<sup>th</sup> Bohmong saw the return of an updated version of the book. In the Marma community, the person who can interpret customary law for the Bohmong or headmen or *karbari* is in fact the local astrologer. This man was formerly a monk who lived in Burma but was now a Union Board secretary with a family of his own. His function was to translate customary law into Bengali to inform final decisions in court cases.

All three circle chiefs have historically and to this day, collected tax for the external powers in the region. With a hierarchy in each circle validated and enshrined in law by the external powers in the region, the structures of each circle have been able to promote peace and stability – in theory. In reality, the circles have reacted differently to the organization of their group from the outside. The Chakma king of the early 1960s - *Raja* Tridiv Roy - had aligned himself more closely to the representatives of the Pakistan state.<sup>68</sup> By doing so, he contentiously agreed to

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<sup>67</sup> “The Hindu Law has been borrowed though we do not know when and from what source. It has been modified by the requirements of non-Indian race which has adopted the religion of Buddha.” (Judge Chan Toon, a Burmese judge in *Family law and customary law in Asia*: 1964; David C. Buxbaum, Association of Southeast Asian Institutions of Higher Learning.)

<sup>68</sup> Raja Tridiv Roy in “A Raja's Protection” explains that he aligned himself with Pakistan against freedom fighters to protect the CHT from reprisals (in *The Bangladesh Reader*: Guhathakurta, M., & Van Schendel, W. (Eds.). (2013) 257-261).

the building of the Kaptai Dam which flooded Chakma arable lands and saw a sizeable Chakma population displaced. The same *Raja* sided with West Pakistan in the War of Independence and with the defeat of West Pakistan, he chose to relinquish his power as circle chief to go into exile to Pakistan. In contrast, his son Devashish Roy aligned himself to the Bangladeshi State more fully than other circle chiefs, taking on roles as State Minister and other positions that enabled him to demonstrate Chakma loyalty. At this time, the Chakma population experienced an assimilation drive to become more Bangladeshi, more so than other tribal communities in the CHT. The Mong circle is the poorest of the circles but also borders with the insurgency rife Siliguri Corridor of N.E India. The Mong circle has experienced more civil war, upheaval, and violence than all the other circles and consequently has experienced an entrenchment of the Bangladeshi military in the region.

As a result, this historically unique region of ethnic federal states<sup>69</sup> has in recent decades been negotiating assimilation into the wider nation state. In contrast, as we will see in Chapter 7, the Bohmong circle has incorporated an annual tax collection ceremony to become an important marker of Marma culture, resisted cultural assimilation with the wider Bangladeshi population, and is regarded to be the most peaceful of all three circles due to the prolific number of Buddhist temples and the relics that are enshrined within these temples.

## 2.4 Challenges for the Future

The rapidly changing demographics of the CHT has become an urgent issue for the hilly peoples.

Up to 1930, people not regarded as indigenous to the CHT could not enter or reside within the region without a written permit from the government as part of rule 52 of the CHT Manual. In a census study by Nasreen and Togawa (2002), in

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<sup>69</sup> In an *ethnic federation* some or all of the federated units are constructed as far as possible to follow ethnic boundaries, providing ethnic communities with a measure of autonomy.

1872, 98.27% of population of the CHT was indigenous and 1.73% Bengali. During the decade 1981 to 1991, the Bengali population in the CHT increased to 48.66% of the population. This was due to the government sponsored Population Transfer Programme (1979-84) which resettled approximately 200,000 to 400,000 landless people in the Hill Tracts. The CHT Manual was amended to accommodate this programme. Thus, the proportion of indigenous people in the CHT started to decrease during the post-colonial period under Pakistani rule and then more dramatically in post-independence Bangladesh.

The influx of ethnic Bengalis in more recent times is also attributed to the effects of climate change. In 2013, according to Kreft and Eckstein, Bangladesh ranked 5th in the Global Climate Risk Index (Kreft and Eckstein 2013: 49). Moreover, two-thirds of Bangladesh is less than 5 metres above sea level, making it one of the most flood prone countries of the world. The nation is particularly at risk because it is a vast delta plain with 230 rivers, many of which swell during the monsoon rains. This geology, combined with river water from the melting Himalayan glaciers in the north and an encroaching Bay of Bengal in the south, makes the region prone to severe flooding.<sup>70</sup> The situation is made worse by the prevalence of intense storms which is considered a marker of climate stresses (Dastagir 2015).<sup>71</sup> In view of this data, the United Nations has warned that a quarter of Bangladesh's coastline could be inundated if the sea level rises 3 feet in the next 50 years, displacing 30 million Bangladeshis from their homes and farms. If that happens, the capital city Dhaka, now at the centre of the country, would have its own sea promenade. Climate change therefore threatens food security and significantly for this thesis, it forces people to migrate to higher ground for safety.

With the rise in the Bengali population in the CHT, there has been an increase in anxieties around ownership and use of land. Addressing his *karbaris* at an annual meeting of the Bohmong circle leaders, the 17<sup>th</sup> Bohmong king advised that action should be taken to take control of land not owned by village households:

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<sup>70</sup> Bangladesh ranks as the sixth most flood-prone country in the world. Though Bangladesh occupies only 7% of the combined catchment area of the Ganges–Brahmaputra–Meghna River basin, the country has to drain out 92% of the flow into the Bay of Bengal (UNDP 2004: 51).

<sup>71</sup> Covered in Dastagir, M. Rehan in *Modeling recent climate change induced extreme events in Bangladesh: A review*, in *Weather and Climate Extremes*, (2015) 49–60, Elsevier.

“There is an instance that, someone registered the entire lands of a village in his name. So, all villagers needed to flee away from the village...Our own villages should be served first so that these types of incidents do not happen. You need to register the land with support of headmen after recording the occupied land and drawing the land maps. After building boundaries plant the jackfruit trees on the empty land. On every place you put your feet. Everywhere.”

Moreover, the Marma royal family have deeds to much of the land in their circle and there is increasing controversy around this ownership. In an interview with one member of the royal family, the Brigadier, I was informed that although the royal family represented approximately 0.5% of the circle population, it owned most of the land in Bandarban town and some land in rural areas as well. At the same time, during field work, there was much discussion around the destruction of the largest royal palace and its lands as it was sold off to Bengali investors. Thus, the shifting of land from the hilly peoples to the Bengali population has created an uncertain future for the communities in the CHT and the Peace Accord has failed to address these concerns. This section has signalled that population changes in the CHT and land ownership are important themes in people’s lives in the CHT and will be a recurring theme throughout this thesis.

## **2.5 Summary and Conclusions**

A review of historical and anthropological literature from the CHT indicates four distinct historical perspectives: colonial adventurers working within the framework of colonial discourses; French structuralists looking at language as a construction of meaning; and with Bernot contributing a small in-depth study of one community - the Marma - by analysing the Marma rural home, mapping living space and studying the objects within it. Van Schendel’s study focusses on the crisis in the CHT borderlands that came with militarization of the CHT and the first detailed look at hilly peoples’ identities. He demonstrates that alongside the colonial and State depiction of being outside the caste system and “uncivilized”, the hilly groups have their own distinct cultural identities which were buried for a short period of time under the *Jumma* banner. Furthermore, a study of literature from

the area shows that there is no detailed ethnographic study on the identity processes of one ethnic group over time in this borderland region.

The sections that plotted the history of the CHT revealed that the rulers - from the Mughals to the British Empire, from West Pakistan to the new State of Bangladesh - and the different types of rule were the major social forces that shaped the region. Through the CHT manual, which is still in operation today, the British achieved a centralization of power and the integration of the diverse ethnic groups into three administrative systems. As a result, the CHT region experienced autonomy from the rest of the Indian subcontinent and the communities were able to co-exist peacefully together and evolve in isolation, far away from the influence of the State whilst being subject to tax collection from the British. The CHT appears to have remained stable until the first insurgencies surfaced in the 1970s. The main reason for the stability was due to the administrative structures of the three circles which reinforced the structures that already existed. Moreover, placing the *Raja* on top of a pyramid structure of power was important for British tax collection purposes, and the annual tax collection ceremony affirmed this hierarchical organization, albeit the ceremony is only commemorated in the Bohmong circle to this day.

When the period of the excluded area came to an end, the CHT region saw an immigration of Bengalis which forced the communities to accommodate and assimilate with Bengali culture or resist. What is interesting to note from this chapter is that whilst all 3 circles have experienced the same involvement from the outside, it is the Marma circle that appears to be relatively unchanged whilst the other circles have been assimilating to varying degrees to Bengali culture. After the Peace Accord, it appears that the Chakma community has culturally assimilated to the State culture whilst the Mong Circle has had more intervention from the State because of its history of insurgency. In the CHT, the Marma in the Bohmong circle appear to have opted out of the assimilation process and at the same time, are known to be culturally “preserved” compared to other hill groups. Some respondents attribute this to the huge number of temples and relics in Bandarban district which is thought to have spiritually protected the Marma people from both internal strife and external interference.

Now the CHT region is undergoing even more change. Whilst British influence promoted stability to extract tax revenues from the CHT, the shift of power from the traditional circle chiefs to the State after the Peace Accord has resulted in the State being more involved in the administration of the region. There is also a lack of representation of the Hill communities in national politics, except for the Chakma people. Furthermore, the Chittagong Hill Tracts Manual was initially set up to protect the rights of the indigenous peoples. However, when it was amended, it coincided with a loss of autonomy,<sup>72</sup> climate change and the in-migration of the landless refugees from the plains that has rapidly changed the demographics of the CHT region.

This chapter has laid out the complex, entangled and fluid nature of the CHT, as well as the modern-day challenges that the CHT communities face. Despite the wealth of perspectives from writers and visitors to the CHT in its long history, there has been no in-depth study that looks at a single community and their identity formation over time and how they deal with crisis or adapt and manage their group identity in the face of rapid change. My aim in this research will be to apply this type of focus to one community: the Bohmong circle that covers Bandarban district and is led by a Marma ruler who presides over a predominantly Marma community.

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<sup>72</sup> As Amena Mohsin explains: "The Manual apparently adopted as administrative principles for the CHT based on the local system of indigenous institutions, but under the new system real authority lay with the DC and the local chiefs and headmen were virtually turned into merely the tax collectors of the state" (*sic*) (Mohsin 1997: 34-35).

## Chapter 3: Perspectives

“As he moves forward within his environment, Man takes with him all the positions that he occupied in the past, and all those that he will occupy in the future.” (Lévi-Strauss 1955: 396).

In the final chapter of *Tristes Tropiques* (1955) titled ‘The Return’, Claude Lévi-Strauss reflects on, among other themes, the nature and purpose of anthropology. Returning to fieldwork in Brazil and India, he explores the similarities in the societies that he studied. These societies are slowly transformed when structural layers cumulatively build on a foundation of structures, and stages that are passed are reaffirmed by the stages that succeed them. Lévi-Strauss also returns to his field work on the Mog<sup>73</sup>- later referred to as Marma by others after him - in a short ethnography published in *Le syncrétisme religieux d'un village mog du territoire de Chittagong*, conducted during the rainy season of 1950, in a Mog village of 183 people. According to Lévi-Strauss, the Mog came from Arakan and had preserved their beliefs and customs of their country of origin.<sup>74</sup> Lévi-Strauss discovered, in this 1952 ethnography, that Bengali is the common language of the CHT and that the Chakma, who make up the largest group in the area, have lost their own language whilst the Mog still speak a dialect of Burmese and Arakanese. He noted that the Mog have a unique clothing style that they maintain as they differentiate themselves from their neighbours. With these initial observations, Lévi-Strauss then goes on to collect data on the structures in Mog society that provide insights into the groups cultural practice.

My initial observations during fieldwork - 60 years later - were similar. The Marma community, unlike other ethnic communities in the CHT borderlands, assert their uniqueness through the persistent affirmation of various cultural practices and resources that seem to be rooted in the past. These core cultural practices seem to have been reproduced over time

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<sup>73</sup> The “Mog” was a term used by Lévi-Strauss throughout this brief ethnography, however, seven pages into his paper, the Mog are also referred to as the Morma or Marma when the chief of the village recounts Bohmong history (Lévi-Strauss 1952a: 208-9).

<sup>74</sup> “Venus il y a quelques siècles d'Arakan, province de la Birmanie du Sud, ils ont conservé les croyances et le genre de vie archaïque de leur contrée d'origine.” (Lévi-Strauss 1952a: 202).

and continue to differentiate the group from the other groups in the region. Reading about the Marma then, and studying them now, is to experience a society that is relatively stable whilst living in an environment, as we have seen from the previous chapter, that is constantly in flux.

This group that was first called “Mog”, and which now terms itself Marma, is made up of groups that originated from different regions of modern-day Myanmar. The Mog are a hybrid group with a common faith - Buddhism. Over time, the hybrid group appears to have ethnically homogenised to become the Marma group of the Bohmong circle in the CHT. To be able to reproduce this unique identity in the ever-changing context of the CHT implies an ability to change and adapt whilst appearing to be culturally fixed.

To explore these concepts and to develop a guiding theoretical framework for the thesis, this chapter will first examine various perspectives on culture, ethnicity, and identity creation which are relevant to the study of borderland communities. This will be followed by a discussion of theories that address important concepts of the process of group identity formation such as hybridization, cultural invention, cultural reproduction, and transformation.

### **3.1 Literature on Borderland Culture and Identity**

“...the histories of Burma and British Bengal tend to present a narrowly focused perspective, often centered on the state, and neglect many developments important to places, and people who fall within the state-constructed periphery.” (Charney 2002: 214)

To understand the dynamics of living on these borderlands, this section will examine the work of some key theorists who focus on borderlands and identities in South and Southeast Asia and beyond.

Borders can be constructed through the action of states and individuals as part of a process of territorialisation. Hilly borderlands are often remote



regions of the world, where the ethnic groups who live there are on the margins of more than one state, often physically closer to a foreign regime and geographically far away from the centre where their own government resides. Borderland communities can be many small “kingdoms” living alongside, interacting and negotiating with each other. As a result, they can be familiar with different types of power and may know more than one language to help them in their daily interactions with the “other”.

Anthropologists have long been interested in borderland communities, not only because of the marginalized groups such as refugees and minorities who live there, but also because of the unique processes of identity formation that takes place (e.g., Leach 1954; Van Schendel 2005; Bal 2007; Chan 2013; and Peter Sahlins 1989).

James Scott in *The Art of Not Being Governed* (2009) describes borderlands as “shatter zones”:

“On a time-lapse photograph, these pulses of migration might look like a maniacal game of bumper cars, with each new pulse exerting its own jolt on earlier migrants and they, in turn, resisting or moving into the territory of still earlier migrants. It is this process that has created “shatter zones” and that goes a long way toward explaining the crazy quilt pattern of constantly reformulated identities and locations in the hills.” (Scott 2009: 329).

As part of exerting control over these shatter zones, or zones of refuge, the State - the government, the society at large or the “norm” to which the borderlands are adjacent - often defines borderland identities and during the process, reveals its attitude towards the people who live there. In Chapter 2, we have already seen how various regimes at state level have defined the CHT region. It is also interesting to note Myanmar State’s perspective on the “unruly periphery”. According to Wade in *Fleas We Greatly Loathe* (2018), since 1962, the military of Myanmar on the other side of the CHT borderlands have used strong narratives around specific groups to subjugate the borderland communities to a centralizing state. For example, the Rohingya community – now known as the victims of the recent mass murder between 2016 and 2017– have tried to maintain their

existence on the Myanmar fringes<sup>75</sup> by arguing that their identity and genealogy has had a long presence in Myanmar. In contrast, the Government argues that the “Rohingya” ethnonym, first mentioned in a 1799 survey of communities in Myanmar by Francis Buchanan, has since that time disappeared from historical records. Citing this long absence from the census, the Government has redefined the Rohingya as a new entity of immigrants from the subcontinent. To underline this redefined narrative, the governing majority also widely hold a belief that Muslims who are ethnically Indian are forcing Buddhist women to convert on marriage, thereby diluting the Buddhist line. These two very distinct narratives from the governing majority about the Rohingya – not enough historical presence, coupled with a fear that Buddhist culture is being diluted – has led to the majority peoples of Myanmar to view and refer to the Rohingya people as if they were a "single metastasizing cell" that threatens the security of the borderlands of Western Myanmar (Wade 2018: 1-6).

While external state powers define the identity of hill peoples, Scott posits that hill peoples are also purposeful in their statelessness, over a long period of their histories, by forming zones of resistance, and adapting to “a world of states while remaining outside their firm grasp” (Scott 2009: 337). By way of example, Scott explores the concept of *dissimilation* which was inspired by the hill peoples in peninsular Malaya who positioned themselves ecologically, economically, and culturally in respect to the Malay state. The term *dissimilation* means a purposeful creation of cultural distance between societies. It can have the effect of staking a claim to a particular niche in the overall hill-valley economy, which if maintained over time and elaborated upon, can lead to ethnogenesis (Scott 2009: 173).

While the borderlands may look confusing and complex to colonizers and state officials, the hill peoples themselves are neither confused nor mystified about who they are and what they are doing. Like Schendel (1992), Scott sees hill societies position themselves not only vis-à-vis the State, but also within themselves as hilly neighbours in a complex constellation of peoples.

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<sup>75</sup> Before the August 2017 exodus began, Rohingya numbered around a million in the towns and villages along the western coast.

“Their broad repertoires of languages and ethnic affiliations, their capacity for prophetic reinvention, their short and/or oral genealogies, and their talent for fragmentation all form elements in their formidable travel kit.” (Scott 2009: 332).

Chan and Womack (2016) take these ideas further, applying an actor-oriented examination of former nation states on the borderlands in Asia. For example, they consider the reintegrated but separate border cities of Hong Kong and Macau – both of which were returned to China in the late 1990s. In these case studies, Chan and Womack conclude that the circumstances of border realities can lead to rigid identities as well as to hybridization, which both “define” people and are “used” by the people in a deterministic way (Chan and Womack 2016: 98).<sup>76</sup> Peter Sahlin, in *Boundaries: The Making of France and Spain in the Pyrenees* (1989), examines the crucial ingredient of “...the oppositional character of identities and loyalties, particularly visible in the Catalan borderland...” (P. Sahlin 1989: 111). The oppositional character that he describes emerged out of local intervillage rivalries over scarce resources and was then further strengthened by failures of diplomacy and the boundary-making steps to stop the two-way spread of epidemics,<sup>77</sup> all of which contributed to the development of a distinct boundary culture between France and Spain.

In the CHT, Van Schendel (1992) explores the purposefulness of groups as they define their own identity in relation to the State. He posits that the groups living between Bangladesh and Myanmar have a choice of adopting one of two competing models which are simply different because of language and cultural orientations (Van Schendel 1992: 106). The first of these is a South Asian model that is Bengali and which the Chakma group have adopted as they speak and dress in the Bengali way. The other is a Southeast Asian model which is Burmese/Arakanese and Buddhist in origin and represented by the Marma. This model can be seen in the choice of words and labels: the word ‘Marma’ signifies that the group gravitates towards the Burmese model and they use Burmese words for their leaders such as ‘po-mang’ or ‘Bohmong’ (‘great captain’), while village

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<sup>76</sup> Moreover, the perspectives that emerge produce knowledge that “supplement, challenge and contrast views from the centre” (Chan 2013: 127).

<sup>77</sup> The plague coming from France in 1720 and then cholera from Spain into France in 1820.

leaders are referred to as 'ruasa', which is a reference to the Burmese system of 'village eaters' or local representatives of the State (Van Schendel 1992: 13; Bernot 1967b: 84, 86-7). The linguistic element of the model seems to be determined by a group's historical trading relations and trading routes: the Chakma traded with Bengalis in the Chittagong plains and therefore speak Chittagonian Bengali, whilst other groups in the CHT traded with the Arakanese in the south of Burma and speak dialects of Burmese.

Even though there are two competing cultural models, it is interesting how these different groups nonetheless buried their differences, in their ethnic self-understanding, to stand together as one group called the *Jumma*. In his paper, Van Schendel outlines a unique period between the late 1970s and 1997 when the State described the CHT groups as Jhum cultivators in need of civilising, and to achieve this, there was a State sponsored Bengali in-migration and militarization of the CHT. This prompted the groups in the CHT to strategically come together under the collective *Jumma* identity – a political alliance that spoke as one voice during political meetings, campaigns, and rallies. As the ethnic groups came together, differences between the groups were ignored. For example, religion as differentiator between groups was downplayed to accommodate non-Buddhist influences among the hill people.<sup>78</sup> Old intergroup perceptions and prejudices had to be renegotiated as some groups in the CHT saw themselves as being more 'advanced' than others; this was particularly evident in the traditional division between 'river-valley' groups (e.g., Marma and Chakma) and 'hill-top' groups (e.g., Bawm, Mru and Khumi). The groups focused instead on elements that were common to all threatened identities, such as their non-Islamic religious outlook and the fact that Bengali was not their mother tongue.<sup>79</sup> The *Jumma* movement sought the creation of a *Jumma* homeland that needed to be protected against non-*Jumma* outsiders – the Bengalis. The movement was also inventive in projecting their recently developed collective identity, built on recent shared experiences, onto the distant past (Van Schendel 1992: 127; Hobsbawm and Ranger 2012 (1983): 1). In examining the two cultural

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<sup>78</sup> For example, Hinduism and Christianity among the Tippera and animism which was still practiced by some mountain tribes.

<sup>79</sup> At this time, English was preferred to Bengali as lingua franca in the CHT.

models and the collective *Jumma* identity,<sup>80</sup> van Schendel shows the value of exploring the fluid compositions and alignments of ethnicity in the borderlands as they come together to oppose political power and ideological misrepresentation from the centre. As a movement and in action, some characteristics of this hybrid formation were amplified whilst others were downplayed to create a contextual sense of unity against an external other.

We can see that existing discourse takes different approaches to examining identity negotiation on the borderlands. Borderland communities, far away from the centre, may be defined from afar by the State. However, they also define their own identities within the region, deciding whether to assimilate or to differentiate themselves from other groups. As part of the process of negotiating life in the shatter zones far away from the State, groups often temporarily align, hybridise, and speak as one group. The key characteristics that come out of these studies is a sense of fluidity and instability, and that the groups that live there can respond in many ways.

The next sections of this chapter will examine the theories that help towards understanding how the Marma people can appear to be unchanged whilst living in such a fluid region of the world. The first section of the chapter will examine fluidity and instability within groups as they adapt to living on the margins. It will begin with a selection of literature that addresses how groups assimilate, adapt, or accentuate their difference from each other on the boundaries of culture. This section will be followed by a survey of the literature on various forms of cultural hybridity and the processes at work within a fluid hybrid group that help them to respond to challenges in their environment.

The chapter will then focus on understanding change and continuity as core processes that are transmitted and endure. It will present an analysis of anthropological literature on tradition, cultural invention and transformation as groups negotiate encounters with the rule of outsiders and how this interaction goes on to shape the group's ongoing and long-

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<sup>80</sup> *Jumma* identity lost momentum after the 1997 Peace Accord, when political representation of ethnic groups was possible in the local Hill Council.

term identity. Moreover, the section will try to understand how culture can appear to be static and traditional when it is actually moving dynamically from hybridity towards singularity. The final section will shift the focus from identity to structures within societies with different examples of how structures are reproduced and through agency, often transformed. It will review the contributions of theorists who look at structures over a long historical time period in order to illuminate the long-term processes at work in adapting and transforming structures to meet the needs of change.

The literature identifies myriad motivations for traditional practice in fluid circumstances. After the review of relevant theories, the chapter will conclude with a selection of the most valuable theories that will help to analyse the ethnographic observations of the thesis: on kinship and marriage; oral histories and the role of objects in the creation of myth; and on the rituals that are adapted by the agency of actors in Buddhist merit-making.

## **3.2 Fluidity and Instability of Ethnic Essence**

This section of the chapter will examine a selection of case studies and theories on how groups respond to living on the margins of a nation through the lens of assimilation and adaptation. It will explore the processes of assimilation on the boundaries of culture and from within culture.

### **3.2.1 Assimilation and Adaptation**

The complex borderlands of the CHT have experienced a long history of migration, insurgencies, and instability. Moreover, the region has been governed by many different ‘foreign’ states. While the Marma people have continued to reproduce core cultural practices of ethnicity and difference in the face of these influences, this seems to run contrary to the experience

described in other local borderland ethnographies, where contact with neighbouring communities, as well as the culture of the majority state, has resulted in assimilation.

Shortly after independence in 1971, the new state of Bangladesh and the nation's founders - Sheikh Mujibur Rahman - claimed that the unifying features of the nation should be culture and language. Indigenous groups, seen as ethnic non-Bengalis, were seen to be lagging behind Bangladeshis and were urged to assimilate to the national mainstream to overcome their "backwardness" (Visser and Gerharz 2016: 370). Ellen Bal's monograph (2007) on the Garo of the Northern Bangladesh-India border, reveals the Garo response to this state policy as they negotiated and assimilated to Bangladeshi culture.<sup>81</sup> Bal provides a historical view of the community but also explores how the Garo perceive themselves and the world around them. Whilst the elderly Garo stay in the hills and do not worry about losing their identity,<sup>82</sup> the young Garo live in the urban centres of Bangladesh. There they experienced a dilution of their culture because of mixing with Bengalis and ever since, the young Garo have been busy negotiating and reinventing their identity.

Another example of what might be called the 'typical' response of assimilation: the Chakma people form the largest group in the CHT and are often seen to be the group that has most assimilated to Bengali culture. The Chakma have no written language of their own and the group's origins are uncertain.<sup>83</sup> Lewin describes the Chakma in the late eighteenth century as being firmly anchored in Arakanese culture:

"They [Chakmas] were for the most part of Arracanese [sic] descent and spoke that language, of which Burmese is a modern offshoot.

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<sup>81</sup> The Garo community of the Garo Hills and Plains was split during partition in 1947. Those Garo that stayed in India developed in a different direction to the Garo of the hills who lived in Bangladesh and rubbed along with Bengali culture. The Garo are matrilineal and known locally as rice Christians, converting for economic betterment and education (Bal 2007: 138).

<sup>82</sup> The elderly responded to this change by using imagery from local myths: "...a buffalo is a buffalo. Even if it is raised by a lion, it will never be a lion." (Bal 2007: 69).

<sup>83</sup> However, they do have the largest tradition of writing about their history since the building of the hydroelectric dam at Kaptai lake which flooded their homelands and submerged the Chakma *Raja's* palace.

They followed the Buddhist religion and customs.” (Lewin 1885: 226)

Barua (2001) claims that the Chakma assimilation process started when the Chakma chiefs took on the Muslim title of Khan under the Mughals but then during the reign of a Chakma queen, they assimilated to Hinduism between 1855-73. The Hindu name of *rani* (queen) was adopted for Rani Kalindi and at the same time, Hindu gods were worshipped as the Hindu Bengali religious model was appropriated (Barua 2001: 31).

In more recent times, the Chakma have been associated with Bangladeshi culture due to changes in their environment and new Government incentives to assimilate. Visser and Gerharz (2016) argue that the massive transformation of the modes of production due to land scarcity, and the insecurity produced by the armed conflict, resulted in a new drive for education. Interviews conducted between 1999 and 2000 confirmed that Chakma aspirations to attain education had increased immediately after the construction of the dam. This was later reinforced by a clause in the CHT Peace Accord that required a quota system for ‘tribals’ in government services and educational institutions. Thus, the migration of Chakma students and their immersion in the culture of Dhaka and other major urban centres was part of a recent process of assimilation and integration into Bangladeshi culture. Most Chakma people who underwent this process were from the middle and upper classes, with students’ family members often employed by the State or local and foreign non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and owning land in the CHT. Another observation in the study highlights how Chakma lower classes made up around 70% of the migrants who worked in the garment industry on the outskirts of the major cities in Bangladesh (Visser and Gerharz 2016: 370-376). Thus, the Chakma, as the largest group in the CHT, stripped of their Chakma lands, assimilated to the dominant culture of Bangladesh.

The Chakma people are an example of continual adaption to State power in the region: from the Mughals to Hindu rulers in the past, to the Bangladeshi State more recently. But while some borderlands groups



assimilate, others respond to inter-ethnic contact and interdependence by accentuating their distinctness. The next section examines theories that account for this strategy.

### 3.2.2 On Borders and Boundaries

There is an idea that cultures will only generate boundaries for themselves if left in relative isolation; that cultures that intermingle will have permeable boundaries or no boundaries. However, in the introduction to *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries* (1969), Frederik Barth challenged this idea. He posited that when cultures come into contact with other cultures, boundaries tend to be drawn around selected characteristics. This selection process creates separation which in turn helps to define the group for themselves and for others. Barth writes:

“...categorical ethnic distinctions... entail social processes of exclusion and incorporation whereby discrete categories are maintained despite changing participation and membership in the course of individual life histories.” (Barth 1969: 9-10).

A group then proceeds to maintain this identity by determining criteria for membership and ways of signalling membership and exclusion. In effect, Barth sees distinct identities and traditions arising out of contact and opposition to others, as opposed to out of isolation. Later in the chapter, we will critically examine the inversion of tradition (Thomas 1992) as it also aligns with Barth's approach of groups negotiating change to maintain continuity of ethnic essence, through the selection and disposal of characteristics.

Taking Barth's idea of group boundary maintenance further, Eriksen (1993) demonstrated that far from being an immutable property of groups, ethnicity is a dynamic and shifting aspect of social relationships. He explored ethnicity in relation to race, nation and class, and the social classification of 'Us' and 'Them', groups and boundary maintenance and transgression in plural societies. His ideas are illustrated by Leach's description of the Hpalang feud - a single specific Kachin gumsa<sup>84</sup> community - and the concept of hostility and friendship.

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<sup>84</sup> Gumsa represents the Kachin ideal of a feudal state. It is a ranked hierarchy of the social world.

Factionalism in Hpalang was aligned in terms of language groups, and rival factions did not intermarry. Yet despite this hostility inside the community, the populace usually presented a solid front to outsiders (Leach 1970: 70-87). However, what unites the specific culture of a group in opposition to neighbouring others can also break down again into local oppositions as the group internally divide, feud and highlight their difference. This example shows that group characteristics already present can become explicit or suppressed in a way that alters its content, and the process that follows entails an articulation of this.

The focus on identity on the boundaries of culture also provides insights into how loosely knit groups can become heterogenous. When another ethnic group comes along, heterogenous segments strongly coalesce around an emblematic ethnic value to form a hybrid group. From this hybridity, what are the motivations or triggers in the selection of the characteristics of the group? To examine this process, the next section will shift the focus away from boundary-making and the way boundaries are defined from within culture to the cultural content and process within groups. The section will survey different perspectives on the merging and disposal of characteristics as a result of external contact.

### **3.2.3 Creolization, Entanglement and Hybridity**

Some societies see themselves as unified whilst at the same time being plural or having multicultural unities within the unity. The concepts of creolization, entanglement and hybridity describe another aspect of plurality, where there is an integration of sub-groups into one group. There is a fusion of different languages, and the amalgamation of elements from different cultures to create one society. Moreover, the concepts provide insights into how groups are constantly changing from within to respond to the needs of the external environment, differentiating the overall group on the Barthian boundaries of culture.

The idea of creolization originates from linguistic theory in which a new language such as Yiddish and Creole is created from two different languages (for example, Abrahams 1983; Hymes 1971). The process of creolization engages both the past and present through the ongoing

reinterpretation of form and meaning of the past, as it is remade into something new (Baron 2003: 112). As an approach, the deployment of the concept represents a cultural framework for understanding how new cultures are created from the conjunction of two or more cultures that come into contact.

Ulf Hannerz in *The World in Creolisation* (1987) applies creolization to the study of Nigeria which has 250 tribes and just as many languages. Within this ethnic mosaic there seems to be no such thing as “Nigerian culture”. However, Hannerz argues that Nigeria is part of a world system with an international flow of culture that synthesizes with local culture and that “...this world of movement and mixture is a world in creolisation” (Hannerz 1987: 551). The process encompasses not only the culture of precolonial to colonial to post-colonial times, but also the culture of the nation state and the entire creolizing spectrum of the centre-periphery organization of national culture through education, mass media, and popular culture. As a result, groups in Nigeria become entangled together as they share the same history whilst remaining subcultures within national cultures. What is significant in this process is that there is both integration and differentiation, and within differentiation, there are different individual perspectives on what needs to be differentiated. Hannerz concludes:

“Where there is strain between received meanings on the one hand and personal experiences and interests on the other, and where perspectives confront one another, cultures can perhaps never be completely worked out as stable, coherent systems; they are forever cultural work in progress.” (Hannerz 1987: 550)

This idea of cultural work in progress is also germane to Latour’s actor-network theory (ANT). ANT shifts the focus from the unilateral agency of actors to a fluid network of relationships between things and concepts where artefacts and hybrid entities are formed by the merging of ‘actants’ and agency (Latour 2005). In *We Have Never Been Modern* (1993), Latour characterises modernity as a system of human sovereignty that – according to him – we have never had. Rather, Latour argues that

sovereignty is distributed amongst human and non-human agency and, as a result, boundaries dissolve as entities hybridise. For example, modernity is a set of characteristics or categorical distinctions that require the processes of hybridity i.e., the mixing and moving between categories. Local understandings of the *idea* of modernity can lead to a process of selecting which traditions can be maintained alongside modernity and which must be adapted or dropped altogether. As a result, adapting to modernity can become a continuous work in progress.<sup>85</sup>

In *Entangled Objects*, Thomas (1991) develops these ideas of selection, integration, and differentiation by arguing that people are never the passive subjects of pure cultures. Rather, human actors adapt and change social contexts in relation to external others, incorporating some of those values and rejecting others as societies shape their own singularly entangled history. To illustrate this, Thomas examines “entangled objects”, which are foreign artefacts of material culture that have been appropriated by indigenous people and incorporated within a framework of local meanings. As societies combine elements of other societies through a system of relationships, those societies can merge. Thomas also points out that if both material culture and the economy is entangled between two societies or cultures, people will have a correspondingly creolized consciousness,<sup>86</sup> even if this consciousness is deep-down; he highlights how, when an entangled culture comes into contact with the external colonial other, people of that entangled culture will either stress a pure ethnicity or deny it. Thomas therefore argues that ‘cultures’ manifest as ethnicity, which is ephemerally constructed in tension with outsiders; and that internally, beneath the level of ethnicity, societies are cosmopolitan spaces of entanglement, creolization and hybridity.

Another factor that describes how groups, in the face of displacement and outside contact, will either carry over or discard cultural elements is a kind of hybridization called “syncretism”. This term was coined by Herskovits when analysing West

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<sup>85</sup> Latour also takes the idea of being part of a wider network of relationships and entangled within it, a step further by seeing the history of hybridity as a history of a wilful manipulation of difference into sameness (Latour 1993: 107-8). Moreover, this construction of sameness needs to be managed otherwise the gel that cements hybrid groups can fall apart as they revert to difference.

<sup>86</sup> These societies would become gift economies as they still embody the characteristics of the donor and the transactions create enduring relations of indebtedness as gifts are embedded in reciprocity.

African voodoo in Haiti. Herskovits studied retention and transformation of African cultural elements with new contact in the Americas. He saw that the closer a cultural group travelled to the so-called New World, certain elements of Voodoo were maintained and elaborated upon, whilst other elements fell away. Additionally, when there is nothing familiar in the new context, cultural traits that are more dominant are carried over into new cultural contexts and reinterpreted considering their new surroundings. In the case of the settled Americas, African religions were carried over and reinterpreted in this way, whilst African cultural elements of kinship and social structure were lost. Herskovits' syncretism not only contained "survivals" from an African past, specifying the degree to which diverse cultures had integrated, but also offered a way of uniting the past with the present. The overall effect of Herskovits' theory is to highlight adaptation, assimilation, and the reconciliation of cultures with the external in the process of creating a new identity.

More recently, Stewart (1999) added to this concept of syncretism, the idea of the metasyncretic:

“Wherever syncretism occurs or has occurred, it is usually accompanied by a parallel discourse that might be termed metasyncretic: the commentary, and registered perceptions of actors as to whether amalgamation has occurred and whether this is good or bad. A strictly objectivist view could never be sufficient.” (Stewart 1999: 54).

This metasyncretic commentary can emerge as part of a historical process and in a situation where different cultural groups live in proximity and experience continual interaction with each other. For example, during the Yugoslav wars, the Bosnian Muslims were seen by neighbouring groups as essentially Serb or Croat who had foolishly and weakly converted to Islam during the Ottoman period and needed to be forcibly de-hybridised and returned to their true ethnic fold (Stewart 1999: 54).

Michael Scott (2005) provides another important set of tools to understand how groups of people may culturally hybridise as they create a foothold in new or modern contexts.

“The globalizing era is one in which the formerly naturalized limits of nations, cultures, and ethnicities have become blurred under forms

and spaces of hybridity, flux, liminality, and uncertainty.” (Scott 2005: 194)

Once again, we see here the twin forces of distinction and assimilation. In hybrid cultures, Scott sees an oscillation between separation and integration in response to changes in the environment, and new ones - aspirational, incomplete, and competing - are constructed from selected old and new elements as hybridity elements are reconfigured.

By way of example, Scott offers two ethnographies in which he illustrates this transition from “hybridity as the universal condition of chaos” (Scott 2005: 213) to the order-making of re-separation, both of which chime with the process observable in the Marma community. First of all, Scott’s notion of chaos is multifaceted as it is not only within groups of people but also as locality. The concept of chaos as locality is explored in the context of the compounded hybridity of the Arosi of the Solomon Islands<sup>87</sup> in the coastal areas and the unsettled and unused “virgin forest” - *wabu* (Scott 2005: 206). The areas of semantically empty land are seen as areas of chaos that trigger “placemaking” activities that help to make the area feel safe enough to settle in and to support the Arosi to live together in clearly grounded polities (Scott 2005: 192-3).<sup>88</sup>

Another of Scott’s case studies on cultural hybridity deals with the chaos brought about by blocked bodies (Appadurai 1986, 1998)<sup>89</sup> or body maps (Liisa Malkki 1995). Based on the violence of 1972 massacres of Hutu by Tutsi in Burundi, Scott sees the violence of dismemberment as a response to a perception that it was no longer possible to distinguish Hutu and Tutsi because of blending between the two groups. For example, Tutsi women, who were frequently the wives and mistresses of Hutu men and the “potential mothers of ethnically anomalous children”, were “liminoid beings” (Scott 2005: 212). Tutsi women were therefore

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<sup>87</sup> According to Scott (2005), depopulation, dislocation, and the acceptance of Christianity have compounded the normal chaos of hybridity, and with it, the usual challenges to locality reproduction.

<sup>88</sup> “As these ancestors moved into the land, they engaged in a repertoire of place-making activities: they founded new settlements, enshrined their dead, invested the land with tabus, innovated and recycled personal names attached to locales, and planted nut trees and gardens.” (Scott 2005: 206).

<sup>89</sup> Appadurai (1986) tests a hypothesis that there is a correlation between increased uncertainty regarding ethnic identities and an upsurge in ethnic violence. No longer able to distinguish each other as too much blending between groups – physical differences are no longer clear. Dismemberment is carried out as the means “to establish the parameters” of otherness (Scott 2005: 209).

considered to potentially contain the chaos of obstruction as Tutsi and the chaos of hybridity as partners in miscegenation. Both the Rwandan Hutu on Tutsi killings of 1994 as well as the earlier Burundi massacres restored the orderly flow of life-giving forces by bringing back order through the separation of pure categories that had been blurred and were blocking the flow of power (Scott 2005: 209). In this case study, chaos is thus understood as insufficient differentiation between groups.

“...the ethnographic cases I have presented indicate an instructive gap between the concept-metaphor postcolonialism—understood as the chaos of hybridity—and the plurality of conceptualizations of chaos that inform practical order production in particular contexts.” (Scott 2005: 213)

Thus, the absence of what is regarded as pure ethnicity, hybridity can be seen as impurity, chaos and weakening, and thus efforts are made to rectify the condition. Scott's theories show that hybridity develops historically but people's response to it depends upon how they perceive it, and this can be contested and result in conflict. Hybridity is therefore not only a model of chaos but there is also plurality in that chaos, as well as many techniques of re-parsing it during the process of order making.

To conclude this section, the theories provide insights into how societies are constantly changing from within and that hybridity as a primary concept can be seen as a fluid but stable field of synthesis. Each theorist treats hybridity differently. The theories of creolization and hybridity focus on the entanglement and disentanglement of fragments that come from different larger configurations of belief and practice. Hannerz sees it as the primary state of culture as it moves towards separateness and difference. Thomas in *Entangled Objects* sees groups incorporate fragments syncretically. Whilst rubbing alongside or interacting with the external other, there can be entanglement through a shared history and objects. Similar to Barth, on the borders and because of inter-group tensions, the different configurations unite ethnically as if they were pure un-hybrid groups in historically temporary ways. From this section, we also come to understand how migration away from home towards a new land can trigger

adaption or selection of internal characteristics to help the migrating group respond to new settings. Syncretism is a useful lens for understanding the process of selection and reinterpretation as well as for emphasizing the cultural potential of hybridity, with a focus on practice not structure. In contrast, Scott argues the opposite for the Arosi and the Rwanda region: namely that entanglement is secondary and that the temporary states revert to forms of separateness, distinctness, and difference in times of crisis.

All the processes described by the authors in this section have relevance to the Marma cultural and ethnic trends and the thesis will draw upon some of these approaches pragmatically at different junctures in the study. The thesis is closest to Barth and Michael Scott's ideas as the Marma assert distinctness and separateness alongside cultural entanglement and syncretism. More specifically, Scott's interplay between chaos and order, the fact that chaos can be triggered by crisis in the locality or from mixing between groups triggering activities of production or order, is the most relevant for this community living in the complex environment of the borderlands.

### **3.3 Change and Continuity of Ethnic Essence**

The perspectives covered so far in this thesis address the characteristics of fluidity and changeability across cultural and ethnic boundaries, fostering variable senses of ethnic and cultural instability. The theories are useful in understanding processes of variable differentiation between groups in close contact and the internal reconfigurations that help define groups in opposition to "the other". Taken alone, however, these concepts do not explain how the structures of some communities are able to appear unchanging over time – both externally and to its inhabitants. What if processes of identity-making can absorb other cultural elements and strengthen boundaries, adapting to change and instability whilst maintaining a core set of processes that transmit and endure? To slowly move to the formation of a singular identity even as significant incorporation passes unnoticed. To answer these questions, I will now look at the internal processes



that govern the invention of tradition and culture within a group, which in turn contributes to a group's journey from hybridity to singularity and the creation of an essential unchanging core of identity.

### 3.3.1 The Invention of Tradition and Culture

Where a strong ethnic identity exists, a group's culture often appears to be rooted in traditions which are handed down, considered sacred and binding and therefore are both unchanged and unchangeable. However, historical analysis usually shows that whilst some content has been transmitted over long periods, traditional forms are often invented rather than received, and re-invented in accordance with contemporaneous needs, circumstances, and creative urges (Hobsbawm and Ranger (1983); Handler and Linnekin (1984); Thomas (1999); Wagner (1975)). This section will review the debate on the invention of tradition and culture as part of the core processes that endure.

Much of the historically oriented anthropological literature on ethnicity and culture looks at the significance of history - the incorporation of the past - on present identities. Hobsbawm and Ranger in *The Invention of Tradition* (1983) postulate that:

“Traditions which appear or claim to be old are often quite recent in origin and sometimes invented.” (Hobsbawm and Ranger 2012 (1983): 1).

The central argument for the invention of tradition is that (a) traditions claim to be unchanged but (b) are not and (c) this fact tends to go unnoticed. Thus, traditional customs change whilst being represented as unchanging. To illustrate their ideas, Hobsbawm and Ranger use a visual concept of a legal wig or robe to represent the invariance of tradition which can be inflexible to unforeseen contingencies. Alongside this, custom - represented by judges - allows for the possibility of flexibility whilst adhering to precedent, since judges can bring about change by adapting rules to new cases without precedent.

In addition, any social practice that is carried out repeatedly will tend to develop a set of conventions and routines. So, it is not only through invention and re-

invention of tradition that change to culture can occur, but adaptation can also happen through customs and conventions. This is especially true when an existing use continues in new conditions, and therefore must be reconfigured to these new conditions in order to operate; or when materials in the past are revisited and new traditions are grafted onto old ones. Tradition is therefore constantly, periodically, imperceptibly, and cumulatively manipulated to keep up with change, and agency is important in making this possible.

Since change can promote both anxiety and a need for solid continuity, invented traditions can also be adaptive strategies for societies undergoing rapid change as they build bridges to a suitable past, creating the illusion of solidity within transitional environments. Of course, people can also assert continuity of tradition not only because environments are unsettled but also because they simply insist upon the value of tradition in a changing environment.

Of relevance to the CHT communities is that invented traditions can also provide an anchor in identity for communities that have been pulled into the political or cultural orbit of a more powerful society. For example, Trevor-Roper (2008) illustrates how groups respond to encroachments of English political power and culture and the relinquishing of Scottish political autonomy through a case study on Scottish history and mythmaking. There was an invention of several myths across Scottish history, one of which was the myth of ancient kilts and tartan. Trevor-Roper points out that kilts were not ancient but developed in the eighteenth century by an English industrialist, Thomas Rawlinson.<sup>90</sup> Nevertheless, "the replacement of history by myth" was an invention that rooted people's identity in the essential nature of Scottishness (Trevor-Roper 2008: 14). Though they are fabrications, these traditions encompass images, cultural values and longings, and enough elements of a "real" past to meet important emotional needs of the present as well as fulfil ideological positions. Moreover, the density and durability of myths reveals how mythmaking has often nothing to do with reason or evidence and everything to do with power, profit (the woollen trade) and legitimacy as they cash in on the apparent continuity of tradition.

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<sup>90</sup> Seeing traditional Highland dress as "a cumbrous, unwieldy habit," Rawlinson commissioned a tailor to design the small kilt, and the tartan was assigned to clans. As a result, a retail industry of epic proportions was established. (Trevor Roper 2008: 199).

Hobsbawm and Ranger (1983) and Trevor-Roper (2008) seem to accept the contradictions of an invented tradition as a bounded idea or entity with a core of unchanging ideas and customs that is regularly adapted to match contemporary circumstances, whilst imagining continuity and the unchanging nature of tradition. Edward Shils (1981) sheds light on the unchanging aspect of tradition by describing it as “substantive content” that is an unchanging essential core (Shils 1981: 263). The "essential elements" of tradition persist in combination with other elements which change, but what makes it a tradition is that the essential elements are recognizable and approximately identical at different stages of a tradition's life (Shils 1981:195-246).

In contrast to this position, Handler and Linnekin in *Tradition, Genuine or Spurious* (1984) focus on created identities that are not defined in terms of boundedness, givenness or cultural essence. As with all inventionists, Handler and Linnekin see tradition as an object that can change, but they also ask this question: if it does change, has it become something new or different? Handler and Linnekin demonstrate their ideas through an analysis of the national and ethnic identification of the Quebecois. Quebecois identity is an ongoing interpretation of the past, and therefore also an invention. For example, folklore and folk dances are not fixed culture but reinterpreted continuously, and the process, is selective as only certain items are chosen to represent traditional national culture at any given time, and other aspects of the past are ignored or forgotten.

“...those elements of the past selected to represent traditional culture are placed in contexts utterly different from their prior, unmarked settings. A family party presented on stage, or a child's toy immured in a museum, are not, in these new contexts, quite the same things that they were in other settings; juxtaposed to other objects, enmeshed in new relationships of meaning, they become something new.” (Handler and Linnekin 1984: 280)

For Handler and Linnekin, ongoing cultural representations refer to or take account of prior representations, and in this sense, the present has continuity with the past. Handler and Linnekin's theory of tradition encompasses both continuity and discontinuity – with the balance in favour of discontinuity - in the attribution of new meaning in the present through reference to the purportedly unchanging

past. Handler and Linnekin therefore shift the view of seeing tradition as a fixed object to a process of thought.

Another contribution to the debate on invention of tradition is Thomas' proposition that what counts as tradition can be an inversion of previous iterations (1992). As Thomas asks against what or who are traditions invented, he argues:

"I explore the ways in which the recognition of both others and selves made particular practices or customs emblematic; different encounters produced different referents for what was characteristic of a place or a people." (Thomas 1992: 214).

As Barth and Eriksen proposed, Thomas claims that difference is created through contact with the other, not only at the level of boundary-making but also within culture itself and that culture can be further inverted in response to codified impositions for example by the colonizing other. An example would be if the colonial power imposes an agenda of modernization, groups could respond with a counter assertion of 'tradition' or an "asymmetrical counter-concept" of a place of here and us (Thomas 1992: 215). This counter-concept could then be inverted again if the colonial power in the next conjuncture imposes a traditionalist agenda in which case indigenous groups may counter-assert an anti-traditionalist modernizing agenda. For example, a term of address such as "primitive" is liable to be seized upon and inverted, or otherwise responded to, in a way that produces a new self-recognition. Earlier in this chapter, we see this in action in the CHT when a term of address such as *jhum* cultivators who were seen as "primitive", was seized upon, and inverted through the collective term *Jumma* in a way that produced an alternative construction of "we" vs. the Bangladeshi majority. Thus, Thomas's argument draws attention to the cultural and ideological instability produced in particular encounters and the importance of seeing invention as part of that interaction.

In *The Invention of Culture* (1975) and *Habu: The Innovation of Meaning in Daribi Religion* (1972) Roy Wagner also makes an important contribution

to the debate on invention. Wagner builds a theory that places people-as-inventors at the heart of the process that creates culture. *Habu* is named after a Melanesian Daribi curing ritual in which men impersonate ghosts. Wagner posits that the Daribi try to control the world on the basis of taken-for-granted components of their current reality where the collective dead ghosts are dead and collective living people are living. By contrast, in the *habu* ritual, inventively, men take on the characteristics of the dead to temporarily enact the possibility that the dead can come alive and interact with humans. Generally,

“It follows that when we invent others as culture, we are not merely describing them; rather, we are giving shape to our understanding of our encounters with those others, and the shape we give those understandings is in part a function of our own, historically peculiar style of creativity.” (Wagner 1975: 28).

For Wagner, an invention comes about both when the Daribi impersonate a ghost that they hold responsible for an illness and when we extend our own culture to ‘see’ this invention.

These perspectives on invented traditions and culture demonstrate how encounters with forces outside a community can push societies to differentiate themselves through inventions or inversions that can be continuously or periodically reinvented. From these vantage points, we can see how customs and traditions can change over time as conventions are adjusted to meet new needs, all the while maintaining an essential core. Moreover, these approaches remind us to focus on elements of change, even as Marma participants themselves direct attention, by and large, to what remains unchanged.

To better understand how the core of a group’s tradition, culture and identity is reproduced in ways that maintains boundaries and sets the group apart in spite of hybridisations and inventions it is necessary to consider an alternative grouping of anthropological literature. In its premise and focus, the literature in the next section shifts the balance away from discontinuity within tradition to continuity within change. In this way, it may

be possible to understand how core processes are able to endure in contexts of change and instability.

### **3.4 The Reproduction and Transformation of Culture**

Marma society appears to possess clear cultural boundaries and contrasted with other ethnic groups in the CHT, also a distinct ethnic identity. What is significant is the historical long *durée* view that the Marma have of themselves. This section will look at anthropological approaches that focus on the role of structures in the reproduction of culture and the various ways agency can work within stable structures to enact change over time.

#### **3.4.1 The Role of Structure**

There are many traditional sociological and anthropological theories that explore how 'traditional' societies create a sense of stable equilibrium. Durkheim's (e.g. 1995 [1912]) functionalism in the late eighteenth century examined parts of a society which work together to make a functioning whole, creating a sense of equilibrium or stasis.<sup>91</sup> Radcliffe-Brown's functionalism saw societies as if they were classifiable species out of time and space, fixing static society in an ethnographic present.<sup>92</sup> However, functionalism as a theory did not adequately address the dynamic processes at work between the structures that make up the functioning whole or the generative processes which contribute to the overall stasis of the society or its ability to bring about change. For example, in *The Gift* (1954), whilst acknowledging the stability of structures, Mauss also detects that there are processes behind it.

“When the paths of Polynesian gifts are traced, a stable, hierarchical structure is revealed. It is not the competitive potlatch, but it is still a total system of gift. Where does the system get its energy?” (Mauss 1954: xii)

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<sup>91</sup> For example, Durkheim saw religion as a part of the human condition, and while the content of religion might be different from society to society over time, religion will, in some form or another, always be a part of social life.

<sup>92</sup> “If we are to have a real comparative morphology of societies, however, we must aim at building up some sort of classification of types of structural systems.” (Radcliffe-Brown 1940: 6)

Lévi-Strauss (1969) and many others (e.g., Mauss 1954)<sup>93</sup> examined this energy or the processes within a system by applying the concept of “Saussurian” linguistics to structures. For this purpose, language is seen as stable and enduring with implicit rules (grammar or mental schemas), whilst resources are *parole* or speech and the dynamic enactment of those rules in daily life. Meanwhile, grammar is a fixed but generative historical logic which orders speech in a process. Employing the lens of structural linguistics, a structural theory was developed in anthropology that covered the processes between unconsciously held mental schemas or rules (grammar) and the fluid enactment of those rules in social life (speech). The theory allows for an analysis of a society with durable structures - analogous to an unchanging grammar - with transforming practices over time such as a succession of speech events. Moreover, whilst grammar is constrained by the rules it sets, it also permits the materialisation of a wide range of scenarios such as speech scenarios or cultural scenarios, all of which conform to the structural rules.

In structuralist approaches of this kind, therefore, variations appear to be stored up in structure similar to a charge stored up in a battery, and speaker-actors have the ability to work within the rules of structures to release the charge. On releasing the charge, processes either uphold structure or refine it to reflect the changes in the environment, whilst the overarching structure appears the same. An example of the latter would be when Marma social structure or the structures of the Marma worldview are like the rules of chess, and Marma adaptations to changing circumstances are akin to different gambits or strategies within the rules of the game. In this way, the propensity for change is possible whilst structures appear stable.

An important aspect of structural process is the role of actors or agency, where their efficacy is theoretically recognised, these forces purposefully work on structures to meet the demands of change in the environment,

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<sup>93</sup> The combination of elements of structuralism when combined with functionalism results in part classification of the parts of the whole of a society whilst understanding the process between structures in the mind (rules/mental schemas) and activity in the actual world. Both Leach and Lévi-Strauss grappled with the limitations of structural functionalism but pushed these theories further in their 18-year debate on marriage rules.

adapting them and sometimes transforming them in the process. Since agency and complexity are as much a part of human social reality as the structures that constrain certain possibilities for action and promote others, the next section will look at theories of agency and their significance for this thesis.

### **3.4.2 The Role of Agency**

An important core challenge for anthropology and the social sciences is to understand the relationship between structure and agency. Structure refers to the complex and interconnected set of social forces, relationships, institutions, and elements of social structure that work together to shape the thought, behaviour, experiences, and choices of people. In contrast, agency is the power people have to think for themselves and act in ways that shape their experiences and life trajectories. Agency can take individual and collective forms. Various theorists have studied the significance of agency by highlighting the multi-layered aspects of the concept.

In *Outline of Theory of Practice* (1977), Bourdieu describes *habitus* as “internalised structures” and “schemes of perception” that structure the agent’s (shared) worldview and their “apperception” of the world in which they suppose they exist (Bourdieu 1977: 86). Bourdieu’s *habitus* determines action but not mechanically: conditioned actors always possess a degree of freedom in how they materialise the structural message, so there is also an improvisatory property to *habitus*. Thus, structures shape people's practices, but also people's practices constitute and reproduce structures and actors can improvise and transform previous structures, all the while conforming to the sedimented rules of the *habitus*. Thus, for example, values can be culturally and symbolically reinterpreted and re-legitimized through an interplay of agency and structure.

In *Central Problems in Social Theory* (1979: 62-64), Giddens adds another perspective on agency. He sees structures as "dual" structures: rules and resources that are worked upon by human agency which reproduce a sense of stasis. Through this, Giddens implies that if enough people or



even a few people who are powerful enough act in innovative ways, their agency may have the consequence of transforming the very structures that gave them the capacity to act. Central to this process is what Giddens calls the "knowledgeability" of human actors or agents who employ the social rules together with the resources at their disposal reflexively, albeit that actors' knowledge may be constrained by the rules and resources at any given time. Thus, knowledgeable agents can put into practice their structured knowledge so that structures become enabling (Giddens 1979: 3).

For both Giddens and Bourdieu, therefore, structure is a process and not a steady state with historical agents' thoughts, motives, and intentions being constituted within the structures by the cultures and social institutions into which they are born. Moreover, both Bourdieu and Giddens share the idea of performativity: that the materialisation of structures occurs through the improvisation of actors who singularise outcomes. Agents therefore have the capacity to engage in discerning and strategic actions such as gift exchange or marriage strategies, since they are knowledgeable actors.

The next section will review contributions that combine both structure with agency in its different forms to show how structure can be reproduced over time and transformed.

### **3.4.3 Structure in Reproduction and Transformation**

The approaches in this section employ historical perspectives to uncover complex, socio-economic, and politically embedded processes of long-term structural formation and change. Why are studies of the long run or *longue durée* important to understand these processes? In 1958, following on from Marx and the first social models on the basis of the historical *longue durée*, Fernand Braudel studied the relationship between agency and environment over the *longue durée*.<sup>94</sup> He studied the *longue durée* of cultures such as Latin civilisation, or the Aristotelian conception of the universe, and noticed that ideas and concepts were joined to the physical environments whilst undergoing change by entering "the changing rivers of time" (Braudel 2009: 202). Braudel saw that the *longue durée* was not

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<sup>94</sup> In which time is *durée* or duration.

eternal but had a beginning and an end, and by viewing societies in this way, it would be possible to see what happened to structures over time.

A contemporaneous crisis of the overarching structures of the system could result in agency interpreting crisis and thinking of creative ways to transform structure with inventions that supersede the structures before them. He also noted that structures that could not be adapted would eventually cease to exist.

“Certain structures, in their long life, become the stable elements of an infinity of generations. They encumber history and restrict it, and hence control its flow. Other structures crumble more quickly. But all structures are simultaneously pillars and obstacles.” (Braudel 2009: 178)

Leach in *Political Systems of Highland Burma* (1970),<sup>95</sup> explores how individual and lineage agency transforms societies in the Kachin Hills of Burma. At the time, anthropology was concerned with looking for stable and consistent characteristics in bounded societies. However, the complex and fluid Kachin Hills required another approach to understand these borderland communities. To tackle this, Leach took a *longue durée* perspective by surveying 150 years of historical records from the region: to examine the Kachins at the beginning and at the end of their social cycle. That structures determined people’s behaviours was taken for granted by Leach. What was crucial for Leach was to understand how Kachin social structure moved from being egalitarian to hierarchical. Through his retrospective analysis, he discovered:

“It was a model of an open-ended system, constrained but not determined by certain “objective” conditions, and capable of an expanding multiplication as well as incorporation of new lineage segments.” (Leach 1970: 84).<sup>96</sup>

Leach described the communities in the Kachin Hills at the beginning of the cycle as gumsa (hierarchical). When the chief was overthrown, the

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<sup>95</sup> A study of the complex Kachin Hill borderlands of Northeast Burma, based on his fieldwork between 1939 and 1943.

<sup>96</sup> Leach further contributes to this debate when he compares the feast of merit with the prestige of receiving and distributing bride wealth amongst the Kachins. Leach identifies the importance of ritual wealth in objects and things as the marker of superiority. He places the individual as central to a process of maximizing power and influence through these objects.

gumsa society became more gumlao (egalitarian).<sup>97</sup> Leach described this as a long-phase political oscillation of tendencies towards one pole to another and that the process by which structures change from small to large and then break down into smaller ones is a process involving structural variation (Leach 1970: 6).

“The ultimate ‘causes’ of social change are, in my view, nearly always to be found in changes in the external political and economic environment; but the form which any change takes is largely determined by the existing internal structure of a given system.” (Leach 1970: 212)

When Leach looked further into the internal system to understand how variation could exist whilst a sense of continuity is achieved in the long run, he discovered that in the Kachin *mayu-dama*<sup>98</sup> marriage system, agency was at work on marriage rules, manipulating structures (“knowledge”) for their own ends – either by wife giving or wife receiving, and that power or influence was wielded when these rules were shaped according to the needs of the person with the most “resources”. This way the marriage system was adapted within the rules of the system, and change was possible whilst stability was maintained. Leach’s monograph was therefore significant in that it sowed the seeds for person-centred theories of agency and practice.

In *Historical Metaphors and Mythical Realities* (1981) Marshall Sahlins also deploys the idea of the *longue durée* in his account of the historical reproduction of Hawaiian social and ritual processes but also focusses on discrete events that triggered processes of cultural reproduction and transformation. Sahlins interpreted the events around Captain James Cook’s visit to the Hawaiian Islands in the late eighteenth century in Hawaiian terms. He claimed that Cook appeared as a specific Hawaiian God because of the direction and time of his arrival, and that he was the

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<sup>97</sup> Gumsa represents the Kachin ideal of a feudal state with a ranked social hierarchy. Gumlao is a ‘democratic’ organisation that could also be in its extreme form a system of anarchic republicanism with no class differences and no chiefs.

<sup>98</sup> *Mayu* denotes lineages from which the ego’s lineage takes brides. *Dama* are the lineages to which women from the ego’s lineage have recently married.

only one of the Europeans who appeared God-like. Cook was associated with the fertility god Lono in the ritual cycle by the priests and incorporated into local cosmology, killed (again as Lono) and his bones kept.<sup>99</sup>

“Through the appropriation of Cook’s bones, the *mana* of the Hawaiian kingship itself became British. And long after the English as men had lost their godliness, the Hawaiian gods kept their Englishness. Moreover, the effect was to give the British a political presence in Hawaiian affairs that was all out of proportion to their actual existence in Hawaiian waters, since they were rapidly displaced in the vital provisioning and sandalwood trade by the Americans.” (Sahlins 1981: 7)

The next king - Kamehameha - inherited Cook’s murder and thus the *mana* and embarked on a policy of friendship and exchange with the British and other visitors. He adopted signs of European civilization such as table manners and clothing. Subsequent rulers saw King George IV of Britain as a ‘brother’. The Hawaiians had therefore approached and appropriated Cook through the lens of their dominant ritual tradition of that time, killed him as part of this same traditional cycle but also, strikingly, acquired Englishness as a result and were changed (or, at least, the chiefs were!).

Cook’s appropriation as the Hawaiian fertility god Lono is a distinctive change for Hawaiians but it also represents continuity within structures of their *longue durée*. In Sahlins’ study, there is agency on structures in the sense that actors find themselves replicating old structures in new circumstances, for example, when Captain Cook appears, the Hawaiians have to decide whether he is Lono or not and when they decide that he is, he is absorbed in the cycle of repetition and reproduction. Sahlins’ study reveals how a creative application of pre-existing cultural categories and schemes of practice to new encounters leads to unforeseen consequences but, in the end, a revaluation of their own cultural concepts resulting in some transformation within continuity. In this work, Sahlins is

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<sup>99</sup> “Hawaiian history often repeats itself, since only the second time is it an event. The first time it is myth.” (Sahlins 1981: 9)

interested not only in how events are ordered by culture, but how, in that process, culture is reordered and transformed.

Structures are reproduced in the *longue durée* for both Leach and Sahlins with agency exerted within the rules of structure, either as part of practice theory or structured variation but ultimately in continuity with an essential core that transmits through time. Whilst Leach and Sahlins privileged the role of agency in absorbing and adapting new elements to ensure stable structures, what if agency is able to do more than reproduce and adapt structures and actually transform them?

Sherry Ortner's *High Religion* (1989) agents have more freedom to make choices and to work within culture to enact real change whilst also occupying places in a structure of long-duration. Central to this is the idea that when pushed to almost collapse, structures can also offer up choices to people. Ortner starts with a pivotal transformative point in Nepali Sherpa history as Khumbu oral histories recount how individuals moved structures towards the building of the first celibate Buddhist monastery. Before this, the Sherpas practised folk Buddhism and priests were able to marry. The first celibate monastery was therefore something new: a new institution with its own rules, organization, values, and ideals. Once set up, a radically new process was set in motion as monks upgraded popular religion as it was brought it in line with monastic values. Therefore, the building of the celibate monastery had a far-reaching impact on Sherpa society as the structures were enabled and transformed. Ortner is interested in the agency behind this transformation: precisely how the monastery was founded, by whom and why, what motivated the actors, how and what had been set into motion.

Ortner finds her answers in key contradictions within the structures that helped to stimulate actors to pursue different scenarios. Crucially, she discovers a significant contradiction in Sherpa inheritance rules - in recurring structures - that came to almost habitual points of collapse. On the surface, all sons inherit land and daughters inherit moveable objects. The contradiction resides in the inheritance rules of birth order, which gives natural authority to some sons whilst none to the other sons.

“The overall effect of this contradiction – of an egalitarianism that is permanently unbalanced by a ranking principle, and a ranking principle that is permanently countered by an egalitarian rule – is a chronic fraternal rivalry that reappears throughout Sherpa history.” (Ortner 1989: 35)

As a result, some younger brothers are pushed into exile out of jealousy and the resulting praxis or shift of context enables new opportunities for those who are looking to increase their social worth.

“Reproduction takes place either because people cannot see alternatives, or do not have the power to institutionalize the alternatives that they see. Changes take place because alternatives become visible, or because actors have or gain the power to bring them into being.” (Ortner 1989: 201)

The contradictions in inheritance rules lead to agency working within structures to generate a certain pattern of action. With a structuralist focus upon scenarios that transmit and endure, Ortner draws upon an interest-theory view of actors as rationalist strategists that develop scenarios that were transposable, resulting in the building of the celibate monastery which transforms society. Through her study, Ortner reveals the importance of cultural mediation and reinterpretation of scenarios that enable structures to transform whilst helping the structures to endure overall.

To summarise, all three theorists demonstrate the importance of studying structures over time to see how structures are reproduced. The Kachins exist in moving equilibrium on the borderlands whilst appearing to be the same and some structural variation is achieved. Within the system, Kachin agents work on marriage rules to bring about social movement, making small changes over time which give the appearance of a society in flux whilst remaining the same. Sahlin’s Hawaiians work within their cultural schemas to incorporate encounters with “the other” and through a process of appropriation, they are slowly transformed as a society. In contrast, Ortner’s Sherpa actors respond to and work with the structural contradictions in their inheritance rules to move to better positions within

society and in the process, instigate the transformation in values that came with the creation of the celibate Buddhist monastery.

In this thesis, we will explore Marma agency on structures, whether in relation to marriage rules or when material culture helps the group to reproduce structures and maintain continuity within contexts of change. This kind of agency is limited to adapting and absorbing, to perpetuate and reproduce structures and the overall system where change is also inevitable. Another form of agency is when actors are presented historically with a choice of scenarios, especially when there are contradictions in structures or when structures reach the point of disintegration. Agency working with or adapting scenarios can result in structures being transformed. This latter approach is an important lens for this thesis as key members of the Marma community employ various strategies to work within structure to adapt it, but also transpose schemas when structures reach the point of collapse.

In this final section, I will outline how all the perspectives in this chapter can provide a useful lens for examining fieldwork data of the Marma community gathered between 2013 and 2015.

### **3.5 Premises and Orientation of the Thesis**

My main contention in this thesis is that border communities and their identity negotiation “need to be taken as processes not givens, and the manner in which they are produced and made to appear as given needs to be studied critically” (Gellner 2013: 5). The CHT region, both alongside and across the border between Bangladesh and Myanmar is an area where groups have moved around, collided with each other and with dominant powers in different periods. Some populations have assimilated to other groups or dispersed, but unlike other groups in the CHT borderlands, the Marma have both asserted and cultivated a sense of ethnic singularity. The Marma people were originally a diasporic group that

slowly over time became a blending, a coalescence, and an amalgam<sup>100</sup> of elements from different but similar groups, as singular ethnic entities were decomposed to be replaced by new configurations. Significantly, this process eventually moved this hybrid group into the direction of a more singular ethnic community.

The chapter explored different ways of understanding the processes of identity formation and the maintenance of a core of cultural practices on the borderlands. From adaptation and assimilation on the boundaries of culture (Barth 1969) as hybrid groups undergo a process of defining the group's basic characteristics in opposition to the other. To understanding the processes at work within culture through creolization, syncretism, entanglement and hybridity (Latour (2005); Hannerz (1987); Herskovits (1937); Stewart (1999); Thomas (1991); and Scott (2005)). These theorists broadly argue that distinctive culture and specific ethnicity is a cultural illusion: rather, 'specific' cultures and societies are the hybrid result of much contact, mixing, diffusion, borrowing and that the only thing that is specific, for any given fleeting moment, is the configuration of their complex hybridity. These theories, whilst pointing towards a fluid process of reconfiguring and recasting of structure, essentially also point to the instability of ethnic essence.

The different approaches with similar conceptual outcomes stress that traditional practice and ethnic identity are invented afresh according to present historical contexts and in response to both internal and/or external pressures (Hobsbawm and Ranger (1983); Handler and Linnekin (1984); Wagner (1975)). Sometimes, cultural invention seems to strengthen singular ethnicity or invention inverts things and tradition is downplayed (Thomas 1999). Other times, through invention and selective borrowing, culture is invented, continually re-invented and recast in the discontinuous present.

Finally, whilst acknowledging changes (inventions, hybridisations, impositions, and excisions) to 'traditional' societies, structural approaches examine enduring

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<sup>100</sup> Some illumination on the following definitions that are relevant to this thesis: blending is mixing that obscures individuality of each component. Coalescing is to unite to become one. Amalgam is a flexibility to change on the way to becoming mosaic. Mosaic is more fixed. Convergence also represents the process of creativity (Hymes 2020).



structures, configurations, scenarios that are core to the organisation of these social spheres and which underpin claims to enduring cultural distinctness and singular ethnicity (Leach (1970); Sahlins (1981); and Ortner (1989)). These theories cover the cultural reproduction of structures in the long run and the sometimes peripheral and sometimes central role of agency on this reproduction. The result is a cultural identity that is continuous (Leach, Sahlins) whilst undergoing transformations (Ortner) when structures reach a point of collapse.

Given the contributions of these perspectives, what then are the premises that inform the organization and analysis of the field material and archival data in this thesis?

They are:

1. The key idea that, whilst ethnic and cultural leaders speak of the vital importance of an 'eternal tradition', historical and ethnographic records show that tradition has changed and is constantly being updated.
2. The equally key idea that, whilst much has changed in the Chittagong Hills both internally to tradition and externally in the relations between states and ethnic groups, a structural core of cultural memory and practice has been reproduced as an active ordering force in Marma lives.
3. That, even as elders and others affirm the undying nature of Marma tradition, they also accept that circumstances today conspire against its reproduction and that in order to conserve it, they may have to change it; or quite possibly, strategically intensify certain practices at the expense of others.

The thesis will describe, explore, and establish the nature of Marma cultural distinctness, given that, as everywhere in the CHT, all populations, communities and groups have experienced changes over the centuries – and are experiencing them now.

Against the grain, the Marma continue to nurture enduring singularity and difference within their social formation as they take measures strategically

to ensure that there is continuity. In the chapters on kinship and marriage, we will see the Barthian position of exploring how encounters with “the other” can result in the fortification of marriage rules and rituals on the boundaries of culture and as part of the reproduction of structures. Looking at marriage customs, I will explore the usefulness of applying Leach’s lineage agency on marriage systems as we come to understand Marma marriage ranking and preference to illustrate how structures are reproduced dynamically from within rules and customs.

In Chapter 6 on Migration and Settlement, an historical *longue durée* view of the Marma group will be offered, as the chapter outlines the migration from Burma, and the negotiation of encounters with other communities that helped to define the group as a creolized culture which was eventually downplayed in favour of a singular Marma identity. We will come to understand the hybrid nature of the group and how interactions with powerful forces in the area led to a reconfiguring of the subgroups within the group as part of a process of creating order in situations of change and chaos.

In Chapter 7 on Marma Material Culture, I will draw upon the concepts of invention and inversion of tradition and myth-making - whilst highlighting the circumstances of hybridization and entanglement that exist in the Marma realm - and which lead to cultural constructions that enshrine the Marma people's identity.

In certain circumstances, agents can (or are forced to) improvise or innovate in structurally shaped ways that significantly reconfigure the very structures that constituted them. All these internal processes occur amidst the trains of events in the CHT that are beyond the control of individual agents and groups. In Chapters 8 and 9, the role of agency on Buddhist power structures will become more prominent as actors and agency’s work on structures lead to the transposition of scenarios. Ortner’s theory of practice is useful here as individuals work with the inconsistencies in society to transform structures. The chapters will examine the rise of one royal monk who came out of a similar fraternal rivalry to Ortner’s Sherpa

community. The transposition of certain Marma scenarios to overcome Marma contradictions will be important when examining the events around this rise of an alternative power in the Marma polity.

Employing the various ideas and approaches of this chapter, the thesis will now explore the ways in which this seemingly stable society is busy accentuating its difference to other groups in a fast-changing environment on the borderlands.

# **Part 2:**

## **Work on Boundaries**

## Chapter 4. Kinship and Marriage

“Kinship and marriage are about the basic facts of life. They are about ‘birth, and copulation, and death’, the eternal round that seemed to depress the poet, but which excites, amongst others, the anthropologist.” (Fox 1967: 27)

From Chapter 2 on the social and historical background of the CHT, the three circle kingdoms were highlighted as being relatively autonomous in an ever-changing nation state. This was because of decisions made by the British colonial powers in the CHT: the historical ‘exclusion’ of the CHT as it became a protectorate, the formation and strengthening of the political structures of the royal circles through the 1900 Regulations Act, and the inclusion of customary law or the tribal guidelines and laws that govern social life to help anchor, for example, the Marma in ancient Burmese practices. Also covered in Chapter 2 were the changing demographics of the CHT as it has become increasingly Bangladeshi, ethnically speaking, and the anxieties this has caused over land ownership in the region.

This chapter of the thesis will study the relational underpinnings of Marma ethnicity: how the Marma people invest in a system of kinship and marriage that make up the key elements of Marma ethnic persistence. Changes in the region have exerted pressures on the Marma group to adopt different marriage practices but the temptation has been rejected in favour of retaining a ‘traditional’ system of kinship and marriage, and especially insisting upon the primacy of long-established marriage rules. There appears to be an essential aspect of being Marma that is secured through the functioning of a specific system of kinship in which marriage rules and customs have endured, according to literature sources, since the 1800s if not earlier. The aim of this chapter will be to describe the Marma kinship system that has persisted and the corresponding marriage rules, concluding with an in-depth analysis of the ethnographic data on Marma marriage rituals and ceremonies which are at the core of Marma kinship.

The chapter will begin with a comparative look at local kinship practices as context to Marma kinship practice in the region.

## 4.1 Kinship Practices in the Region

In anthropological literature, kinship is about social relations of descent and affinity, relations of identity and membership and also relations of marriage or non-marriage between groups and categories of individuals. Most studies examine descent groups<sup>101</sup> or a close-knit group of interrelated families because it contributes to the understanding of how groups organize relatedness and reproduction. Robin Fox explains this in his seminal work, *Kinship and Marriage* (1967):

“We can always look at what anthropologists have called ‘kinship relations’ in two ways: on the one hand, we can look at the total society and ask how it forms its kinship groups....and how they function, and on the other, we can look at the network of relationships that bind individuals to each other in the ‘web’ of kinship.” (Fox 1967: 22)

What do kinship systems look like in the CHT region? Studying kinship in this corner of the world is challenging given that it is a meeting point between different ethnicities and religions with various histories of migration and assimilation. This section will describe a selection of different kinship systems and their unique characteristics as a backdrop to the study of Marma kinship.

The most detailed study of kinship systems in the region can be found in numerous studies written by Leach (1945, 1951, 1970). The Kachins at the time of Leach’s fieldwork were made up of several ethnic groups, and the main subset group were the Jinghpaw group. Leach applies Jinghpaw kinship terminology when examining general kinship in the Kachin hills and he focusses on one specific Kachin gumsa community called the Hpalang in his monograph (Leach 1970).

The Hpalang in the 1940s consisted of 130 households and one fifth of the Hpalang community were nominally Christians (Leach 1970: 67-72). Hpalang marriage preferences followed the rules of the *mayu-dama* system which Leach saw as the identifying characteristic of Kachin social structure. *Mayu* (wife-givers)

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<sup>101</sup> Often, the assumption is that descent groups have a traceable genealogical link or a common ancestral link through male or female ancestors or both, which constitute the organizing principle of a descent group.

is the name used by families of the husband to describe the family of the wife. *Dama* (wife-takers) is the word used to describe the family of the husband by the family of the wife. Families are both *mayu* and *dama* in their relationships to other families and when any two Kachin meet, they should be able to establish their relationship according to *mayu-dama*. The marriage preferences are for a man to marry into his *mayu* and for a woman to marry into her *dama* and the system is one of matrilineal cross-cousin marriage (Leach 1970: 136). The *dama* gives *hpaga* - ritual wealth – to the *mayu* as bride-price and this can include cattle, money, gongs, liquor, cloth, clothing, coats, blankets, and jewellery (Leach 1970: 60).

Descent for the Hpalang is patrilineal with each individual inheriting one or more lineage surnames from the father. The individuals who share the same surname are considered to be close patrilineal kin and are of one household – *htinggaw* (Leach 1970: 73). For Hpalang, succession rules follow the rule of ultimogeniture inheritance whereby the youngest son gains possession of his deceased father's estate. Marriage is patrilocal, that is, the youngest son continues to live in the house of his father, whilst other sons build houses nearby. In contrast, a woman on marriage leaves her own home and goes to that of her husband. The normal Hpalang village consists essentially of a single patrilineal-patrilocal group which is exogamous. The concept of incest and illicit sexual relationships is embodied in the term *Jaiwawng*: sexual relations between a man and a woman of his own lineage are breaches of the rules of exogamy (Leach 1970: 136-137).

The largest group in the CHT – the Chakma, were studied by Lévi-Strauss (1952a) and more recently by Barua (2001). Even though the Chakma chiefs took Muslim and Hindu names throughout their history, the Chakma have always been to a greater or lesser extent Buddhist (Barua 2001: 31-32; Hutchinson 1978: 25). Lévi-Strauss notes that Chakma kinship terms are the only ones in the CHT that are mostly derived from Bengali as even in the 1950s, it appears that they were assimilated towards Bengali culture, in both language and dress. According to Barua (2001: 36-37) kinship groups of Chakma society are called *goza* which are divided into numerous *gusti* or patrilines. Earliest descriptions of the Chakma group claim thirty-three *goza* plus seven for the Tanchangya, a subdivision of the tribe (Lewin 1869: 73). The Chakma can marry both within the *goza*

(endogamous) or outside the *goza* (exogamous). The Chakma follow patrilineal descent and inheritance is transmitted from father to sons (Barua 2001: 36). From Lévi-Strauss, we learn that both parallel marriage with mother's sister's daughter and cross-cousin marriage can take place with a father's sister's daughter and mother's brother's daughter (Lévi-Strauss 1952a: 42-43). There are two routes to marriage: marriage by elopement whereby the guilty couple are first of all fined cash and a pig. When the couple repeat their action three times and pay the associated fines, the marriage becomes final, and the girl's parents must abide by their daughter's choice. Secondly, there is marriage by purchase, whereby the bridegrooms' family raise a bride price that includes money, ornaments, cloth, pigs, rice, and rice-beer. Marriage is ordinarily patrilocal except when the father is close to his daughter and it is possible that for the first year or two, the husband could reside at his parents-in-law's house, working for them and the bride-price is lowered accordingly to reflect this (Lévi-Strauss 1952a: 43).

Since rural Bangladesh is similar to the hill tracts, Mashreque's 1998 study of kinship in rural Bangladesh provides comparative insights into Bangladeshi kinship. We learn that the descent principle is patrilineal with patrilocal residence with the shift of residence usually undertaken by the bride. Members of the patrilineage and extended patrilocal families live in a common residential compound called homestead or *bari* containing several small houses. The internal cohesion of the kinship structure remains the function of the *bari* head and patrilineage is the core of the social organisation incorporating all the agnates and their spouses. The *bari* head arbitrates small disputes in the courtyard between the interacting households and arrangement of family events, and rituals like birth, circumcision and marriage is usually made in consultation with the *bari* head (Mashreque 1998: 52).<sup>102</sup> However, bilateral descent principles also operate, as the maternal kinship connection is often valued. However, the degree of matrilineality is not significant in rural Bengali groups compared to Chakma and Marma systems.

Shenk et al. (2016) examines consanguineous marriage patterns in rural Bangladesh, where the traditionally agrarian region is increasingly engaging with

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<sup>102</sup> The members of homestead, bound together by common interests and sentiment, pay loyalty to the *bari* head as a manifestation of unity and cohesion.



the global market economy and the challenges this places on marriage preferences (Shenk et al. 2016: 167). A consanguineous marriage is a union between two individuals who are related as second cousins or closer. Marriages are generally arranged by parents, with a focus on endogamy within families. The advantages of these marriage unions are that they reinforce existing kin relatedness, cohesiveness, and loyalty to one's kin group. Importantly, consanguineous marriages allow kin groups to keep dowries small and limit the subdivision of property and/or the sharing of such property with non-kin.<sup>103</sup> Poorer households are more likely to engage in consanguineous unions because of their inability to pay a dowry up front, while wealthier parents who are able to pay higher dowries are motivated to search for a husband outside of the kin group.<sup>104</sup> With a shift to industrialization and urbanization, there is often a decrease in land ownership and increase in education and occupational change – these factors can reduce consanguinity and with more wealth, dowries can be raised. Therefore, both endogamy and exogamy marriage rules are in operation in Bangladeshi kinship (Shenk et al 2016: 169-177). The patrilineal descent principles regulate the possession of ancestral property, and they follow the Muslim law of inheritance with the son being entitled to two-thirds share of his father's property and a daughter, to one-third share. Although a Muslim woman is legally entitled to inherit a small portion of ancestral property, she is expected to give up the claim in favour of her brothers. In exchange, she receives gifts and valuable possessions and can expect protection from her natal family and may regain her rights of maintenance in the case of divorce or widowhood (Mashreque 1998: 56-57).

This section explored a selection of groups operating in the CHT and bordering region which have different kinship practices. It also revealed that whilst some of the groups are different, there is some overlap in kinship practices. We will return to the overlap in kinship customs throughout this chapter.

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<sup>103</sup> Another common belief is that a marriage between family members may ease the transition for the bride and ensure a more caring attitude from her in-laws, leading to greater marital stability.

<sup>104</sup> The data presented in Shenk et al. (2016) suggest that consanguineous marriage decisions are often strategic. For example, a daughter with no brothers might marry a cousin to retain rights to family property, or a family might choose to marry an educated daughter to an unrelated spouse in order to "make new relatives."

## 4.2 Marma Principles of Descent, Rules, and Residence

This section summarizes key elements of the social organization of the Marma people.

### 4.2.1 Patrilineal

Marma kinship is a mix of various settlement patterns that reflect the wave of migrations into the area across four centuries of Marma history. My observations in the field corroborate the earlier works of Lévi-Strauss (1952a and 1952b) and Bernot (1967), in that the Marma groups are divided into patrilineal descent groups and each group lives in and are defined by their particular locality. These descent groups migrated separately but at some point, converged in the CHT to establish the Marma community. More details on this will be covered in Chapter 6 on Marma migration and settlement, but for the purposes of understanding Marma kinship, this section will briefly cover the most salient points that relate to kinship.

The earliest descriptions of CHT clans come from Lewin (1885) when he describes the dwellers of the Hill tracts roughly as two clans: Khyoung-tha or children of the river and Toung-tha, children of the hill. In the late 1800s, the Khyoung-tha were made up of one group of 36,000 “Mughs” under the Bohmong, they lived near the river, were of Arakanese descent, followed Buddhism and spoke the language “of which Burmese is a modern offshoot.” (Lewin 1885: 226). Lewin sees the Toung-tha as being of Singpho origin but also made up of different groups of different origins.<sup>105</sup>

Later, in the 1950s, Levi-Strauss identified 13 patrilineal “clans” for the Mog, each clan being named after the region from whence they came from: whether Burma or the names of various places where they settled during the migration to the CHT.

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<sup>105</sup> This group include Bunjogis, Pankhos, Mros, Tipras (Lewin 1885: 227).

“The Kioprusa clan is said to be the oldest settled in the Hill tracts, while the 1885 came later from Arakan and submitted their predecessors to their rule.” (Lévi-Strauss 1952a: 50)

The Rigiesa clan, that had migrated from Arakan, was headed by the Bohmong chief. The other clan of similar origins was headed by the Mong Chief of the Palangsa clan.<sup>106</sup> Mills describes in detail the connection between the Bohmong and the Rigiesa clan as the one permanent feature of their history. More than once the Bohmong was driven from the land he occupied, but he never lost his clan chieftainship, and when he eventually moved up from the South to his present home, the Rigiesa clan formed the bulk of his followers whilst other clans, notably the Palangsa clan to which the Mong *Raja* belongs, continued to move up into the Chittagong Hill Tracts by another route.

“To this day the Rigiesa clan are sons of the Bohmong and it is through his rights as clan chief of the most numerous of the Magh clans that he has been able to extend his entirely distinct *jhum* tax collecting rights over other communities” (Mills 1926/7: 77).

The Mong Chief is the second political authority of Marma society. Both clans are described as being patrilineal, but with some elements of matrilineal residence<sup>107</sup> (Lévi-Strauss 1952a: 211; 1952: 50). For example, of the three circles of power in the CHT, there was a form of matrilineal residence at the top of the Mong circle when a woman became the leader and held power for many years in the absence of a male heir. More recently, Khan (1999a) identifies 8 clans in Bandarban district but the clans relevant to Bandarban town are those clans that live on the banks of the Sangu River and the clan that lives south of the Karnafuli river (Khan 1999: 115 and 190).

Interviews conducted by Ahamed (2004) on kinship in the CHT reveals that Marma patrilineal kin groups could only be described accurately for two to three

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<sup>106</sup> According to Mills, the connection between the Bohmong and the “Regratsa clan” (Rigiesa) is the one permanent feature of their history. More than once the Bohmong was driven from the land he occupied, but he never lost his clan chieftainship, and when he eventually moved up from the South to his present home the Regratsa clan formed the bulk of his followers, other clans, notably the Palangsa (Palatine) clan to which the Mong Raja belongs, moving up into the Chittagong Hill Tracts by another route. To this day the Regratsa clan are sons of the Bohmong and it is through his rights as clan chief of the most numerous of the Magh clans that he has been able to extend his entirely distinct *jhum* tax collecting rights over other communities (Mills 1926/7: 77).

<sup>107</sup> A woman lives with her children and sometimes her daughter's children, without coresident husbands or other adult men.

generations back. Ahamed studied aspects of kinship in a small town called Roangchari in the Bohmong circle, which is home to an important Buddhist pilgrimage site. This localized group was split into lineage segments. Although some descriptions covered stories of legendary ancestors,<sup>108</sup> the group came to be defined by the location of settlement as they collectively worked on establishing the new boundaries of their land. The Bohmong was not seen as a traditional clan chief but a leader in exile from Burma that led a hybrid group during its migration across the region and his elevation to circle leader by the British was a relatively recent innovation. Moreover, the clans of the CHT were classified as having access to common lands and their rights to *jhum* cultivation and the boundaries of those lands were enshrined in the 1900 Regulations Act. Marma land ownership will be explored in more detail in Chapter 5.

Similar to the Kachin's *mayu-dama* rules (Leach 1970), the Marma clans practise clan exogamy since clan members consider themselves to be of common blood and therefore marriage with one's own clan would be like a marriage with one's own family and therefore taboo.

“The rule of clan exogamy remains as rigid as it was in the past: any breach is not tolerated.” (Khan 1999a: 116).

Thus clan exogamy and, as we will see later in this thesis, tribal endogamy go hand in hand in the Marma community.

#### **4.2.2 Residence: The family - *Oeingsa* – compound of Shwe May Prue**

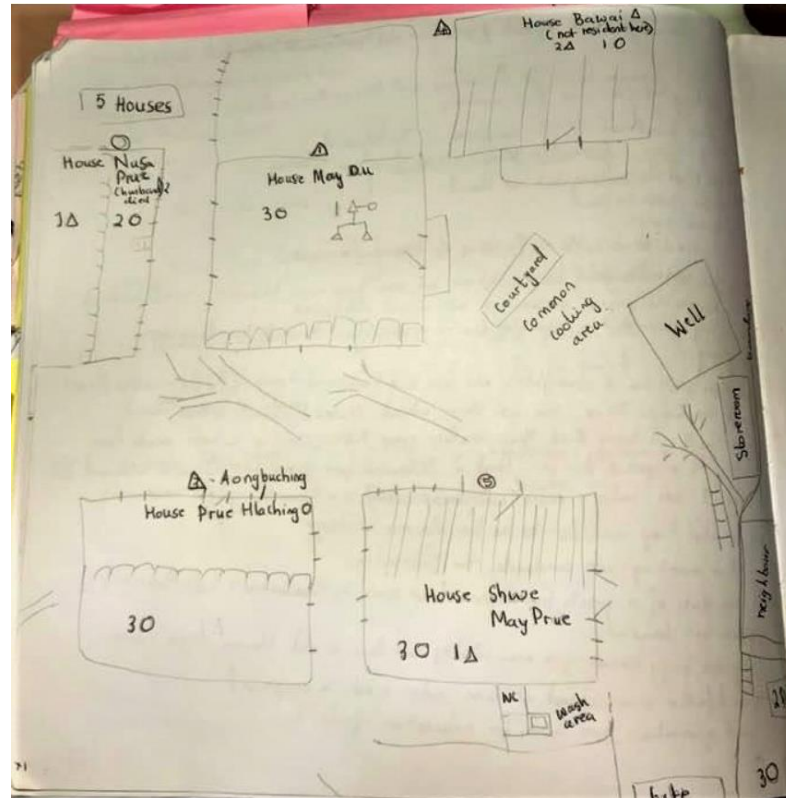
Lévi-Strauss noted that the Mog clans were patrilineal but with some matrilineal elements in the household (Lévi-Strauss 1952a: 211-12). Defining the ‘household’ from a Marma perspective, a Marma household is called an *oeingsa* with branch households established within the vicinity of the main or core household, sometimes even as part of the main household and like the Bangladesh *bari*, the

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<sup>108</sup> Tracing back their settlement history and ancestry, Ahamed reveals that the group originated from two legendary figures - *puri* and *pube*. Although Ahamed does not provide details on these legendary figures or their migration history, we do learn that the *pube* group were the first settlers of the Roangchari and expanded gradually splitting into different lineage segments. Long after the settlement of *pube* group, the *puri* also settled in the same area.

Marma compound is made up of patrilineal family units headed by the eldest brother of the family.

**Figure 4: The host family compound of 5 households. Diagram shows layout of compound as well as family composition. The triangle represents male and circle, female**



In my host family, the eldest brother of the family lived in the centre of the compound and all his siblings lived around him. In the main household of the senior brother, the eldest daughter was unmarried, the second had eloped with a Bengali Hindu and the third had married my local helper in the town - Sai Sing. In the compound, another brother had married a Rakine from Cox's Bazaar and the family were dress makers. One of the brothers had died and had left a widow and her children. The only sister - Shwe May Prue of the main household - lived with her husband, and two of her daughters at the time of fieldwork were married and resided abroad. One daughter was at home and another son eventually went abroad. The family of the sister - Shwe May Prue - were the wealthiest of all the families on the compound, but still daily respect was shown to the eldest brother. During my visit, I came to learn that all members of this compound shared in

shopping, food preparations and religious rituals, and went on organized trips to various local temples.<sup>109</sup>

From the host family in Bandarban town, we can see the distinctive features of Marma *oeingsa* organization that strengthen the family as it links members by economic, social and ritual co-operation. This household organization is a common feature of both the royal and non-royal families, and in both rural and urban settings (Khan 1999a: 61-63; Ahamed 2004: 120-123). Additionally, Ahamed details the extent of the cooperation in the rural setting of Roangchari, placing food sharing as central to the relationship:

“... the way *oeingsa* is defined among the Marma people has various crosscutting aspects between kin and non-kin, between sharing or not sharing food. Marma often say even distant members of the lineage can be included as members of *oeingsa* as long as they eat from the same cooking pot and share economic activities.” (Ahamed 2004: 121)

The *oeingsa* is therefore not only a biological unit but also unit of economic cooperation. However, in the urban setting, only those with access to land and therefore some wealth can maintain such a system of social and economic cooperation.

#### **4.2.3 Descent and Marriage Preference**

In *Kinship Systems of Three Chittagong Hill Tribes* (1952a), Lévi-Strauss observes that the ideal Marma kinship model sees descent through the male line and that the Marma people strictly prohibit marriage within members of a patrilineage. Similar to Leach's Hpalang group (1970) that follow matrilineal cross-cousin marriage preference, the Marma “state that the ideal spouse for a man is his *mari*, i.e., the bilateral cross-cousin...” (Lévi-Strauss 1952a: 49). In other words, a male Marma cannot marry his parallel cousin who is the daughter of his father's brother or the daughter of his mother's sister, as the union would fall under an incest taboo, as the parallel cousins are part of the subject's (ego's)

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<sup>109</sup> Whilst these shared rituals helped to create a sense of unity as they worked together to thank the eldest brother for heading the compound, they were divided when it came to which *kyang* to worship at. One household followed a monk called Guru Bhante and went to his private temple, whilst others worshipped exclusively at the *royal kyang*. This division was a relatively new phenomenon that emerged in the last 10 years. Moreover, this household was related to the 14<sup>th</sup> Bohmong so they had an uneasy relationship with 15<sup>th</sup> Bohmong family.

lineage.<sup>110</sup> Marriage between cross cousins who are the first cousins of the mother's brother (maternal uncle's child) or of the father's sister (paternal aunt's child) is permitted. Cross-cousin marriage secures and reproduces exogamy i.e., marrying out of the father's descent line, allowing people to marry someone who is descended from distant Marma ancestors but who is not in the father's descent line.<sup>111</sup> Moreover, a cross-cousin marriage can preserve close family wealth, maintain geographic proximity, and family structure. Considering that the Marma are a community of circa 300,000 people, the most challenging prohibition for the Marma is parallel cousin marriage. There are 3 instances of parallel cousin marriages in the recent history of the royal family, and I was informed that the members involved have been removed from the royal genealogy map, ostracized and/or disinherited from royal lands.<sup>112</sup>

One important characteristic that differentiates the Marma people from the Kachins, Chakma and Bangladeshi are that women enjoy more freedom in a selection of a husband. When Lewin (1885) writes about the custom of marriage by elopement, he is effectively saying that a couple can force a marriage to take place and that the bride-to-be has agency in making this possible. The young men of the village go in pursuit of the runaway couple. If they are caught, the girl is asked if she wants to leave her family home and if she agrees, then the lover is fined by the girl's family. If the lover cannot pay or come to a new arrangement, he is beaten by the community (Lewin 1885: 232).

Lévi-Strauss also observed in the 1950s that women have more freedom:

“On a more psychological level, one is struck by the great freedom enjoyed by women, contrasting with both the Hindu and the Muslim patterns which have permeated Cakma society to a greater extent.” (Lévi-Strauss 1952a: 51).

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<sup>110</sup> Unilineality is a system of determining descent groups in which one belongs to one's father's or mother's line.

<sup>111</sup> A cousin from a parent's same-sex sibling, while a cross-cousin is from a parent's opposite-sex sibling. Thus, a parallel cousin is the child of the father's brother (paternal uncle's child) or of the mother's sister (maternal aunt's child), while a cross-cousin is the child of the mother's brother (maternal uncle's child) or of the father's sister (paternal aunt's child). Where there are unilineal descent groups in a society (i.e. matrilineal and/or patrilineal), one's parallel cousins on one or both sides will belong to one's own descent group, while cross-cousins will not (assuming descent group exogamy).

<sup>112</sup> Guru Bhante is the grandson of the 13<sup>th</sup> Bohmong King and became a monk after a long career as District Judge. The story goes that he fell in love with a parallel cousin when he was a young adult and they conducted a secret affair. As a member of the royal family, he was disgraced by this romantic relationship. He returned to Bandarban as a monk since this elevates a person in society. It is widely believed that Guru Bhante chose celibacy over marriage to make right a transgression and to regain respect.

A strategy to force a marriage in the Marma community is also elopement. During the fieldwork, I came to learn that Dauki and her husband had known each other all their lives and were expected to marry. Dauki's partner was eager to leave the area to work but wanted to take Dauki with him. However, he was not in a financial position to offer a huge bride price. They forced the issue by eloping to the nearest town on the coast - Cox's Bazaar. The parents were outraged and in order to regain the honour for their daughter, they organized a hasty wedding, and the bride price was put on hold until he could raise the funds. Dauki and her partner could share from the same plate at the wedding and the holding of hands was witnessed by the community. This route saved on family expenses because the wedding had to be organized with haste. However, elopement can be a source of shame in that it exposes the fact that the child has not shown courtesy to his or her parents as filial respect is important. If elopement is the result of parent's disapproval, there is an even greater loss of face. Moreover, there is a blemish on the daughter as it is assumed that she has already had sexual relations with her partner.

“Hence, elopement, in a typical Burmese circumlocution, is compared to the exchange of an unripe jackfruit, which has been beaten to look ripe, for a copper coin, which has been polished with mercury to look like silver.” (Spiro 1977: 191).

Since the Marma group are mainly patrilocal, the bride usually follows the husband to his family home: the *Khamaji* (bride) *Laikte* (following husband). These customs and practices are broadly in line with Bangladeshi marriage customs. However, some of the characteristics related to Marma marriage (and inheritance) rules are more complex and ambiguous. Unlike other patrilineal groups within and outside of the CHT, such as the Bawm, Tanchangya and Bangladeshi, the Marma people are exceptional in allowing Marma women to enjoy a substantial degree of authority in terms of a share of the inheritance of property and decision-making in the household. The Marma group also accept a daughter's husband as a member of the household if the husband is not able to offer patrilocal residence. This was the case for princess Lily's household. Her father was a non-royal who lived in the royal compound with his princess wife.

Moreover, if a Marma couple have only one daughter, the patrilineal descent rule of the Marma people is subordinated to a form of 'matrilocality' where the



daughter's husband moves to the residence of his in-laws.<sup>113</sup> Matrilocal residence - *Thamak* (son-in-law) *takt* (lives in house with her) - often comes with no social stigma attached to the male, even though in Bangladeshi society, this would be considered a lowering of the social status of the husband. The Marma group, therefore, follow both patrilocal and matrilocal residence patterns. Significantly, if a husband in a matrilocal setting inherits property or land from his own family, the husband will take this with him to his new home. If he dies, his wife becomes the caretaker of his inherited land until the heirs come of age.

#### 4.2.4 Rank

It is unclear whether the wife-giver or the wife-taker is ranked higher in the Marma marriage system. This concept of ranking was fully explored in relation to *mayu-dama*<sup>114</sup> marriage rules with the Kachins. Lévi-Strauss' work on Kachin marriage-exchange inspired Leach to explore this further in *The Structural Implications of Matrilateral Cross-Cousin Marriage* (1951: 23-55) which was then fleshed out in *Political Systems* as part of a new dynamic theory.<sup>115</sup> A debate between Leach and Lévi-Strauss that lasted 18 years (1951-1969) saw both anthropologists grapple with the question of who had higher rank – the wife-giver or the wife-taker. In Kachin *mayu-dama* marriage rules, both Leach and Lévi-Strauss see actors as part of the process, manipulating structures (“knowledge”) for their own ends – either by wife giving or wife receiving. Power or influence can be wielded when these rules are shaped according to the needs of the person with the most “resources”. *Mayu* denotes lineages from which the ego's lineage takes brides. *Dama* are the lineages to which women from the ego's lineage have recently married. Mixed with this is the idea of hypogamy, which is the act of marrying someone of a lower social and economic class than your own, and hypergamy which is the action of marrying a person of a superior caste or class. Both

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<sup>113</sup> For the Marma, the parent-daughter bond is strong with the youngest daughters often staying with their parents and enjoying land or property whilst the parents are still alive. Other children inherit after death and sons also inherit substantial property from their wives.

<sup>114</sup> *Mayu-dama* (affinal relationship): There is a preferred marriage for a man to marry into his *mayu* and for a woman to marry into her *dama* (Leach 1970: 136).

<sup>115</sup> Leach's dynamic theory emerges out of an analysis of the forces in movement or principles in action that can change society and these forces are individuals not societal structures who manipulate aspects of society structure to further their own ends.

concepts of hypogamy and hypergamy became central to understanding and interpreting rank and prestige in Kachin marriage exchange.

For Lévi-Strauss, although wife-givers give to lower status, and take in return bride wealth, it is the wife-receivers that are superior as they gain a higher status wife (Lévi-Strauss 1969: 325, 336, 587). In opposition to this, Leach refuted Lévi-Strauss's idea that bride wealth in marriage went in one direction - in the direction of the wife-taker or the one of lower status.<sup>116</sup> Leach posited that *mayu* are of higher rank than *dama*, i.e., wife-givers are of higher rank than wife-takers.

“...Yet the facts of the case, as I hope to have demonstrated with reasonable clarity (Leach 1951: 1954), are that the superior status of the chiefs depends on the multiplicity of their obligations to give women away.” (Leach 1969: 282)

Leach, unlike Lévi-Strauss, had done field work in the area and believed from his own observations that the wife-giver who gives to a lower status family and takes in return bride wealth is superior as they gain material advantage. Moreover, Leach uncovered that individuals working within the rules use marriage as a direct instrument of political alliance, stimulating social movement between the ranks and creating influence. Leach saw that *mayu-dama* rules delivered stability to society whilst at the same time, the social movement that came through marriage alliances created a ‘moving equilibrium’.<sup>117</sup> What is interesting about this debate is the focus on the agency of actors on marriage customs by both theorists and their own perception of what has higher value - social position or material wealth.

In reality, in the context of any social system that is divided between nobles and commoners, marriages across this division could be either hypergamous or hypogamous, reflecting the myriad needs of families at any given moment. Therefore, applying this debate to a Marma marriage is interesting but far from conclusive. For example, a Marma marriage appears to reinforce strict societal structures with little class mobility and the ranking of wife-giver and wife-taker is not clear. During fieldwork, there was evidence of marriages of equal rank being

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<sup>116</sup> Lévi-Strauss-type marriage implied a circular system of marriage whereby clans A marries B, B marries C, C marries A. According to Lévi-Strauss, wealth objects as part of this marriage move in one direction and women in another, whilst the status of participating groups remain stable.

<sup>117</sup> Leach agreed with Lévi-Strauss that kinship systems do not always deliver enduring and stable societies but was more interested to see how these processes were interlocked within a wider political and economic system.

the most prized, especially amongst the royal families. Sons of the 14<sup>th</sup> Bohmong were married to princesses from the Bohmong and Mong Circles. One of the princes - Shwe Prue - married a Mong princess from Khagrachari to maintain royal bloodlines. On the other hand, a dark-skinned daughter from the 14<sup>th</sup> Bohmong was married to a pale-skinned commoner with the hope that the children would be lighter in skin tone.<sup>118</sup> There were also examples of marriages between princesses and the sons of headmen who were of lower social rank but brought land and wealth to the union. I came across one example of an impoverished prince who married a lower ranked girl who had trained as a doctor, and therefore the marriage brought economic opportunities to the prince and his family, whilst providing the bride's family with a higher status.

Levi-Strauss (1952a) also noticed in his Mog village that Marma girls appear to enjoy a great amount of independence and freedom and that they are permitted to mix freely with men. He illustrates this with the example of a divorce that had taken place at the woman's instigation and without the husband's consent. The woman in question then went on to remarry five times (Levi-Strauss 1952a: 51). Based on these additional insights, it appears that in Marma society, a wife-giver could be of higher rank as not only does the wife bring with her an inheritance from her father and a bride price to her own family but also a woman in Marma society is valued in her own right.

### **4.3 Summary: Principles of Descent, Marriage, and Residence**

A comparative look at communities in and around the CHT on ideal marriage and residence rules reveals the specificity of Marma kinship. In the table below, the summary of the key features of regional kinship practices show that the elements that make Marma rules uniquely revolve around the position of women in Marma society. Marma girls can choose who they marry. There is provision for an inheritance for women (to be covered in Chapter 5), as well as the possibility of matrilineal residence. It seems that the Marma people have more in common with Chakma and Hpalang on marriage customs with the bridegroom's family giving

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<sup>118</sup> To counter the darker tones in the family bloodline and therefore produce children who would look more "royal" in a Burmese rather than in a South Indian sense, was also often cited as a goal in marriage unions.

wealth to the bride's family, and both the Marma and Chakma groups are able to force a marriage to happen through elopement. All groups have less in common with the majority Bengali culture, but the Marma *oeingsa* has a similar social organisation to the Bengali *bari* residence, whereby the eldest son oversees the economic cooperation of the households that make up the compound.

**Table 1 Showing comparative key characteristics of local kinship and descent principles**

| Group   | Succession                               | Descent     | Residence                   | Marriage Preference   | Marriage Customs                                     | Taboos                                | Terminology     |
|---------|--|-------------|-----------------------------|---|--|---------------------------------------|-----------------|
| Hpalang | Ultimogeniture<br>Father to youngest son | Patrilineal | Patrilocal                  | <i>Mayu-dama</i><br>exogamy<br><br>Matrilateral cross cousin marriage | <i>Hpaga</i> =<br><br>Bridegroom gives wealth        | <i>Jaiwawng</i><br>Sex in own lineage | <i>Jinghpaw</i> |
| Chakma  | Father to sons                           | Patrilineal | Patrilocal                  | Clan exogamy<br>Parallel cousins                                      | Bride purchase<br><br>Elopement                      |                                       | Bengali         |
| Bengali | Father to sons                           | Patrilineal | Patrilocal – <i>bari</i>    | Consanguineous<br><br>Kin endogamy                                    | Dowry from wife's family                             |                                       | Bengali/Hindu   |
| Marma   | Father to sons + daughters               | Patrilineal | Patrilocal – <i>oeingsa</i> | Bilateral cross cousin<br><br>Clan exogamy, ethnic endogamy           | Girls can choose<br><br>Bride price<br><br>Elopement | Parallel cousins from own lineage     | Burmese         |

For the Marma, ethnic endogamy is maintained but strict rules of clan exogamy and the taboos on parallel cousin marriage are challenges to the group in present day CHT. In the next chapter, a more recent phenomenon of a lack of marriageable male Marma partners has put pressure on Marma clan exogamy and ethnic endogamy, instigating a reversal of the trend of wife-givers having more prestige in favour of wife-takers. Marma inheritance rules will also be explored in greater detail since there are fears around marital breakdown and divorce that exposes women to the possibility of out-marriage or a second marriage, which may result in her inheritance leaving the community.

The next section of this chapter will address some of the anxieties by covering the rituals, rules and social involvement in Marma marriage that come together to try and ensure a longstanding marriage. It will also examine how marriage rituals

bring together a hybrid of spiritual forms as animist rituals are mingled with Buddhist practice.

#### **4.4 *Chameng Than Pwe*: “To be Put on the Path Together”**

This section of the chapter will examine ethnographic data on the arrangement of Marma marriages, and the rules, customs and rituals relating to weddings. A detailed analysis of the ethnographic data illuminates how Marma cultural practices are reproduced over time and how social anxieties that manifest as disorder are managed through ritual. Marma marriage rituals ensure the continuity of rules, as well as help the marriage to have the best possible outcome. This section will demonstrate how the singularity of kinship exemplifies the distinctness of the Marma people in this fluid area and how it processually contributes to the reproduction of this distinctness.

The ethnographic data is based on attendance and participation in 9 Marma weddings: 6 were royal marriages in Bandarban town; and 3 were commoner marriages of which 2 were amongst the rural poor and 1 amongst the rural rich. A Marma marriage takes place over 2 days, starting and closing in the evening.

The data collected is based on my observations of the various steps and rituals involved. These observations were checked with elders and experts on marriage customs, astrology and the texture of the ceremonies. The marriage experts lived in Mro Chyang (Bamboo Stream) village and included: Headman Chimie Dulupara who was in charge of the village of over 240 families engaged in *jhum* and cotton cultivation; Thui Mong was a 60 year old farmer; Pijn Shwe Thui (Flower Gold Youngest) was a 76-year-old astrologer and a monk in Mandalay for circa 5 years; San Aung Prue (Standard Victory White) was 65 years old and a *medechar*. and Aung Kyaw Chau (Victory and Famous) was 36 years old and a master builder of Pagodas. See Figure 5 for elders and experts on marriage rituals.

**Figure 5: The Elders (at the time of fieldwork) and the Ethnographer**



I also consulted local literature on marriage ceremonies. Marma interlocutors claim that marriage in the community follows a set of rules that have been orally passed down from one generation to the next. According to the elders, the Marma people follow a set of marriage rules that are unchanged since their migration to the CHT. For a full list of terminology, see the Glossary of Terms.

#### **4.4.1 The Steps Involved in a Marma Marriage**

##### *Astrologers and the Importance of Names in a Marriage*

Before an official engagement, the couple's family consult with a well-respected astrologer<sup>119</sup> to check the compatibility of names that are given at birth. At birth, a baby is taken to the *Kyang* (temple) to be presented to the monk. The monk selects 3 Marma names based on the sibling position, the appearance and characteristics of the baby, and the day of the week of birth. Since the Marma people believe in the Buddhist doctrine of reincarnation, sometimes a child that comes into this world takes on the form of an ancestor and will accordingly take an aspect of the ancestor's name. Naming often reflects the day of the week that a baby was born called a birth day and the compatibility of these birth days in a couple is important. For example, a person born on Saturday may marry someone born on Tuesday, Thursday, and Wednesday; a person born on Sunday is

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<sup>119</sup> Bernot also mentions the centrality of the astrologer in marriage in the Marma community of the 1950s (Bernot 1967b: 180).

compatible with someone born on a Tuesday and Friday; one born on Monday is "friendly" with Thursday and Friday; one born on Wednesday is "friendly" with Saturday, Thursday and Monday; one born on Thursday is "friendly" with Tuesday, Wednesday and Saturday. Thus, to achieve a good outcome for a marriage and future prosperity, the Marma people share their birth days before becoming engaged as it enables prospective partners to see whether they are astrologically compatible.<sup>120</sup>

The astrologer also consults the birth charts of the candidates and considers planetary and stellar influences on the birth charts of the couple before he gives the final verdict on whether the pair are astrologically friendly or favourable to each other.<sup>121</sup> The guardians take the birth charts to the Buddhist monk or another expert astrologer. The monk or astrologer consults the two birth charts and decides on the wedding date and the hour considered lucky for the future couple, in the presence of their guardians. He also takes into account cross-cousin rules and preferences.

*Engagement to Marriage: Mya (wife) Mui (ask) Jaung (for) Laarey (going) or "I want the daughter for my son"*

Marriages are arranged, or partially assisted by the two families in the case of acceptable love marriages between cross-cousins. In the first stage, a proposition of marriage is made: several relatives and friends initiate 'diplomatic talks', making trips to the two families and their candidates. The initiative comes from the bridegroom's side. On a fortuitous day, which is usually calculated by an astrologer, the bridegroom's parents with some of their friends and relatives, in a group comprised of an odd number of people, take a bottle of rice wine to the legal guardian of the would-be bride. In rural settings, they also take a cockerel, which has been boiled, 1 special dish, which is usually wild jungle potatoes cooked with dried fish and wrapped in banana leaves. These items are taken to the bride's house before the cock crows or *IngThang Cho* – when marriage speaks.

The *oingh* or 'gift of wine', covered in a scarf, is opened when the bride's side

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<sup>120</sup> It seems that Marma people living as a majority in the Bohmong circle tend to have three names whilst Marma people in the Mong Circle, as a minority in a mostly Tripura region, tend to take one name with 'Marma' as their family name.

<sup>121</sup> Astrologers check if couples have a history of mental health. Moreover, according to the elders, 27 birth stars are split into 3 categories: human, spirit and ogres. Ogres and humans are not a match but all others are.



agrees to the visit, and then another bottle of wine is produced, which both sides enjoy but this time with a dried fish dish. First the bride's guardians are asked if they have no objection, and then the would-be bride is asked to express her opinion on the marriage. If there is no objection, the deal is closed, the scarf is folded, and a small feast is arranged with the rice wine and food. Another bottle of wine is produced with the gift of a boiled cockerel from the bridegroom's family. The bride's side provide more wine and one hen. In this marriage negotiation, the wine is symbolic of honour, the cockerel of prosperity and the hen is a symbol of fertility.

When talking to the elders, I learnt that another step is sometimes added at this early stage of marriage negotiation. The ritual is called the *Ing Mak* (dreams) *Praing* (tell). This time, no chicken is cooked but a dish of aubergine mixed with dried fish is given to the bride's parents. The parents are asked the next day to recount the dreams of the groom and bridegroom. This stage is called "repeat the dream offering". If the dreams are good, the marriage can go ahead. If the dreams are bad, the wedding is terminated. According to the elders, dreams are like omens or signs that need to be interpreted before the final go ahead is given. The parties can also consult a dream specialist who can interpret the dreams from a Burmese book on dreams - *Ink Mak* (dream) *Thui Thunk* (interpret) *Kyaing* (book). For the Marma people, I was told that a marital union in its earliest stages is considered fragile because it holds the potential for disorder, as new members join a household, whether patrilocal or matrilocal. Therefore, much needs to be divined, cosmically aligned and foretold in the dream-world by specialists in advance of the ceremony. The emphasis upon checking the stars and people's dreams seems to indicate that the Marma attribute a limited efficacy to the marriage exchanges of food and wine. They must arrange marriages in accordance with cosmic tendencies as well as social rules.

The phase called *Chameng Than Pwe* or *Mengla Tun Pwe* or 'to be put on the path together' (Khan 1999a: 156) is the formal sitting down of the two families to negotiate the details of the marriage. The elders call it more simply *Thee Thak* (drinks again) *Haaing Thak* (food again). It is a public event as it always includes either the headman or a village elder and the family of the engaged couple. It is paid for by the boy's family and covers the 3 steps: the negotiation and

announcement of the bride-price with *Hnaang Rey* which means “I am giving gold as a gift to take you as my wife” in which the amount of gold or comparable precious items is negotiated. The amount given reflects the social status of the groom; the bride-price, wedding dress and ornaments are settled as gifts from the groom; and the setting of the wedding date and approval given for the couple to be seen in public and being alone together.

*The Wedding Ceremony: Ley Tha hit or Lou Chani (2 Day Event)*

The wedding ceremony is a public announcement of a couple’s intention to live together. The traditional wedding months are from November until December and February until June. July is avoided as it is the rainy season which is also the rainy retreat for Buddhist monks and a difficult period for guests to travel to a wedding.

The Marma people are noted for their beautiful and elaborate wedding ceremonies. Having seen several weddings it is interesting to note that no shortcuts are taken, and the correct procedures always seem to be followed as all the ceremonies I attended followed the same format, overseen by the *medechar*. The *medechar* is a man who is neither a widower nor a divorcee and who lives with one wife and is an expert in interpreting and enacting Marma marriage rituals.

On the eve of the wedding, relatives are invited to the groom’s house to take part in a *nat* spirit *puja* and general celebration. The worship takes place on a bamboo platform adorned with flowers, bamboo stems and leaves from the jungle. This *nat* ceremony in the evening includes prayers to ancestors, to the house spirit and the village guardian spirits, similar to the house *puja* ceremony described in the Introduction chapter to the thesis. An offering of a pig (*Gong-u-nai-u*) or chickens (*Chungmale*) are sacrificed for the ancestors and guardians of the home and village. The men of the house prepare the sacrifice by boiling the chicken or roasting the pig. The *medechar* is then brought into the ceremony to follow the steps of the ritual offering as the best parts of the animals and other food offerings are put together to make a complete dish. The rest of the food is eaten by the company of family and friends. Thus, all those who could possibly influence the success or failure of a marriage are appeased from the outset of a marriage ceremony – the *nat* spirits, the guardian spirits and the ancestors of the family.

At 9 am of the wedding day, the groom's party - made up of an odd numbered group - walk towards the bride's house in a procession. The group consists of the bridegroom's parents and people who have married only once and single boys and girls. No widows or divorcees are allowed to take part which is indicative of how the Marma see marriage as being especially vulnerable to break-down. The group take a boiled cockerel, a handful of boiled rice, a bottle of rice beer and rice wine to the bride's family. One man carries suitcases which contain dresses and ornaments for the bride. The groom carries a long *dao* (knife)<sup>122</sup> in his hands. At the bride's house, the articles of clothing and ornaments are presented to the bride's family and the younger sister or female cousin of the bride washes the feet of the groom to welcome him into the house. The group members of the bridegroom's side usually help the bride get ready. The gifts of food and drink are shared by both sides. The groom walks the bride to the wedding hall, often to the backdrop of live music.

**Figure 6: Newlywed couple facing barricades**



Before entering the marriage hall, the groom is separated from the bride by a bamboo stick or small branches of trees, and an entry fee is demanded. Not unlike barricading practices in rural Burma, failure to pay the entry fee results in the groom being threatened with stones or sticks (Spiro 1977: 158). Spiro claims that this demand for money is part of a stoning myth '*kyou tade*' which is related to a rural Burmese origin myth. This custom originated after destructions of the earth and all its inhabitants by fire, water and wind which resulted in four gods without sexual organs coming down to earth. They were unable to return to heaven as they ate rice and roots and developed sexual organs, signifying greed, anger and lust. The higher gods saw them as engaging in sex and stoned them (Spiro 1977:

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<sup>122</sup> The sword represents the strength and length of a union.

185). The barricading ritual therefore seems to have emerged from the ideas in the origin myth that couples who are transitioning from one state to another - especially from a lower earthly state to a higher heavenly state - need to be obstructed or stoned if they break free. This ceremonial obstruction happens several times on the wedding day. It signals that the wedding ceremony is a ritual enactment of at least part of the origin myth and, so by implication, each wedding recapitulates the first marriage conducted by the demi-gods. Moreover, the barricading seems to block exogamy and a greater bride-price or entry-fee is required to overcome it. Given that the bride and groom are regaled with shiny emblems of wedding clothes, it seems that entry into the wedding hall and the ceremony is symbolically constructed as a return to where the higher gods reside, suggesting that marriage ceremonies recapitulate the mythical train of events. It is not clear, without more ethnographic detail, whether the subsequent marriage recapitulates the myth i.e., whether they are marrying as figures of the lower world but protected from divine anger or whether they are able to move to a higher plane in spite of their forthcoming sexual union.

The entrance of the wedding venue is decorated with two fresh banana plants on either side of the gate and two ceremonial lucky water pots (*rijang-ow*) are filled with water and mango leaves. The extent of the decorations shows the affluence of the host family.

**Figure 7: Ceremonial lucky water pots (*rijang-ow*)**



When the group arrive at the gate of the wedding venue, water from the ceremonial lucky water pots is sprinkled on the couple to welcome them as

purification before they take the transitional state - within the context of the stoning myth - from earthly to heavenly states. Then they are led to the inner room where there is a small bamboo table: the groom sits to the right, the bride on the left and two unmarried girls sit next to the bride. All face the invited guests. Again, the *medechar* takes water from the pot and this is sprinkled over the couple to protect them and to drive away unwanted spirits.

A group of Buddhist monks in odd numbers, are formally requested to deliver the five precepts<sup>123</sup> and the incantation of the *Mangala Sutra* to ward off evil. The audience in unison repeat the five precepts and with folded hands - a gesture of veneration - listen to the recitation of the *sutras*. This part is not considered to be part of the wedding ritual since Buddhist monks never 'wed' people. In fact, a Marma wedding ceremony recapitulates a stoning myth that is not recognized by Buddhism. Instead, the Buddhist incantation of the *Mangala Sutra* is a way of inviting auspiciousness and prosperity into the newlyweds' lives. The monks dip a bunch of mango or blackberry leaves into a water-pot which is wrapped in consecrated thread. After lifting from the pot, the monk sprinkles on the heads of the bride and groom with water droplets - 5 or 7 times. When the religious ceremony is over, food is offered to the monks and arrangements are made for their return to the monastery.

#### *The Social Contract*

The bride and groom prostrate in front of their parents to receive blessings. Parents in front of the headmen and the audience of guests, show approval of the union by reciting a traditional blessing that bestows health, wealth, and a long marriage to the couple. The parents announce the amount of bride-price from bridegroom to bride and sometimes a dowry (bride to groom) is presented so that the community can witness the exchange.

Eating from the same dish is called *Ley Chang Tamey* (Khan 1999a: 186) or *La Chung Sa Rey* according to the elders. The hands of husband and wife come together with the food when feeding each other. The *medechar* who oversees the wedding ceremony, serves food constantly, so it never runs out, just as the

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<sup>123</sup> They constitute the basic code of ethics to be undertaken by lay followers of Buddhism. The precepts are commitments to abstain from killing living beings, stealing, sexual misconduct, lying and intoxication.

marriage is hoped to never come to an end. The mixing of hands and food is a symbol of commensality and marriage. Any leftovers from this meal are wrapped and offered to the river spirit the next morning.

The *medechar* then performs a ceremony called *chainga*. This involves pulling apart the beak of the chicken along with the lower forked jawbone. He interprets the forked jawbone to predict the future of the relationship. The right bone represents the man, the left the female. The longer the fork, the longer the relationship will last. If the fork on the right side is longer than the left, it means that the husband will outlive the wife and vice versa. The prediction is then checked with other elders in the room, including the headman or village *karbari*. Examination of a chicken's tongue bone and acceptance of the prediction by the headman is the final seal of societal approval of the union.

**Figure 8: Ceremony called *chainga***



The *medechar* announces the sacredness of the marriage by putting right hands together - *Ley Tha hit* or *Lou Chani* - over boiled chicken and rice or holding hands with members of the family over a bowl. Water is then poured over the hands. The water represents marriage as it is indivisible as water. If the pitcher is full, it means that more resources will be available to the couple. They are now husband and wife: *Langa* (husband) *May* (wife) *Rey* (become).

**Figure 9: Putting right hands together - *Ley Tha hit* or *Lou Chani***



The *medechar* then presents a long *dao* or sword with several coils of white thread next to it - each coil being made up of five rounds of cotton threads to represent the five Buddhist precepts. When a guest comes to bless the couple, the couple bow, and the guests scatter uncooked rice, as with sprinkled water, possibly to ward off unwanted spirits on the couple's heads. Other rituals such as chanting and throwing unhusked rice away from the front door of the groom's house may be performed for the same purpose, possibly to "beat away the wild spirits which may have accompanied the bride from her own patrilineage." (Tapp 2003: 300).

The *medechar* then takes a coil of thread from the knife and hands it to the guest, who in turn puts the coil around the bridegroom's (right-hand) wrist. When wearing the coil of thread, the point of the knife is taken very close to the fingertips of the bridegroom's wrist to transfer the thread directly to the wrist. Then the bridegroom takes a coil from the knife and places it on the bride's wrist in a similar manner. The bride receives the coil by bowing herself in front of the bridegroom. By way of a blessing, the *medechar* offers a little glass of 'rice wine' (distilled rice) or 'beer' (fermented rice) to the guests. Teetotallers can avoid the drink by just touching it with their fingers. The guests then give a present to the couple. This process can last for several hours as the Marma wedding can involve many guests. Guests who are younger than the bride cannot bless the couple.

**Figure 10: Coils of thread on *dao***



The guests are finally welcomed to sit down and enjoy a meal with drinks.

After the wedding, the bride stays at the groom's family home for 7 days. They are not permitted to cross any streams during this time: crossing streams will most likely symbolise moving from one symbolised domain to another. When linking this to the stoning myth, crossing the river may refer to staying in heaven rather than coming down to earth which they will do, it seems, after 7 days.

The Marma system of kinship and marriage with its elaborate ritual and mythical underpinning, is longstanding and considered to be at the customary core of what it means to be Marma. Much of the symbolism in the marriage ceremony, beginning with the astrological consultations, suggests that a successful marriage is cosmically embedded but also in the preparation of food and symbolic use of water, and that it is contracted where there is infinite plant-life, food, and water. A Marma marriage is presided over by a community of actors to make sure that the rules of a Marma marriage have been adhered to. Through the feasts and other ritualised practice, the whole community is drawn into the heavenly ritual space. This section has shown that structure determines the rules, and norms, whilst resources are employed to ensure the smooth re-enactment of culture.

The next section will discuss the significance of the marriage rituals as part of ensuring Marma ethnic persistence and continuity.



## 4.5 Discussion of Marma Marriage Rituals

### 4.5.1 Marriage Rituals That Have Endured

The ethnographic data reveals Marma marriage rituals that were observed during my fieldwork. The marriage rituals observed by Lewin over 130 years earlier in his 1885 book *A Fly on the Wheel* point to similar but slightly different rituals (Lewin 1885: 228-229). According to Lewin, when a young man chooses a girl that he wants to marry, his parents also send an envoy to the girls' family but at this time, the envoy came by boat. The groom's family would ask the bride's household for permission to fasten the boat to the house. During this process, the groom's family would check if the support of the house on the river was firm and whether the boat would have a secure mooring. If the house was old and the supports were weak, they concluded that there would be difficulties in the marriage to overcome. So over 130 years ago, the marriage process was also concerned about understanding and trying to improve marriage outcomes, however, at his time through the structures and foundations of river homes.

After the examination of moorings, the rituals described by Lewin 130 years ago point to similar processes to those followed at the time of fieldwork.<sup>124</sup> The only difference is when the marriage process is considered complete and the couple are married, it is the little finger of both man and wife that are joined, not the hands. Nevertheless, Lewin's account points to a significant fact: Marma marriage process and rituals have largely endured over time, as have the concerns around ensuring a good outcome for the marriage.

### 4.5.2 The Hybrid Nature of Buddhist and Non-Buddhist Interventions

To experience a Marma wedding is to experience elements of several belief systems. Buddhism delivers a protective blessing to the couple as water from pots, situated close to the marriage seat, absorb the monk's chanting of the *Mangala Sutra* and is then sprinkled over the wedding couple using blackberry or

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<sup>124</sup> The entrails of a fowl were examined, and dreams studied by the female relatives of both parties and interpreted according to a set of rules. An astrologer was consulted for a favourable day for the marriage. Lewin describes the marriage feast as being accompanied by a fiery *arrack* and that on the wedding day, the bridegroom arrives at the bride's village with much number and noise. The bride's relations bar his entrance with crossed bamboos unless he pays a forfeit. During the ceremony, a new spun cotton thread is wound round the man and girl. A spirit priest (not unlike the spirit priest that presided over the house puja in the Introduction chapter) mumbles holy words and feeds rice to the wedded couple (Lewin 1885: 229).

mango leaves. At the same time, the non-Buddhist spirit world is appeased with offerings and prayers to protect the couple from misfortune. The spiritual interventions in a Marma wedding provide a mixture of blessings and appeasement of spirits for the married couple's protection particularly during the transitional state between engagement and marriage. Thus, religious orders and experts as well as local spirits recognized by the local Buddhist hierarchy, are consulted at every step because it is believed that the bride and groom are vulnerable to evil spirits.

A Marma marriage ceremony and wedding customs appear to be creolized or hybrid in form: that is to say, they appear as an assembly of elements of Buddhism and elements of pre-Buddhist or non-Buddhist rituals. This hybridity is noted in history. Lewin in 1885 noticed that the Khyoung-tha or river people clans were nature-worshippers, bowing and sacrificing to the spirits of the woods and streams. However, he also perceived the Buddhist elements in their daily lives:

“But in every village the Buddhist “khiong” or temple, was to be found, built of bamboo and mats in the smaller villages, and of solid planks and teak timber posts in the larger communities.” (Lewin 1885: 227)

There is an historical hybridity to Marma ritual practice and at the same time, the role of Buddhism vs. non-Buddhist local practice oscillates in use and significance according to the needs of the group and social context. However, in a Marma marriage ritual, the hybridity is *not* a syncretic fusion of Buddhist and non-Buddhist elements but an orderly succession of separate but interconnected rites. Both Lewin in the 1880s and my observations from recent fieldwork point to a Marma world that is seemingly Buddhist, but bring with them their most important gods, spirits, and practices. Normally the latter play a subsidiary role in most aspects of Marma life, however, it appears that the non-Buddhist interventions dominate in the marriage rituals, whilst Buddhist elements provide a supplementary layer that invite auspiciousness to the union.

Another component of the hybridity is the role of mythology that sits alongside Buddhist and non-Buddhist interventions. The barricading and stoning in the wedding rites are resonant of the primordial stoning of the first human

ancestors<sup>125</sup> by the gods of the sky: where the higher gods in the sky come to earth to stop the lower gods from engaging in sex incestuously. Therefore, the narrative mythically justifies and explains Marma exogamy. Alternatively, part of the myth could also be seen as a re-enactment at the level of kinship and marriage of the first humans breaking free of the sky gods to marry into the earthly realm of humans. In this scenario, bridegrooms (wife-takers) are symbolized as demi-gods of the above who come to earth to become sexual and marry so that wife-takers are of higher rank than wife-givers. The wedding brings about the heavenly union of bride and groom, ritually 'creating' divine beings.

The symbolism of *chainga* seems to suggest that through the fused chicken bone, the couple are merged as one single organism, a part-fused male and female, and this provides an indication of the new state of the couple after the wedding ceremony. The couple ritually made into divine beings mean that they avoid the stoning reserved for earthly sexual beings. The expected sexual union is embodied in the fusion of two limbs of the same organism which is witnessed and validated by all, and which then allows the couple to proceed to the next state as sexual beings. Therefore, in accordance with the stoning myth, the symbolism of the ceremony seems to show how the couple can avoid being stoned and have a marriage 'made in heaven' that will ultimately be sexual. The message of the ceremony also seems to be that, whilst exogamy is the customary rule, it is not easy to accomplish since there are cosmic forces about that try to prevent it, as they tried to block the first primordial sexual unions. This explains the recourse to astrology to look for counter-cosmic signs and the considerable work of the engagement and wedding rites to overcome the obstacles.

The rules are transmitted orally from generation to generation through elders and *medechars*. It is the *medechar*, not the Buddhist monk, who is the custodian of the marriage ritual as he oversees the re-enactment of rules of marriage and mediates between the couple, the family and society. He employs syncretic forms as he uses various resources such as a cockerel's fork bones, the *dao* and coils of thread, and pouring water to further validate and protect the marriage. The fork bones engage all members of the audience in the final acceptance of the

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<sup>125</sup> Myths of emanation depict the universe as coming into being through processes of spontaneous differentiation within an original unity that contains all things in potential.

marriage; the white coils of threads help the couple to enter their new state with safety; and the pouring of water over the hands of the couple - a resource that is familiar to Buddhists - shows symbolically that the community has witnessed the union. The consultation throughout the process helps to validate the union to ensure that the marriage will endure.

One of the main resources in a Marma marriage is the role of chickens throughout every stage of the process, from courting to engagement and then marriage. Marma experts state that a cockerel symbolizes prosperity, and a hen represents fertility. From my informant - Sai Sing, I learnt that chicken in marriage symbolizes the union of the bride and groom, and the wishbone signifies that the bride and the groom are joined together. Often when people stress that a ritual element is a symbol of unity it is because the ritual is acting upon and overcoming pre-states of separation and difference. The early stages and steps of the ritual do indicate separation and difference as all the bits of a chicken are boiled: from head to claws, the good bits, and the bad bits. The ritual symbolism of *chainga* seems to indicate that the couple have become like chicken: that they have moved from being separate, from having occupied separate spaces to becoming as united as the two-pronged bones as part of the chicken.

There are many societies that keep chickens for more than just food. Ethnographic studies show for example that among the Azande in Africa, chickens are kept mainly for oracular tests, and are only killed for food when hosting important guests (Evans-Pritchard 1937).<sup>126</sup> In a region closer to the CHT, a study on Chinese folkloric beliefs by Feng (2012) amongst the Miao in China describes the bird as a messenger of the sun god (Feng 2012: 10). A bird can deliver requests for blessings to ancestors and gods in the supernatural world as it moves between sky and earth, and it carries messages about the future from the supernatural world back to the Miao people. Chickens are good symbolic vehicles for embodying the gods on earth because they are fecund, creating and laying life every day and they are birds seemingly of the sky that spend all their time on the ground. Their very anomaly (in both respects) makes them divine candidates as well as the communicative link between the gods above and the humans below.

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<sup>126</sup> Chickens and eggs have many uses: in divination, to help find a cure for an illness, and to guide the newly deceased family member's soul to the ancestral lands.

Therefore, in this sense, chickens are God-like whilst living amongst humans. Moreover, Feng discovers what seems to be a similar *chainga* ritual among the Miao in Wangmo County whereby a rooster's wing bone, thighbone, tongue-bone, and eyes are used for predicting the outcome of a marriage.<sup>127</sup>

“The success of a marriage is so crucial to a family or a lineage that those affected feel that they have to do something to improve the outcome. Chicken in their cultural world has the power to connect the secular world in which they are living and the sacred spiritual world.” (Feng 2012: 19)

The preoccupation for the Marma with potential disorder during marriage stages possibly relates to the systems of patrilineal descent. In this type of community, the sense is that the bride is not a stranger but that her sexuality will potentially create disorder as she enters her husband's family and is consequently seen as crossing boundaries.<sup>128</sup> The bride is a potential carrier of bad fortune to others and the bridegroom is the potential victim.<sup>129</sup> This may create disorder which Douglas describes as symbolizing “both danger and power”, and that rituals need to be performed that recognize “the potency of disorder.” (Douglas 2002: 117). For the Marma and the Miao, using a rooster to predict the future of a marriage and provide protection of the couple through their transitions from one state to another, reinforces its mystical function as it helps towards managing the dangers of the liminal phases towards a restoration of family order. Through the work of the wedding ritual, the bride and groom have become a chicken-like earthly unity that has incorporated part of the heavenly above.

## 4.6 Conclusion

There is continuity amidst change and continuity despite change. The Marma people have maintained specific customs such as clan exogamy, and patrilineal and matrilocal residence as well the provision of an inheritance for girls since the

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<sup>127</sup> Tapp describes a Miao wedding in Sichuan. There is a special supper in the evening of the wedding day, during which the bride's side offer a cockerel and the bridegroom's side present a hen. After they are cooked, divination by chicken tongue - *sua qas nphlaib* - takes place and if the tongues are not damaged in any way, the signs are considered to be lucky (Tapp 2003: 272, 300).

<sup>128</sup> For the Marma, this is not always the case as the bridegroom can also join the woman's family.

<sup>129</sup> Ahern's ethnography in Taiwan on Chinese women's power and pollution (Feng 2012: 15) may shed further light on this particular chicken ritual. Chinese women are considered unclean or polluting because of the nature of the “unclean substances” that are associated with menstrual blood and the blood of a virgin's first intercourse which connects this act to birth.

earliest literature indicates it as such (Lévi-Strauss 1952a; Bernot 1959). These practises are continuous and unique as it differentiates the group from other groups in the region and the nation state. Whilst the Marma people are internally exogamous, on the boundaries of culture, the outwardly defining characteristic in the Marma world is that it is a Buddhist society. Yet in Marma marriage rituals, the non-Buddhist elements dominate as it expands religious practice with Buddhist elements supplementing it. This hybridity also contributes to the perception of a Marma cultural world of distinctiveness.

In the Marma marriage ritual, the continued investment in a system of kinship and marriage is strongly linked to a sense of the fragility of marriage, and the marriage ceremony addresses this fragility. What is remarkable is the enduring nature of the marriage rituals and rules that are first cited by Lewin as early as the 1880s. These rules and practises have been reproduced over time, with knowledge handed down to elders and embodied in the agency of the *medechar*. Moreover, they constitute the ritual core of being Marma, making up the key elements of a stable and enduring Marma ethnicity.

By employing Buddhist and non-Buddhist resources, the Marma people are able to reduce the anxiety of family members who depend on a successful marriage to produce the next generation that will continue the family line. However, since daughters can inherit property and even land, out-marriage for daughters is especially problematic for the Marma group as the daughter's inheritance is taken from the family and travels with the daughter to her marriage to another family or outside the community. Whilst this chapter has looked at Marma kinship practices and only touched upon the challenges faced in an environment of change, the next chapter will illuminate how the Marma people tackle challenges to their kinship customs as they work on the boundaries of culture to separate themselves from other groups. It will focus on endogamy rules that help the Marma community to keep Marma culture, land and religion within its boundaries.

## Chapter 5: Ethnic Endogamy: Land, Culture and Religion

Over a period of two centuries, the migrating group that came to be known as the Marma, intermarried with Arakanese Buddhists during their journey to the CHT. However, during fieldwork, it was clear that the Marma people are nowadays less tolerant towards inter-ethnic marriage as it seems to present a threat to Marma group cohesiveness. The reasons for this shift are anchored in the new realities of the CHT, specifically in the changing demographics of the region both in terms of the influx of Bengali settlers, and in a gender imbalance within the Marma group itself.

In Gibson's 1986 ethnography *Survival: Sacrifice and Sharing*, we learn how the Buid from the highlands of the Philippines managed to counter a similar threat to their land from migrating settlers of the majority system from the lowlands. The Buid are similar to the Marma in that they are living on the peripheries and practice *jhum* cultivation. According to Gibson, the Buid managed to maintain endogamy and therefore a bounded society by introducing elements of internal fluidity in marriage practices. The Buid value system upholds an obligation to give but not to receive and this is noticeable in a Buid union where women become the objects of "giving" or exchange as men share wives with other men. A high rate of divorce and remarriage is positively valued so that the Buid can be sustainably endogamous.<sup>130</sup> Similarly, Marma collective identity is conditioned by a long history of relations with neighbouring communities and by living in a region that was sometimes perceived as fraught with danger. For example, the *nat* spirit world of the jungle, the dangerous animals of the natural world, and the warring tribal groups such as the Lusai, once known as the head-hunters. Marma people therefore also have a history of focussing on a common threat to create internal

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<sup>130</sup> Gibson observes that a solidarity with ancestors against the malignant spirit world is only possible if the community is cohesive on earth. The community ritually express this cohesiveness through the sharing of food, labour and rituals between households and most significantly, the sharing of meat sacrifice for the spirit world. Whereas the Buid share in feasting, Marma sharing revolves around community merit-building, pujas, and social activities such as drinking and sharing food from the same spoon.

solidarity. However, there the similarity ends. The most important difference with Gibson's Buid is that the Marma group are a diaspora that have migrated to the region and marriage and inheritance of land is the cement that keeps the community together. Unlike the Buid, there is no acceptable form of wife-sharing in the Marma community and jealousy or *hingsha* within the Marma group is rife.

With the growing population imbalance in favour of women in the Marma group, one would expect a rise in polyandry as a Buid-like strategy to help the group to remain endogamous. However, this has also not occurred. The Marma people prefer instead to follow ethnic endogamy marriage rules to keep the society bounded, as cultural dilution through marriage with, for example the Bengalis, and the subsequent risk of loss of land, is a much greater threat than changes in the natural environment.

In the previous chapter, we have seen how a Marma marriage works within clan exogamy. This chapter will explore how the group strives to conform to overall ethnic endogamy rules, which is the custom of marrying within the limits of a local community or tribe, amidst the new challenges in the region. The chapter will provide background to how the boundaries of culture have been maintained, followed by a discussion on the recent stress points with the concomitant threat of out-marriage, concluding with the cultural practices that have been adapted to continue ethnic endogamy within the group.

## **5.1 Ethnic Endogamy Practices in the Marma Group**

From the moment a Marma child is born, he or she receives a name that is uniquely Marma. This name defines the ethnicity of the child and differentiates the child from other children in the CHT. From birth onwards, this Marma name is consulted at crucial moments of a Marma life: from providing clues to the compatibility of individuals for a marriage, to gaining permits to reside or buy land in the Bohmong Circle. Marma naming at birth helps to maintain Barthian boundaries between cultures.



Since the changing demographics of the CHT, new stress points have been developing on Marma ethnic boundaries. We have already seen in the previous chapter that women traditionally inherit property and goods and sometimes land if there are no male heirs. Moreover, within the Marma community, women can enjoy this inheritance exclusively and independently. But if they marry out, the husbands from another culture could have rights to the property or the inheritance of their wives. Talking to respondents and experts in the field, it became clear that marriage to another tribal Buddhist is acceptable but not preferred whilst marriage to a Bengali whether Buddhist or Muslim results in punitive actions such as the denial of property and inheritance rights and quite often social ostracism. Currently, if intermarriage occurs, there is an order of acceptability: Buddhist Arakan/Rakhine to Buddhist Chakma or other tribal Buddhists are considered acceptable; tribal Christians are the next category that are acceptable; a Buddhist Bengali is unacceptable, and a Bengali Muslim is taboo. This Marma arrangement of marriage preference reveals a strong ethnic endogamy but on occasions, they will intermarry with other tribal people who are Buddhists, as long as they are not Bengalis. Therefore, it seems from this order of acceptability that religion as well as ethnicity are important factors in the taboo on inter-ethnic marriage.

There is no written Marma rule on inter-ethnic marriage, but a “convention” or an ideal that has been handed down from generation to generation and upheld by the Bohmong office in customary law cases that tackle questions on marriage. For example, whilst the Bohmong office provides guidance on taboo marriages such as parallel cousin liaisons,<sup>131</sup> it also presides over questions on an inter-ethnic marriage or when a Marma woman or wife has an affair with a Bengali Muslim, both of which are considered taboo.<sup>132</sup>

“There was a Marma couple whose marriage was in crisis. I think the wife maybe having an affair with a Bengali Muslim. If she divorces her husband and marries the Bengali, she will lose her rights to the property and she would also be ostracized.” Interview 17<sup>th</sup> Bohmong

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<sup>131</sup> The taboo marriages encompass marriages with parallel cousins who are viewed as having the same blood ties as siblings.

<sup>132</sup> The Bohmong recounted the story of a husband who lived with a woman for 3 years but married another. The BM consulted customary law which draws upon ancient Burmese texts and made the decision to fine the man 30,000 taka. The man could have gone to prison but instead the wife receives payment, the man continues to live with his girlfriend, and social peace is restored.

The Bohmong and the head clerk are experts on Marma customary law and through their consultations and interpretations of the rules and conventions around marriage, they uphold customs against inter-ethnic marriage, and as a result, they uphold Marma endogamy rules.

However, the rise of a Bengali settler population and the decrease in marriageable Marma men has meant that the usual stress points on the Marma boundaries of culture have reached an alarming state. The next section will examine the different issues around intermarriage in relation to ethnicity, religion, and land and the Marma strategies that have emerged in response to this as well as the adaptations on the boundaries of culture that were required to keep them closed.

## **5.2 Contemporary Pressures**

### **5.2.1 Loss of Land**

The CHT total surface area (including river and forest reserves) is 5,089sq. miles out of which the total land area constitutes 1,423 sq. miles.<sup>133</sup> During fieldwork, informants were anxious about both the in-migration of Bengali settlers which influenced the demographic balance of the region. As well as the changes to local land ownership practices. The idea that local land was being lost to or grabbed by outsiders, was causing the greatest anxiety. To understand this, the next section will detail the history and background to land ownership in the CHT.

Almost all households in the CHT (93%), irrespective of their ethnic identity, own land or have access to common lands. Either as individual ownership, or traditional ownership, which is registered or non-registered with headmen and covering plots of land from Common Property Resources (UNDP 2009). Land in the CHT is classified as forest lands or river lands. Whilst the river lands tend to be privately owned, the huge tracts of forests in the CHT were largely considered to be gifts of nature.

The two most important legal categories of forest lands in the CHT are the "reserved forests" (RFs) and the "unclassified state forests" (USFs). The RFs are

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<sup>133</sup> CHT District Statistics (BBS)1983: ix.

administered by the Forest Department of the Ministry of Environment and Forests. The USFs are administered by the district administration in conjunction with the district councils, the chiefs and headmen. The USFs are in practice regarded as the commons of the CHT people, and include *Jhum* commons, settlements, and communally managed village forests. The headmen are formally vested with the responsibility of managing and protecting these USFs, collecting *jhum* tax and handling any disputes on land use and ownership.<sup>134</sup>

In Ahamed's case study on land and agricultural practices in the village of Roangchari in the Bohmong circle, he also observes that every household in a village, irrespective of ethnic background, has cultivation rights to practice *jhum* that are clearly defined in terms of landmarks, such as streams, mountain tops, prominent trees and so on. The headman is responsible for distributing the *mouza* common lands to different villagers through the village *karbari* and collecting *jhum* tax. The *jhum* cultivators in any of the ethnic groups in Roangchari define customary rights to *jhum* in the following way: they claim that *jhum* land is common property, belonging to the village community and even to members of the spirit world (Ahamed 2004: 212-4).<sup>135</sup>

Thus, land for the *jhum* cultivators is not privately owned but was common land and *jhum* cultivators are only allowed to practice their traditional agriculture on these lands if they pay an annual *jhum* tax. Moreover, as can be seen in the warning to the Mong Chief in the late 1800s, the obligations of the 3 circle chiefs are as follows:

'The Chiefs of the Chittagong Hill Tracts have no title to the ownership of the land which is vested exclusively in the Crown: they exercise only the delegated right of collecting taxes and rents on behalf of Government.'

('Issue of a warning to the Mong Chief, Chittagong Hill Tracts, for dereliction of duty'. 'Report on the Administration of the Chittagong Hill Tracts for 1875-76: 30.)

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<sup>134</sup> According to the present indigenous system, the village community is jointly responsible for the use, management and control of the lands surrounding their village, which is a village common. As head of the village, the *karbari* has the responsibility to allocate *jhum* lands to the villagers in consultation with the headman of the *mouza* (a group of villages) (Roy 1998: 13).

<sup>135</sup> Therefore, the modern statist conception of property, which focuses on the individual and formal written documents that show ownership, is not prevalent amongst most cultivators in the CHT.

In contrast, the farmers cultivating the lands in the river valleys and on the lower hill terraces are, since the Peace Accord of 1997, provided with land titles. The holders of land titles have the right to legally transfer lands to kin, thereby ensuring continuity of land ownership among title holders. A proportion of all the hill peoples belong to *jhum* whilst the wealthier layers, such as members of the royal family, headmen and *karbari*, often have deeds to land along the riverbanks.

The 1900 Regulations Act had been set up to maintain the CHT as an “excluded area” and to prevent outsiders, particularly the dominant Bengali population, from settling and owning lands there.<sup>136</sup> One of the main demands of the PCJSS to the Bangladeshi Government during the Peace Accord of 1997 was the retention of the original 1900 Regulations Act since they not only protected indigenous land rights but also challenged the presence of Bengali settlers in the CHT. The 1900 Regulations Act has various clauses that prevent the loss of land to outsiders.

Rule 34 explicitly bans non-hill people from buying or acquiring land in the CHT area:

“Nothing in these rules, or any grant, lease or contract under which land is held in the Hill-tracts shall operate to permit the inheritance of any Hill-tracts land by non-residents of the district except with the express consent of the DC.”

Rule 52 covers “Immigration into the Hill Tracts” and states that:

“...no person other than a Chakma, Mogh (i.e., a Marma), or a member of any hill tribe indigenous to the Chittagong Hill Tracts, the Lusai Hills, the Arakan Hill Tracts or the State of Tripura shall reside within the Chittagong Hill Tracts unless he is in possession of a permit granted by the Deputy Commissioner at his discretion.”

The Permanent Residency Certificate was first mentioned in Rule 52 and describes who is allowed to settle in the CHT:

“If an applicant for a permit satisfies the DC that he is a permanent resident of the CHT, his application shall not be refused except on the grounds that he is an undesirable.”

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<sup>136</sup> Rule 52: the special status of the region by underlining that “henceforth the Hill Tracts shall be declared an excluded area”.

Thus, the original intention of the Regulations Act was to prevent people from the plains entering the CHT and to block “non-residents” from buying or inheriting land in the CHT.

However, since the Peace Accord of 1997, these clauses were reinterpreted to allow anyone to purchase land in the Bohmong Circle and beyond, and since a permanent residency certificate is issued at the discretion of local leadership, this is now decided by a Bangladeshi State appointed District Commissioner of Bangladeshi origins. Moreover, all permit requests come to the Bohmong Office as pre-signed by the same representative of the Bangladeshi government. Significantly, in 2009, a Human Rights report stated that “the indigenous people are on the verge of total eviction from their ancestral land”<sup>137</sup> as approximately 250,000 acres of land was sold to Bangladeshis in the Bandarban district, illustrating the extent of the transfer of land to those considered to be outsiders.

### **5.2.2 The Shortage of Marriageable Marma Men**

Alongside the loss of land to outsiders, an additional trend in the Bohmong circle has resulted in a new kind of pressure in the region. At the time of fieldwork, interlocutors expressed a growing anxiety over the lack of male marriageable partners for the growing female population. There is a noticeable gender imbalance in the Marma population - see Appendix C: Population Statistics of Bandarban - due to the fact that the CHT region has experienced a protracted 30-year civil war and also because of a large and growing community of celibate monks in the area. As a result, Marma women are not in short supply, but marriageable men are. As one of my respondents explained:

“Not only for a princess, but it’s also very difficult for educated girls. What is going on. It is very difficult to find men to marry.” Princess Lily in her early 30s.

The young men who were available to marry talked against the idea of marriage:

“I feel like if I get married then I will be in someone’s custody. Marriage is like a detention, and I would be bound by many rules. So I don’t want to get married.”

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<sup>137</sup> “Human Rights report 2009-2010 on Indigenous Peoples.”

Moreover, they often cited a local royal – Guru Bhante – who had given up his career as district judge (and song writer) as well as turned his back on marriage to become a monk. Guru Bhante then went on to become one of the most powerful people in the region.

The gender imbalance and the lack of marriageable men has added pressure on ethnic endogamy rules. To exacerbate this issue, the stories of women who married outside of Marma culture was on the rise and becoming an alarming new reality.

The main Marma anxiety revolved around the fear that Marma girls would marry Bangladeshi Muslim men. We have already seen in the social chapter of this thesis that throughout the history of the CHT region, there is an antipathy towards the wider Bengali population. However, since Marma women are fair-skinned, which is associated with great beauty in the region, they are much sought after by Bangladeshi men. This presents a dilemma for Marma society: should a marriage take place with a Bengali Muslim man; a Marma woman's inheritable property will be at risk of eventually becoming part of her husband's assets. The fact that Marma girls would hand down their property and inheritance to their mixed heritage sons or if a Bengali man was accepted into the family, the family would fall under Bangladeshi law - not customary law - allowing the father to own everything that belongs to his wife. Since the Marma system was also part matrilineal, there was also a fear of outsiders living inside the Marma community. In reality, it was more likely that when Marma women did marry out, their husbands would not come to live with the bride's family and the girl would be disinherited to safeguard the family's property. Thus, the anxiety around intermarriage with Bengali Muslim men revolves around the potential loss of culture and land.

A modern-day strategy in the Marma community to force a marriage outside of the endogamy rules is elopement. However, there are elopements that can result in an immediate expulsion from the family. The most controversial elopement is when a royal princess marries a Bengali Muslim or Buddhist. Two young respondents, Prince Kai and Princess Lily, both have sisters who married a

Bengali Buddhist and Muslim, i.e., they married outside of their culture and into the 'enemy culture'. As females, they are seen to be spiritually weak so there was an expectation that their faith would be relegated and that their offspring would become Muslim not Buddhist or more Bengali than Marma. Since there is an unwritten law that disinherits Marma girls if they marry a Bengali, the sisters were disinherited to keep the family inheritance and property in the Marma community.

Kai's sister married a Bengali Muslim but then divorced him. Because she was educated, she was able to work at an NGO and support herself. She eventually married an American Christian. This second marriage and her wealth enabled her to return to Bandarban again and she was accepted back into the family. Lily's eldest sister - Joy - married a Bengali Buddhist. All her maternal uncles barred Joy from returning to the royal house. Joy has a young daughter and lives in Dhaka and has only been allowed to return twice to Bandarban – for the funerals of her grandfather and her brother. During this visit, she stayed with her husband's family since she was barred from the royal household. When interviewing the mother of Joy, she talks about only having one child left out of three, even though she has another daughter in Dhaka. Although Joy's husband was a Buddhist, it was the fact that he was a Bengali that made Joy experience a "social death" in the Marma community.

There are also examples of alternative outcomes arising from these forbidden unions. In the compound where I lived, the middle daughter of the eldest brother eloped with a Bengali Buddhist. She ran away to live together with her boyfriend for over a year. Her family experienced the shock, shame, and sorrow of this action. There were first whispers and then complete silence around the events as it was no longer discussed. However, almost a year later, the daughter was accepted back into the family with her husband.<sup>138</sup>

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<sup>138</sup> As discussed earlier, the most controversial alliance was between the daughter of the 16<sup>th</sup> Bohmong and a handsome army officer. This was perceived as a double betrayal by her community as she married a Muslim and a soldier (the occupiers of their land). Her father did not disown her. She stayed part of the royal family but could not make a claim on the royal lands. When her husband ran away to the USA and abandoned his family, she remarried to a Chakma Buddhist and converted her children to Buddhism. Slowly, over a period of 10 years, both the family were forgiven and accepted back into Marma society.

These examples from the fieldwork illustrate how the Marma as an ethnic group have rejected Bengali men<sup>139</sup> as suitable marriage partners for their women. There is a sense that ethnic out-marriage will result in the possible loss of property and maybe land. Thus, the demographic changes have challenged Marma endogamy rules and inheritance practices and instead of making them flexible, the Marma people appear to be resisting this change by tightening the unwritten taboos around inter-ethnic marriage. In order to keep land and property in the Marma community, marriage in Marma society is focused on reproducing ethnic endogamy. Significantly, women without the prospect of marriage appear to be resigned to their fate to be spinsters, working as local entrepreneurs and traders, in education and for non-governmental organizations (NGOs).

In Chapter 3 of the thesis, we saw how the ethnic groups incorporate one of two cultural models – the Bengali model or the Burmese model (Schendel 1992), with the Marma influenced by the Burmese cultural model. For this reason, to understand the resistance to inter-ethnic marriage, it is interesting to survey the historical attitudes to similar concerns in neighbouring Burma. Before hard borders were established, the region known today as Myanmar was a place of porous frontiers and interpenetrating political systems. Added to this fluidity were the imported cultural influences of the British, as the Empire extended its power into the region:

“The British, who took Burma in three stages after 1824, ended nearly a thousand years of unbroken monarchical rule and side-lined the Buddhist clergy, disdaining its central position in society and embittering the Buddhist population. The subsequent importation of hundreds of thousands of Indian workers, who rose to economically powerful positions, compounded fears that Buddhism was under threat.” (Wade 2018: 3)

With the British annexation of lower Burma in 1850, new peoples came to this region from different parts of the British Empire – India, Malaya, Straits, China – to fill administrative and agricultural opportunities and to support the expansion of the Empire’s infrastructure. During this period, the British Empire introduced racial classification in order to understand the complex ethnic groups, and this had the

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<sup>139</sup> Attitudes to Bangladeshi Muslims can be seen in historical records. Lewin in 1885 states: “The Burman, or Mugh, was a fellow creature, without caste prejudices, with a noble religion, a man with whom I could eat, drink, and make fellowship: the Chittagong Bengali was like a fox with a cross of the cat...” (Lewin 1885: 135).



effect of stimulating boundary-making between peoples as “once-fluid notions of ethnicity began to calcify into hard distinctions.” (Wade 2018: 3). Inevitably, male workers married local Burmese women as these women became the anchors for the migrant families in Burma. However, out of this mingling of groups came a fear in Burma that Buddhism was under threat and this fed into the anxieties around intermarriage.

According to Ikeya (2013), as far back as 1939, there are references in Burmese literature to a left-wing nationalist *Kyi Pwa Yei* or Progress group which presented a diatribe against intermarriage and miscegenation - the interbreeding of people considered to be of different racial types.<sup>140</sup> Ikeya conducted an examination of civil court cases and jurisprudential debates that dealt with marriage, adultery, divorce, inheritance and adoption in this period, and court cases that gave insights into kinship ties. The legal system at this time was a plural one because of Burma’s incorporation into the British Raj in 1826. In this system, family relations and religions were exempted from the civil law of state and made subject to customary law whether it was “Burmese Buddhist Law” or “Mohammedan law” or “Hindu Law”, depending on which group the person belonged to. Migrant males took precedence in the plural legal system, which resulted in their Burmese wives often being stripped of their customary rights. Burmese women sometimes voluntarily gave up their equal share in property and the joint custody of children. Some women converted and became subject to Muslim law which was more favourable to men.<sup>141</sup> There are also examples of women resisting this lowered legal status: apostasy or the refusal to follow a religion was documented as one strategy for woman to revert to her rights as Buddhist; and another strategy was to keep up Buddhist merit-building activities so that her children would benefit in a future rebirth.

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<sup>140</sup> In 1938, there had been an anti-Indian riot which saw intense communal violence in colonial Burma. This had resulted in a 350-page book called *Kabya Pyatthana (The Half-Caste Problem)* by U Pu Galay and covered “the question of the marriage of their womenfolk with foreigners in general and with Indians in particular” and the half-caste children that resulted which threatened Burmese culture and race (Ikeya 2013: 1).

<sup>141</sup> Burmese Muslims at this time were known as *Pathi* or *Zerbadee*, a term which usually denoted someone with a Burmese mother and Muslim father. Now known as ‘Burmese Muslims’, they are linguistically and culturally integrated into Burmese society. Citizens are persons who belong to one of the national ethnic groups (Kachin, Kayah (Karenni), Karen, Chin, Burman, Mon, Rakhine, Shan, Kaman, or *Zerbadee*) or whose ancestors settled in the country before 1823, the beginning of British occupation of Arakan State. If a person cannot provide evidence that his ancestors settled before this time, then they are not considered to be citizens. (Ikeya 2013).

Since customary law of the man took precedence over the “personal law” of a woman, there was much anxiety around marriage between a Burmese woman and a foreign migrant<sup>142</sup> which was only addressed in various laws in 2015, at the time of fieldwork.<sup>143</sup> Even so, the fear around intermarriage is still present in modern day Myanmar. For example, the political leader - Aung San Suu Kyi - was prohibited from becoming the President of Myanmar due to a clause in the constitution stating that her late husband and children were foreign citizens.<sup>144</sup>

Central to the fear around intermarriage is the loss of land and property, and the rights of women. The next section will detail property transmission practices within the Marma context, and how Marma cultural practice protect women from losing access to their inheritance.

## 5.3 Property Transmission and Protection

### 5.3.1 Marma Inheritance laws

“The study of kinship as an aspect of social structure began with lawyers and students of comparative jurisprudence. That is why the study of kinship today is replete with legal terminology and concepts...The reasons for this are quite simple – inheritance, succession and marriage. Every society makes some provision for the transfer of property and social position on death and the transfer is usually to a kinsman.” (Fox 1967: 17).

In this section, Marma concerns around land and the inheritance of that land will be examined as they are central to why Marma ethnic endogamy is carefully maintained. In the CHT, the Marma people appear to be alone in their concern. According to Lévi-Strauss (1952a) and Ahamed (2004), whilst marriage is patrilocal amongst all the groups in the CHT, the Chakma, Kuki, Bawm and Tanchangya do not allow females to inherit property or land.

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<sup>142</sup> With the recent Rohingya crisis, it is evident that these attitudes remain towards Muslims in Myanmar.

<sup>143</sup> Myanmar’s *Protection of Race and Religion Laws* were adopted in 2015. One of them is the religious conversion law and interfaith marriage law which regulates the marriages of Buddhist women to non-Buddhist men.

<sup>144</sup> She assumed the newly created role of State Counsellor, a role akin to a Prime Minister or a head of government but is now (2021) in prison.

There are different interpretations of Marma inheritance or *Am waing* in local literature. According to Lévi-Strauss, inheritance rules distinguish between "male goods" (*iokia waing*) that include house, goats, cattle, and land which goes from father to son. And "female goods" (*min ma waing*) consisting of ornaments, jewellery, dresses, spinning tools, fowl and pigs which go from mother to daughter (Lévi-Strauss 1952a: 51). Ahamed (2004) claims that both male and female can inherit the hereditary properties of the household which are classified as two main types: "moveable" which covers agricultural implements, domestic animals, spinning equipment and ornaments and clothing. "Immovables" which covers land, houses, and trees. According to Ahamed, customary practice dictates that house, cattle and agricultural equipment is considered male movables. Whilst female movables are spinning tools, clothing, ornaments, and pigs. The immovable property and paddy lands is distributed equally between son and daughter. If there is more than one son, usually the first born is heir to 50% of the inherited land and property and the other siblings, including females, get a share of the remaining 50% (Ahamed 2004: 128). Khan (1999a) posits that since inheritance customs are unwritten, there are many ways in which property and land can be divided; sometimes only the sons inherit from the father the equivalent of the immovables whilst the daughters inherit from their mothers the equivalent of the movables. In some places, all inheritance can be divided equally with all the children, including the daughters.

When a Marma husband dies, male goods, and land pass to the widow rather than to the brothers or sons. Widows can re-marry her husband's brother to keep the land within the family. When a widow dies, her inheritance is shared with her heirs. Khan adds that one of the most distinctive characteristics of Marma inheritance laws is that whatever is transmitted to the daughter becomes her inheritance: it stays with her and even comes back to her on divorce. This enables a Marma woman to be independent as she enjoys some freedom and rights to property, sometimes alongside managing her husband's estate. Ahamed points out that if a wife dies, her property does not automatically go to the husband unless she is childless (Ahamed 2004: 128).<sup>145</sup>

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<sup>145</sup> Ahamed (2004) claims that the inheritance rules of the Marma in relation to land and other properties was largely

The fact that women inherit part of the family's possessions, even land, often surfaces as a source of pride in the community. At the same time, it is a source of anxiety because of the risk of losing inherited goods through intermarriage. The main problem arises when unwritten customs that are interpreted in customary law courts, come into conflict with the nation state Bangladeshi Muslim inheritance law when all a wife's inheritance comes under the control of the husband. There were many examples during fieldwork of efforts to protect marriages from breakdown and divorce, as well as to protect widows, so that women would not marry outside of their culture and take their inheritance with them. The role of marriage payments in the marriage process is an important step in safeguarding a woman from re-marrying after divorce or becoming a widow.

### 5.3.2 The Role of Marriage Payments

In this section, the different types of marriage payments will be explored, what they achieve and how they help to ultimately keep Marma property within the Marma community. Moreover, the section will examine how practices have been adjusted as a result of the popularity of the dowry system that is the marriage payment custom of the majority state.

The Marma marriage process requires the Marma community to witness and approve an important announcement of the marriage payment. The phase is called *Chameng Than Pwe* (elders) or *Mengla Tun Pwe* (Khan 1999a: 156) or 'to be put on the path together' is the formal sitting down of the two families to negotiate the details of the marriage. It is a public event as it always includes either the headman or a village elder, and the family of the engaged couple. It covers the negotiation and announcement of the bride-price (and occasionally dowry).

The most significant type of marriage payment in the Marma community is *laphwe* - a bride payment.<sup>146</sup> A Marma bride payment is a gift transferred from the groom's family to the bride and is a share for life that is held with her family and

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adopted from the Burmese family and inheritance law locally known as *Somohada*. The Marma have incorporated Burmese Buddhist principles of inheritance more than their neighbours and the degree of openness to Buddhist principles, can be said to be an aspect of Marma culture. Guidance and interpretation of *Somohada* is provided by Buddhist monks, who in the case of the Marma, were trained in Buddhism in the Arakan district of Burma. Their knowledge of *Somohada* has consequently become a 'cultural asset', guiding Marma people to maintain not only family values and the religious code but also distinct inheritance practices.

<sup>146</sup> Bride payment is a gift not a loan. It protects women when widowed or divorced and is common in Burmese societies. It is settled on the bride (being gifted into trust) by agreement at the time of the wedding, or as provided by law.

will protect her in widowhood and divorce. It is believed that bride payments contribute to marriage stability as it restrains the wife's family from effecting divorce since they must return the bride payment. The second main type of marriage payment is *lachung* – to bring with the hand to the bride's family - or bride wealth.<sup>147</sup> It usually takes the form of ornaments either made from silver or gold that can always be worn by the bride and is a material pledge that the woman and her children will be treated well. The showiness or shininess of the ornaments symbolizes the bride's worth to the husband and the community. Groom wealth is also called *lachung* and it can be male clothes and accessories offered by the family of the bride to the family of the groom in an exact mirror image of bride wealth giving. Groom wealth can also take the form of property or land if the groom in a rural setting moves to the bridegroom's family to live matrilocally. The groom's family are compensated for the loss of labour of their son as he moves to the bride's household, but this payment - as with bride wealth - must be returned to the gift-giving family on divorce. Groom wealth is less common in urban areas where the son's labour is not required in the same way as in rural settings.

In neighbouring Burma, Spiro's work on *Kinship and Marriage in Burma* (1977) with the Yeigy in Upper Burma, follow both matrilocal and patrilocal residence rules after marriage. Spiro outlines the types of exchanges of wealth during marriage which resonates with the Marma experience. The most common marriage payment in the Burmese setting is a bride price. According to villagers in Burma (Spiro 1977: 119) the bride payment can serve the following functions: a gift that can be added to the conjugal estate; economic security to protect the wife; and finally, a bride payment is supposed to diminish the desire for polygamy. Spiro also mentions the practice of bride wealth which is the material compensation for the loss of the bride's labour - whether in the home or in the fields - to her family. However, unlike bride payments, bride wealth does not allow the bride to keep the bride wealth or ornaments on divorce as she is returned as labour to her family.

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<sup>147</sup> Bride wealth is marriage payments from the husband and his kin to the bride's kin. Essentially this means that bride wealth marriages are those in which the groom (and often his family) remit a payment in some form to the bride's family in order to officialize a marriage.

In Bangladesh, South Asia, and urban parts of Burma, the dominant form of marriage payment is the dowry,<sup>148</sup> which is also on the rise in the Marma community. A dowry is similar to Marma groom wealth in that it is a gift from the bride's family to the groom's family. Anderson's (2007) analysis of marriage payments over time in Bangladesh reveal some interesting new trends. She highlights the essential difference between bride price-paying societies and dowry societies. Bride price societies in South Asia are relatively homogenous with women having a prominent role in agriculture whilst often being part of a polygamous household. Dowry, in contrast, is found in socially stratified, monogamous societies that are economically complex and where women have a relatively small productive role. Furthermore, she argues that bride prices are relatively uniform within societies and do not vary by familial wealth. Dowries increase with both the wealth and social status of both sides of the marriage bargain.

Spiro (1977) offers a non-economic motive for the preference of bride payment over dowry in Burmese society which is applicable to the Marma group. Of most importance, he says, is prestige (*goun*) for the bridegroom's family and the Burmese emphasis on conspicuous display. For example, whilst negotiations are private and behind closed doors at the bride's house, a specially composed fanfare at the wedding announces the size and content of the bride price (about 20% of the assets), suggesting that a better name for this payment could be "wealth display" of the bridegroom's family. Equally, the largeness of the bride price serves to raise the status of the bride which is both a gain for the bride's family in terms of honour and for the bridegroom's family in terms of prestige. When the bride's family are of a lower social status to the bridegroom, they also achieve an enhancement of prestige through the marriage.<sup>149</sup> In Leach's Kachin gumsa society, when individuals marry out of their own social class, it is normally the men who marry up and the women down and that "Kachin formal theory is that bride price is adjusted to the standing of the bride." (Leach 1970: 151). For the Marma people, since there is a shortage of male marriage partners, adjusting the

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<sup>148</sup> A dowry is a loan not a gift, paid back if divorced and it comes from the wife's family to her husband's family. In the Bengali Bangladesh tradition: property or money is brought by a bride to her husband on their marriage.

<sup>149</sup> Leach similarly identified the importance of ritual wealth in objects and things as the marker of superiority. Hpaga or "wealth items" are symbolic currency for exchanges like bride price but also a repayment for "violations" of the *mayu-dama* rules rules, incest taboos, or for the resolution of feuds (Leach 1970: 153).

bride price to the standing of the bride is becoming more of a challenge. Significantly though, the Marma are continuing to create their distinctiveness from the rest of the nation by following traditions closer to their Burmese neighbours.

### **5.3.3 Adaptations and Strategies**

This chapter has so far outlined the contemporary pressures in the Marma community on marriage customs and rules. We have already seen the problems related to a gender imbalance in the Hill tracts. In this section, we will take a closer look at some strategies that tackle the concerns, including the raising of a Bangladeshi-type dowry in order to stabilise Marma marriage.

For the Marma community, marriage follows Burmese style customs within a Muslim nation state. We have already seen how the influences of Burma, Muslim Bangladesh alongside an Indian subcontinent-style dowry system, effects the negotiations of a Marma bride price, as there are a wealth of alternative resources available. Marma marriage payments to the bride's family are compulsory – an unbending rule that covers the loss of a woman from her family. With the challenge of a lack of male marriageable partners for women, it appears that there is a growing tendency for Marma families to offer dowries to allure marriageable Marma men to their families and which also acts as an inducement for Marma women not to marry out. The dowry is similar to a debt and would function as Leach describes as a “kind of credit account which ensures the continuity of the relationship...the existence of a debt may signify not only a state of hostility but also a state of dependence and friendship.” (Leach 1970: 153). As a result, there seems to be an increase in dowry-giving by the bride's family, particularly amongst the richer strata of Marma society, which can be partly explained by these new conditions, and partly by the draw of showy gold dowry fashion in the capital - Dhaka - on the Marma population. This implies that some wealthy members of Marma society are incorporating Bangladeshi customs and that in these cases, wife-takers are of higher rank than wife-givers.

“The wedding process still follows culture and customs but sometimes the decorations are mixed up with Bengali traditions and held in Bengali venues. Actually, it's all mixed up. For example, my mother gave the gift of organic blankets to my wife's family. They were from her father's house, and we used them while I was a child too so they were emotionally important to us. In the choice of ornaments, we are still trying to keep to

tradition, but something has changed, we are now measuring the deference given to them through other people's eyes." Interview with Sai Sing.

To illustrate this "mixed up" new trend, Figure 11 depicts a marriage that seems to have incorporated both Bengali and Marma elements. Against Marma tradition, in this marriage, there is both a dowry and use of the Bengali wedding colour of red in Marma dress form, reflecting a significant change in marriage practices in the Marma community. The shift seems to suggest that there is an incorporation of new elements in the Marma marriage system which is necessary to help reproduce the Marma population and culture in the CHT.

**Figure 11: Hybrid elements in a Marma marriage**



What are the other strategies deployed to keep land within the community? Spiro (1977) describes analogous Yeigyi practices in upper Burma that help keep land within the family. Levirate practice permits a brother to take as his wife the widow of his dead brother and sororate practice permits the husband to take the sister of his wife as another wife (Spiro 1977: 162). He explains that there are advantages to both practices: through levirate practice, keeping the wife within the family after a brother's death protects their investment (bride payment) with a guarantee that both wife and property will remain within the wealth-giving families. A sororate marriage is also considered to hold advantages for the husband as by taking the sister of his wife, the husband does not have to pay a new bride price. Moreover,



he retains full possession of the original bride price and acquires for his wife, support in the household.

Similarly, Ortner (1989: 36) examines Sherpa strategies to keeping land within the family when there are similar demographic pressures on land. As with Sherpa inheritance rules, left to its own devices, the parcellation of land can result in a declining standard of living for the group. As with Spiro's research, Ortner describes a Sherpa solution to this problem: fraternal polyandry, when there is a single wife, a set of brothers whom she weds, and a single set of children to reduce the number of divisions of land as too many wives will mean too many children.

In the past, the Marma people adopted polygamous practices within royal families – up to four wives. Marma polygamy, though once common, is now rare. It meant that many wives bear more children and therefore there are more divisions of land which has impoverished the royal family (see Chapter 6) and is less common now due to the financial responsibilities of such an arrangement. I came across one example in the royal family of sororate practice within a polygamous marriage when a senior prince had three wives in total and wife number 2 and 3 were sisters. He had married the younger sister of his Tanchangya Buddhist wife. The reason for doing this was because the eldest sister appeared to be suffering from mental health issues and instead of returning the bride price to the prince's family, the family supplied a younger sister to help in the household and to be another wife to the prince.

These sections have argued that with fewer potential husbands, there is a greater likelihood that women will marry out in search of husbands, which puts pressure on Marma endogamy rules. The concerns are around Marma women and inheritance and what will happen to property and land that is owned by women when they marry outside of the community. The Marma group are responding to this challenge to endogamy rules by adapting cultural practice. Looking comparatively at Burmese and Bengali marriage practices and inheritance norms, it appears that the Marma lean towards Burmese practices but are also able to incorporate some new elements - Bengali dowry-giving - in order to maintain the singularity of their practice. However, the most direct strategy for tackling out-

marriage is the practice of disinheriting girls who marry out, and narratives around this strategy reappeared throughout the fieldwork (and in this thesis). This step protects the community from the loss of land to another culture and maintains the integrity of local land ownership.

## **5.4 Conclusion**

The analysis of ethnographic data on kinship, marriage customs and rituals in Part 2 of the thesis, reinforces the idea of a Marma society that endeavours to be stable, with structures that are carefully reproduced but which enter into tension with surrounding circumstances when these radically interfere. The Marma community persists with its kinship practice and marriage rules, and with a set of creolized rituals that lie at the core of this practice. Marriage remains the stage in a Marma life cycle where there is a convergence of society's approval, the re-enactment of cultural customs and rules, an astrological interaction with local cosmologies, the spirit world and Buddhism.

From the Marma endogamy section, we learn how the Marma people maintain their boundaries and difference with other communities outside of the group. It is clear that ethnic endogamy and descent group exogamy go hand in hand in Marma society, driving decisions and choices in marriage as well as being the source of anxieties when they are breached. In Marma endogamy rules, we see a persistence of traditional patterns of internal social distance, separateness, and social cohesion as the principle of ethnic endogamy is rigorously adhered to. The process of maintaining marriage customs and presiding over disputes or breaches in customs, link the Marma community to Burmese customary law. We see how ethnic out-marriage is tantamount to ostracization and this taboo has a strong influence over the population.

Marma inheritance laws and land have become central to Marma preoccupations for maintaining a Marma existence in the area and the encroachments by Bangladeshis into Marma lands have perhaps even strengthened the reproduction

of this Marma practice. We also learn that Marma women appear to be bearers of Marma culture and custodians of boundaries (Cahyaningtyas 2016: 6) as a woman's endogamy maintains a group's identity. Marriage payments, mainly in the form of bride price, provide protection for women and help to keep property and land in the Marma community. A divorcee or widow is less likely to re-marry because of the payments and therefore is less vulnerable to a Muslim marriage. However, the growing population of unmarried women has meant that some strategic adaptations have had to be made, showing that flexibility on conventions exist, whilst the overall system of kinship and marriage remains the same. For example, in order to stimulate wife-taking within the Marma group, Bangladeshi-style dowries are being raised which is a new alternative element or resource available within traditional practice.

Part two of the thesis has examined the processes behind the reproduction of Marma structures and how continuity is achieved in situations of change. The two chapters demonstrate the sense of enduring structures and practice with some recent changes absorbed along the way. The reproduction of practice strengthens the boundaries of Marma culture so that the group can maintain its uniqueness in the region. Moreover, it shows how an historically hybrid group can accentuate its singularity on the boundaries of the group. A creolized set of spiritual resources are deployed during marriage rituals to ensure the best possible outcome for the marriage, which ultimately ensures the future continuation of the group.

Part three will shift the analysis of the ethnographic data from maintenance on the boundaries of culture to examining the cultural processes at work within the boundaries of a group. The thesis will study the hybrid nature of the Marma diaspora as it travels in successive waves to the CHT, culminating in the Royal Chart that stands before the Tribal Cultural Institute in Bandarban town, and the rich array of resources in material culture that were invented and reinvented to strengthen Marma tradition and culture.

# **Part 3:**

## **The Cementing Role of Shininess**

## Chapter 6: Migration and Settlement

The central questions of the thesis ask how the Marma people have been able to maintain a unique cultural identity and strong group boundaries against other hill tribes and the region's majority culture for approximately 300 years in the CHT and 200 years as a settled group in the Bohmong circle, whilst at the same time undergoing elements of change. Whilst the previous two chapters studied the boundary-making and reproduction of Marma culture through kinship, marriage rules and property conventions, the next two chapters will focus on how the Marma create and bolster cultural content from within the boundaries of the group through narratives around migration, settlement, material objects and ceremonies.

As outlined in Chapter 3, Leach, Sahlins and Ortner examined the history of an ethnic group in the *longue durée* as part of the analysis of their ethnographical data. This approach provided the opportunity to uncover the processes at work behind reproducing structures and the adaptation of those structures to change. Similarly, Geertz in his 1980 monograph *Negara*<sup>150</sup> was able to see that the Balinese state was fixed by a cultural schema that was 600 years old:<sup>151</sup>

“...new courts model themselves on vanished ones, reemerging under different names and in different places as but further transcriptions of a fixed ideal.” (Geertz 1980: 134).

These transcriptions appeared durable, so to unpick the processes behind their durability, Geertz studied Negara's history in bounded periods and as part of a two-fold continuous social and cultural process:

“The period approach distributes clusters of concrete events along a time continuum in which the major distinction is earlier or later; the developmental approach distributes forms of organization and patterns of culture along a time continuum in which the major distinction is prerequisite and outcome.” (Geertz 1980: 5)

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<sup>150</sup> Negara is the classical state of precolonial Indonesia. Negara means town, palace, capital, state, realm and also conveys a sense of a classical civilization.

<sup>151</sup> “...one of the most important institutions (perhaps the most important) in shaping the basic character of Indonesian civilization is, for all intents and purposes, absent, vanished with a completeness that, in a perverse way, attests its historical centrality - the Negara, the classical state of precolonial Indonesia.” (Geertz 1980: 3-4)

In the period approach, the timeline is plotted with events, which may simply mark the before and after but also possibly act as markers of structural change. In the developmental approach, time is a “medium through which certain abstract processes move” where it is difficult to see when things stopped being what they were and became instead something else (Geertz 1980: 5). Geertz’s ethnography is relevant to this section of the thesis as similarly, Marma oral and written narratives discuss histories as events plotted on an historical timeline: both the histories of events and histories of enduring, repetitive processes that conceal back-stories that need to be told in order to reveal the continuity.

The Marma people stress that they are a migrating diaspora with foreign origins. To this end, the first chapter in Part 3 will examine the Marma process of historicity as their narrative on origins, migration, and various settlements in the CHT unfolds and repeats on an historical timeline. This chapter will include a survey of historical data on the migration of the group followed by a presentation of a mix of historical and ethnographic data on the group’s settlement in Bandarban. The chapter will conclude with insights and concerns that emerged during fieldwork around the settlement in Bandarban and the future of the group in the region.

Geertz’s approach also attempts to interpret the scattered and fragmented stories between the lines and behind the myths that sometimes obscure the events on a timeline. There is another narrative that is being told through material objects and ceremonies that do not necessarily follow an historical timeline but contribute in different ways to the overall progression of the dominant narrative. The next chapter in Part 3 will analyse how the hybrid group synthesise elements of their history in Marma material culture and ceremony, to create a singular de-hybridized identity. As identity and tradition is created and bolstered by objects, commemorative rituals and symbols of kingly power, the chapter will also highlight the processes behind how the Marma organise and assemble their material culture and ceremony in relation to their history. The aim of both chapters in Part 3 will be to understand how the group’s hybridity has become Marma-rized over time.

## 6.1 Introduction

First of all, the next sections will explore two relatively recent inventions that have helped to demarcate the Marma group from other groups in the CHT region - the creation of the “Marma” label as the name for the settled hybrid group in the Bohmong circle and the object of the royal chart.

### 6.1.1 The Origins of the Ethnic Label “Marma”

From the fieldwork interviews, I came to learn that this community began to call themselves Marma from the late 1950s when the 14<sup>th</sup> Bohmong applied to the government to change the groups’ name to “Marma”.

It is assumed that the royal lineages were distancing themselves from the blanket term of “mog” which was applied to certain hill peoples and conveyed a sense of lagging behind or being uncivilized compared to their valley counterparts. Before the 1950s, the ruling powers over the region, mainly the British and Bengalis, used to call this group *Mog* (Buchanan 1798), or *Mugh* (Lewin 1885) or *Maghs* (Khan 1999a). However, there is mention of “Ma-ra-ma” as early as 1789:

“This group was commonly known as 'Joomea (Mogs)' to the Bengalis of the plain, but their leader Kaung-la Pru [Kong Hla Phru] explained that 'the proper name of the Joomeas is Ma-ra-ma, and that they have resided in this Country from time immemorial'.”(Buchanan 1798: 91).

Scholars hold divergent views about the etymology of the term “Mog” or “Mugh” or “Magh” and “Marma”. Some claim that the word “Magh” is derived from *Magdu*, a Sanskrit word which means a seabird and by implication denotes pirates (Risley 1891: 29). Khan in his monograph *The Maghs: A Buddhist Community in Bangladesh* (1999) uses the term *Magh* to collectively cover both Rakhines (Arakanese) of the plains and the Marma of the hills. Khan (1999a) and more recently Htin (2015) see both groups as migrants from Arakan into Bangladesh. However, Khan goes on to contradict this position by linking the label of the group

“Marma” with the word Myamma thereby linking the Marma group directly to Burma (Khan 1999a: 41).<sup>152</sup>

A recent scholar, Kyaw Minn Htin (2015) claims that “Marma” is simply the Arakanese pronunciation of the Burmese word “Myanmar” and in the 18th century Arakanese texts, *Maramā* denotes the people of Arakan (Htin 2015: 135-136). He refers to Western sources that share a similar assumption:

“The Burmese esteem themselves to be descended from the people of Arakan whom they often call Myanmawgyee, that is to say, great Burmas.” (Buchanan 1799: 223)

Htin also claims that the leaders of the Marma community were promoting “an embellished Bohmong history”:

“Bohmongs are the Chiefs (also known as *Rajas*) of the Marma community from Bandarban Hill District. The creation of the history and genealogy of the Bohmongs in the early 20th century has been a key factor in linking the Marmas to the Pegu city and Mon people of Lower Myanmar. An embellished history of the Bohmong dynasty was presented to J. P. Mills in 1920s and Lucien Bernot in 1950s by the then ruling Bohmongs.” (Htin 2015: 139).

In sum, Htin advocates that the Bohmong family, like the commoners in the Marma group, are also originally Arakanese. To underlie this, Htin claims that the Bohmong Chiefs were known to be Arakanese during the late 19th century and in Lewin’s time, but that from the early 1900s, the Bohmong family actively worked to de-Arakanize the group by claiming to be Burmese and Mon descendants, and that this triggered a process of change in the group’s self-identification.

Looking at historical accounts of Marma identity, Hutchinson (1906) refers to the Bohmong history has having origins in Burma or Mon. He also points out that the ancient records preserved by the Bohmong’s family had been destroyed by fire. Mills (1926) claims that the ancient records that were destroyed had been orally transmitted to him and there was “no reason to doubt its substantial accuracy” (Mills 1926/7: 21). Mills also places the origin of the Bohmong family in Pegu. In

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<sup>152</sup> According to Khan (1999a), there are several groups of Maghs based on locality and occupation. E.g. Khounghtha Magh and Roang Magh are migrants from Arakan. The Barua Maghs are of mixed origin – Hindu, Muslim, Arakanese, Burmese, Portuguese.



the 1950s, Lévi-Strauss learnt about the Bohmong history from the chief of the Mog village where he resided, who retold the same narrative about Pegu (Lévi-Strauss 1952a: 208-9).<sup>153</sup> When in Bandarban, over 100 years on from Hutchinson, I heard the same narratives about how the Marma group came to be in the CHT. These narratives had been transmitted orally from generation to generation and some members of the royal family had studied their history in more detail and even visited Pegu to establish the facts of their origins.<sup>154</sup>

The debate on the origins of the Marma ethnic label reveals the complex nature of the group, both in the way that the group is viewed by travellers to the region and the retrospective assumptions made of the group. Htin's idea that the Marma group has recently undergone a process of "de-Arakanization" may hold weight. Equally, whilst the Marma nobility seek to stress its Burmese pedigree over Arakanese, the Marma commoners may be trying to do the opposite, to prioritize their Arakanese origins. However, since the aim of the thesis is to understand the processes behind the unique Marma identity in the CHT, the thesis will place the perspectives emerging from the group as central to understanding these processes and in this case, the origin of the label "Marma" comes from Pegu in Burma rather than in Arakan. Moreover, since the Marma label became the official name relatively recently - in the 1950s, it also seems to be employed to differentiate the group from other Arakanese or Burmese origin groups in the CHT.

Another recent invention is the royal chart that links the group to a specific time, history, and place. The next section will detail the significance of this object in the narrative on Marma history and origins.

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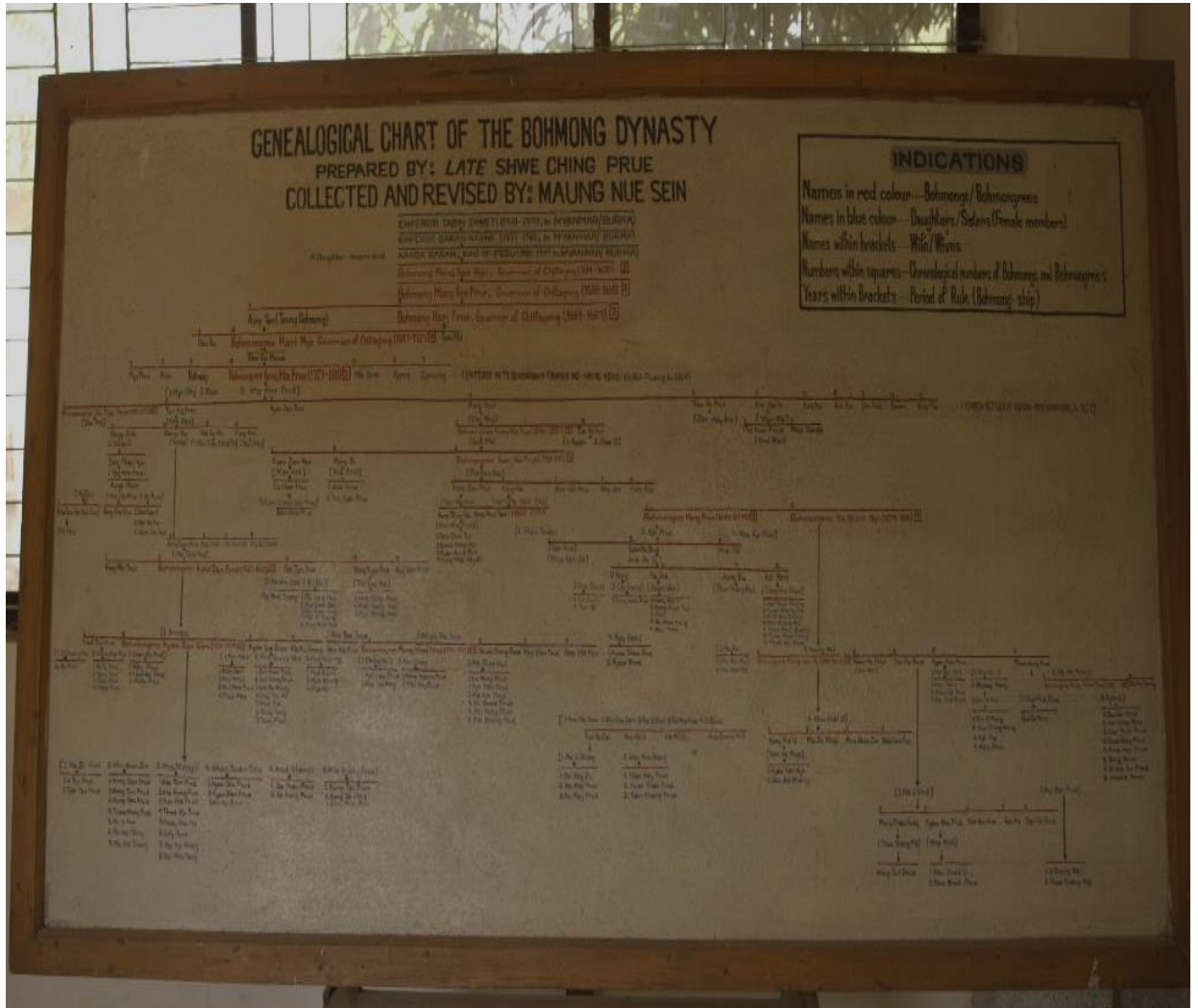
<sup>153</sup> The Bohmong History is also recounted by J.P. Mills in 1920s and Lucien Bernot in 1950s by the then ruling Bohmongs (See: Mills 1926-27; Bernot 1967: 85-96; Löffler 1968: 189). The earliest history of Bohmongs in printed form can be found in Hutchinson's *An Account of the Chittagong Hill Tracts* (1906). The genealogy of the Bohmong Chiefs was reproduced in G. E. Harvey's article *The Magh Bohmong* (Harvey 1961). As Löffler (1968) notes: "In his most remarkable book *Les Paysans Arakanais du Pakistan Oriental*", Lucien Bernot gives the fullest account of the Marma Chiefs of Bandarban. For his account Bernot had mainly to rely on the oral traditions of the people since the archives of the Bandarban dynasty are said to have been lost. When J. P. Mills during his tour in the Chittagong Hill Tracts in 1926 wanted to see them, he was told that the archives had been destroyed by fire. Again, when Bernot asked for them in 1952, he was informed that they had been stolen some years ago from the Chittagong station." (Löffler 1968: 189).

<sup>154</sup> Prince Nu Shwe Prue, the youngest son of the 14<sup>th</sup> Bohmong had travelled to Bago (formerly known as Pegu).

### **6.1.2 The Royal Chart and the Faithful Followers**

When visiting the Tribal Cultural Institute (TCI) in Bandarban, I came across the large Bohmong genealogy chart which stands as a museum object at the entrance of the institute and represents the undisputed history of the royal family. Marma kinship is difficult to define, due to the hybrid nature of the group and we learn later in this chapter how hybridity has arisen through intermarriage with other Buddhist communities during the migration to the CHT. In contrast, royal kinship - as leaders of the Marma community - is well documented and on public display.

**Figure 12: Royal Chart at entrance of Tribal Cultural Institute (TCI) in Bandarban**



The creator of this chart was Maung Nue Sein, the TCI director and presumably the designated royal genealogist at the time. The creation date is not indicated on the chart. However, the last Bohmong on the chart is the 14<sup>th</sup> Bohmong. The next Bohmong, Aung Shwe Prue is on the family chart but not as the 15<sup>th</sup> Bohmong, which he became in 1998. Moreover, since the chart has not been updated to reflect the subsequent Bohmongs and their families, it is clear that this chart was made in the past and most likely during the lifetime of the 14<sup>th</sup> Bohmong and before his death in 1996. The period of the 14<sup>th</sup> Bohmong's reign was marked by civil war in the CHT, with a Peace Treaty being negotiated and eventually signed in 1997, so perhaps the chart was created to highlight the strong history of the

Bohmong family in the region as a backdrop to war, and the subsequent peace negotiations with the Bangladeshi Government.

As with Ortner's (1989) celibate Sherpa monastery acting as a point of reference in social practice from which new beliefs or actions emerge, the royal chart serves as the starting point for a retrospective analysis of a community's historical journey from Burma to the CHT. The chart covers the period from 1614 to before 1996 and approximately 15 generations of Bohmong leadership. According to the chart, the first four Bohmongs were Governors of Chittagong from 1614 to 1727. It was the 5<sup>th</sup> Bohmong named Kong Hla Prue<sup>155</sup> who migrated to the Hill Tracts.

Up until the 9<sup>th</sup> Bohmong, the Bohmong family was one large family. The succession rules of father to son changed in 1875 as power was transferred instead to the senior most royal member of the family.<sup>156</sup> As a result of this change, the royal family became extended to include 3 additional branches of families, each headed by a Bohmong. There are a few instances of polygamous marriages of 2 to 3 wives in the chart but it is the 13<sup>th</sup> Bohmong who greatly expands the royal family by having 6 wives and 26 children.

When royal members discuss the chart, they relate it to the story of their ancestral origins. The royal family are the descendants of the Prince of Pegu called Maung Sein Pyn, who was the only son of the Emperor of Pegu of Burma. From oral recounts of their history, I came to learn that after defeat at the hands of rival kings in the early 1600s, the Prince of Pegu was taken hostage with his sister and royal "faithful followers" and left the Pegu capital of the Hanthawaddy kingdom<sup>157</sup> to settle eventually in Arakan. The Prince of Pegu became the first Bohmong from 1614-1630 and in the following century, the descendants of the Prince of Pegu eventually came to settle in the Chittagong Hill Tracts.

This relatively newly created royal chart acts as a connecting thread that links the current community to its roots in central Burma of 400 years ago. From this

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<sup>155</sup> Francis Buchanan (1798) is one of the first colonial travellers in the CHT to have met with the leader Kong Hla Hpru who was the 5<sup>th</sup> Bohmong (1727-1811) and the first BM to live in the Bandarban region.

<sup>156</sup> Mills claims that Marma succession is similar to primitive Indonesian customs whereby a minor would be passed over in favour of his uncle, "simply because a minor's hands are feeble, but a capable son of full age would not be so passed over." Mills (1926/7: 78).

<sup>157</sup> The Hanthawaddy Kingdom was the dominant kingdom that ruled lower Burma (Myanmar) from 1287 to 1539 and from 1550 to 1552.

narrative of the royal family around the chart, we learn that the Marma people are a hybrid group made up of royals and faithful followers. It relates the story of the royal family but through it, the whole Marma community - not just the royal family - remember and celebrate their connection to Burma. Moreover, the chart is an object that synthesises different elements of a narrative: it anchors members of the royal family in a glorious past; it intimates their long history in the region; and it implies that royal blood pumps through the veins of an extended network of families. Thus, through the royal chart, actors appear to have worked within the structures of the group to embed a narrative of origins and migration.

As already noted, the chart covers the genealogy of the royal family. It does not, however, detail the history of the other component of the hybrid group – the “faithful followers” – even though the narrative around the royal chart includes them as an important part of the almost mythical journey. From various historical accounts, we learn that the followers married into local Arakanese families, and later with other Buddhist communities, during their journey to the CHT.

Consequently, the assumption is that the present-day Marma group are made up of the “faithful followers” who originate from the defeat of Pegu but also includes others who were absorbed along the migration path. These faithful followers who became part of the commoner clans in the Marma group appear to be without genealogy. As already highlighted in Chapter 4, Ahamed’s interviews of commoners in the Bohmong Circle claimed that they did not remember any genealogical stories beyond two or three generations, and they did not have a clear idea of their clan history (Ahamed 2004: 114). Digging deeper into colonial accounts, we learn from Mills that in the early 1900s, Kangcha-aong, the headman of Ramgarh *mouza*, told him that his group - the Maghs - had reached the CHT three generations ago and found nothing but jungle with a few tribal people called the Tippera living in the area (Mills 1927: 42).

Visitors to the region have developed their own theories as to the ethnic origins of the commoners in the hybrid group, who came to be known as Marma. Alongside the Bohmong family, Htin (2015) claims that all the hybrid subgroups of the Marma community are from Arakan State and not from Upper or Lower Burma. He posits that there were different waves of Arakanese migration to Bengal and that the last wave took place around 1794, after the conquest of Arakan in 1784

(Bernot 1967b: 33). The Arakanese settlements during this period were on the coastal areas in present day Bangladesh such as Cox's Bazar and Patuakhali regions (Khan 1999a: 46-47) and these groups, to this day, continue to call themselves "Rakhines" or Arakanese. The other migration wave travelled North in the CHT and the group that settled there became known as "Mong" whilst those who settled in the south of the CHT became the Marma group.

"The Arakanese descendants of CHT identify with reference to different 'clan' names such as "Regre tha", "Khyong tha", "Maro tha", "Kokkadain tha", "Longadu tha" as well as maintaining the ancient term "Marma". (Htin 2015: 148)

This claim that the subgroups in the Marma community are originally Arakanese is also observed by some colonial officials at the time. The first traveller to the region, Buchanan notes:

"These people left their country on its conquest by the Burmas, and subsist by fishing, boat building, a little cultivation, and by the cloth made by their women...The natives of arakan pay no rent for their lands, as every three years they remove and clear away some new spot overgrown with Wood." (Buchanan 1798: 31).

Hamilton (1825) points out that the old Arakanese community that had settled in the CHT the longest, faced a new wave of Arakanese refugees following the Burmese invasion of 1784, and as result, formed two different communities as the old community did not want to be associated with the newly arrived Arakanese (Hamilton 1825: 201). In contrast to the Arakan origins position, a rather unusual theory is put forward by Mills (1926/7: 76). Curiously, Mills claims that the faithful followers of the Marma group come originally from Indonesia and that they later became known as Talaings:<sup>158</sup>

"The Maghs are an Indonesian people, with affinities scattered from Northern Arakan to Borneo and beyond. Of earlier migrations of the tribe little is known, but is was from Arakan, where they seem to have been known as Talaings. From Arakan they entered the Southern portion of Chittagong District, whence they gradually moved up to their present home, pushing the Chakmas ahead of them as they came. Those of the Mong

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<sup>158</sup> Talaing is considered a branch of the great Tai race from Southern and Central China. They had already begun to migrate South, South-West, and South East, and filtered through Assam, the Chindwin Valley and Arakan. "This is the stock from which the Maghs are sprung." (Mills 1926/7: 74)

Raja's circle arrived later than those of the Bohmong's circle and differ considerably in culture." (Mills 1926/7: 74).

Although there is little data on the faithful followers and the other nonroyals, it seems that the ethnic origins of the faithful followers – whether Arakanese, Indonesian or Talaings – was, and still is a focal point of debate.

In conclusion, it is clear that the Marma label and the royal chart are recent actor-led inventions as they provide an opportunity for the ethnic group to retrospectively narrate and commemorate the history of the Marma from the vantage point of the relative present. Similar to Handler and Linnekin's (1984) invention of culture, the Marma label and chart encompass both continuity and discontinuity, giving new meaning in the present to events and peoples of the past. In contrast, the history of the faithful followers is fragmented and scattered across different sources. However, it is also a significant label, and together with the "Marma" and the royal chart, "The Faithful Followers" make up the Marma community of today.

The next section of this chapter will draw largely on oral histories and the written notes of a local historian and member of the royal family, U Tan Pru, who documented the history of the community until 1950, just before he left the CHT to live in Burma.<sup>159</sup> See Figure 13.

**Figure 13: U Tan Pru (man with glasses)**



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<sup>159</sup> U Tan Pru left the CHT at the time of Partition. His handwritten notes were left behind with the royal family.

This chapter will then conclude with a study of how the Marma as a migrating diaspora became a settled-diaspora-becoming-indigenous to the CHT. It will illuminate the ways in which the Marma deploy narratives and ritual to help define their enduring immigrant identity within the CHT as well as strengthen their distinctness as a group, signalling elements that are bordered, contained, and marked. It is important to note that the narratives from this group are mostly directed by the royal family who have both the means and education to invest in it continuously.

## **6.2 A Plotted History: The Cycle of Defeat and Triumph**

In this section, U Tan Pru plots the community's journey, examining their struggles and negotiations with other groups during their migration. This section will cover Marma history from the Emperor of Burma to the Bohmong king (see Table 2); the group's migration journey from Burma to CHT, as they were collectively named "Mog" or pirates by outsiders; to settling in Bandarban where the group came to be known as the Magh group headed by the Bohmong; and finally, to the 1950s when they claimed the name of Marma for the community.

### **Table 2: Chronology of Bohmongs**

#### **Pegu**

Emperor Tabin Shweti (1531-1550)

Bayin Naung (1551-1581)

Emperor Nanda Baran (1581-1599)

#### **The Bohmongs of Chittagong and Bandarban**



**Chittagong District:**

- 1 Maung Saw Pyne (1614-1630)
- 2 Maung Groin Prue (1630-1665)
- 3 Hari Prue (1665-1687)
- 4 Hari Kgao (1687-1727)

**Bandarban district:**

- 5 Kong Hla Prue (1727-1811)
- 6 Thet Than Prue (1811-1840)
- 7 Thadaw Aung Prue (1840-1866)
- 8 Maung Prue (1866-1875)
- 9 Sanaio (1875-1901)
- 10 Saw Hla Prue (1901-1916)
- 11 Maung Tha Nyo (1916-1923)
- 12 Kyaw Zan Prue (1923-1933)
- 13 Kyaw Zaw Than (1933-1959)
- 14 Maung Shwe Prue (1959-1995)
- 15 Aung Shwe Prue (1998-2012)
- 16 Kyaw Sain Prue (2012-2013)
- 17 U Chaw Prue (2013 -

According to oral histories, the royal chart and U Tan Pru's notes, the Bohmong families are descendants of the legendary Emperor Tabin Shweti (1531-1550) of the historical Pegu Empire in neighbouring Burma.

Jesse and Jewel, two young princes in their early 20s, retell the story in the following way:<sup>160</sup>

“It is said that our ancestors were known as Mon of Pegu and they were also the king of that kingdom. It is also said that the throne of Pegu is still in Myanmar.”

“You know the first Bohmong. When did he come over here? It was in 1640. He lived in the Arakan state from 1601 to 1640 (?) and after that he was sent by the Arakan King over here. Basically, he was defeated by the Arakan king. That's why.”

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<sup>160</sup> Jesse is descended from the 15<sup>th</sup> King, 27 years old in 2015. Jewel is a descendent of 13<sup>th</sup> King.

These statements reveal an historical self-understanding amongst the youngest members of the royal family but more saliently, it illustrates two themes: a glorious past followed by defeat.

### 6.2.1 Defeat

The written notes of Pru describe how the group emerges from an initial defeat to triumph in stages. The story begins with Emperor Nanda Baran (1581-1599), who ruled over the Pegu empire, being defeated and killed in a battle in 1599 against a formidable coalition made up of the kings of Taungoo, Siam and Arakan. Pru notes how they fought:

“The emperor king now marched on Ava, being joined with their forces by the kings of Prome and Taungoo. Advancing up the valley of the Sittan river, the army encamped near Panwa. A battle was fought, in which the uncle and nephew, each on an elephant with a small body of followers, engaged in fierce combat.” (Pru 1950: 7)

The city surrendered and the emperor, who was the son and successor of the Great Baran Naung, was made a prisoner of Taungoo, where he was secretly put to death in December 1599.

“Thus perished the last of the emperors of the great Taungoo Dynasty of Pegu which held sway over practically the whole of Burma and Siam with their influence reaching into the remote corners of the Arakan, Assam and distant Indo-China. Never did Burma again rise to such a high pinnacle of glory and military prestige as during that time, and if she did attain it afterwards, during the days of Alaungpra, nothing can surpass the greatness.” (Pru 1950: 7)

In return for his help in the overthrow of Emperor Nandan Baran, the King of Arakan was gifted two captives from the royal family: the Prince of Pegu, Maung Saw Pyne (1614-1630) who was the son of the dead King of Pegu, and his sister Shin Dwe Hnaung, whom the King of Arakan later married.<sup>161</sup> As the group migrated westwards from Pegu to Arakan, the defeated Prince of Pegu was given a new

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<sup>161</sup> The king of Arakan married the princess and changed her name from Shan Dwang Huaung to Cho Han Gree which means chief queen.

responsibility as well the gift of new lands. See Figure 14 for the migration path of the group from Pegu, across the Arakan State and to the Chittagong region.

**Figure 14: Migration from Pegu to CHT**



The next section plots the successive journeys of migration from one home to another as a loosely formed group headed by the royal family. The 33,000 ‘faithful followers’ were thought to be members of the royal court of Pegu and according to Pru, a mix of Burman<sup>162</sup> and Mon.<sup>163</sup> Whilst Maung Saw Pyne lived for 13 years at

<sup>162</sup> Also Burman, Burmese and Bamar are a Sino-Tibetan ethnic group and nation native to Myanmar (Burma) where they are the dominant group. The Bamar live primarily in the Irrawaddy River basin and speak the Burmese language, which is the sole official language of Myanmar at a national level. Bamar customs and identity are closely intertwined with the broader Burmese culture.

<sup>163</sup> The Mon were originally from Southwest China, from where they migrated to upper Burma reportedly around 1500 BC, and then continued moving south to the Irrawaddy valley where the majority of them live today. The Mon are considered descendants of one of Southeast Asia’s most ancient civilisations, and they introduced both written language and Buddhism to Burma.

the Arakanese court, his faithful followers also settled in Arakan. According to Pru, some of the fellow refugees worked under the king and the noblemen of the court, whilst others settled in Mrkhaung and the surrounding districts of the capital. Pru points out that because of intermarriage with locals, it is now difficult to trace the lineage of the faithful followers (Pru 1950: 8).

### 6.2.2 Military Victory

This part of the Bohmong narrative recounts a history of military service to an imperial centre, with victory and the reward of titles.

In 1614, the Arakan King sent Prince Maung Saw Pyne, who had become his brother-in-law, to Chittagong which was then part of the Arakan province.<sup>164</sup> Prince Maung Saw Pyne developed a reputation as a wise governor and was surrounded by “able counsellors” (Pru 1950: 9). At this time, the Portuguese were repeatedly attacking the Arakanese settlements. Maung Saw Pyne decided to fight back and collected an army, including some of his Bengali allies, and successfully removed the Portuguese pirates from the area in 1620.

“For this victory, he was honoured by his brother-in-law, the king of Arakan, with the title “Boh Mong” which means King of Generals or Commander-in-Chief. This is the title commonly written as “Bohmong”. After this Portuguese defeat he ruled the country, without further serious interruptions, till his premature death in 1630 AD. (Pru 1950: 9-10)

Similarly, 50 years later, the Bohmong, Hari Kgao (1687-1727), was determined not to give up Chittagong to the new enemy of the time – the Mughals. When a new dynasty was installed in Arakan,<sup>165</sup> Bohmong Hari Kgao was able to regroup troops and eventually defeat the Mughals in 1710.

“For this brilliant victory, he was conferred the title of “Bohmong Gree”, which means Great King of Generals. This title was hereditary and affirmed many times afterwards.” (Pru 1950: 12)

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<sup>164</sup> The prince was appointed Governor of Chittagong, or *Sait-Tat-Gong* which means, head Fortress in Arakanese (Pru1950: 9).

<sup>165</sup> Under King Chande Wijaya.

The titles of “Bohmong” and then “Bohmong Gree” appears to have reinstated the leaders of the community to a former glory. However, this glory only came after a cycle of successive struggles and defeat against an ethnically different other - first the Portuguese and then the Mughals.

### 6.2.3 The Journey to the CHT

Another theme that is covered in the oral and written histories is the history of displacement and the long troublesome journey to the CHT. Kong Hla Prue (1727-1811) - the same Bohmong who met with Francis Buchanan - like his two predecessors, also struggled to regain possession of Chittagong and after several attempts, was forced to retire to Arakan again in 1756 and seek shelter at the Arakanese Court (Pru 1950: 13).<sup>166</sup> In 1760, the East India Company ended the Mughal’s control of Bengal and Chittagong. On returning to his former territories in the South of the Chittagong Division in 1774, Kong Hla Prue discovered “the Mogul power declining and that the British ascending” (Pru 1950: 13). For the next thirty years, Kong Hla Prue led “a wandering life” (Pru 1950: 12), travelling in search of a permanent home. As he moved deeper into the Hill Tracts, he left followers behind at each place that he stopped.<sup>167</sup> Whilst slowly working their way north and battling with local “wild tribes”, they entered the Sangu Valley and settled at Subalok in 1798. They stayed there for seven years but finding the place unsuitable, in 1804, they moved a few miles further up the valley to *Furahou Koiyn* or ‘Plain of Old House Site’ as it came to be called afterwards. During this period, life in the hill tracts was perilous due to constant assaults from the “savage tribes”.

“...[It] was a wild region...with deep narrow valleys and steaming jungles in which lurked deathly malaria and the terrible headhunter...The struggle for bare existence and the atmosphere of constant danger with which they were surrounded was, as a matter of fact, a far cry from the courtly and polished life led in Arakan.” (Pru 1950: 14)

A colonial administrator from that time, Lewin, describes the danger in similar terms:

“Bah! What is a tiger! The valley below into which we were going was full of human tigers.” (Lewin 1885: 178)

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<sup>166</sup> For circa 18 years.

<sup>167</sup> Places such as Ramu, Edgar, Bongoo, Youngtha, Matamuri and Lama.

Once settled, Kong Hla Prue was the first Bohmong to make a treaty with the British and come under their influence and protection. He came to oversee all the territories along the river Karnaphuli to the south until the Kingdom of Arakan and divided his followers into four *ackoos* (*mouzas*) and 16 *toins* (villages). To each *ackoo* and *toin* he appointed one *achooshin* (headman) and one *toinshin* (*karbari*) as leader. This hierarchy made it possible for Kong Hla Prue to assert his authority over his people and extract revenue on behalf of the British. In return for collecting tax for the British, the Bohmong and his people received the protection of the British powers in the region. When the Bohmong died, his eldest son, Thet Than Prue (1811-1840), made an agreement in 1820 to pay tax to the British Government on cotton production in the area. Finding the site of their home too small, Bohmong Thet Than Prue moved his headquarters to the present site, Bandarban, or *Kyet Sein Myo* in the year 1822 (Pru 1950: 18).<sup>168</sup>

The following Bohmong, Thadaw Aung Prue (1840-1866), was noted as a harsh and ill-tempered Bohmong. Some of his relatives fell out with him, collected a large number of followers and family, and left Bandarban to establish a rival community in Lama on the Matamuri River or moved North. When Thadaw Aung Prue died in 1866, one of his brothers - Maung Prue with his family and followers - returned to Bandarban from the North (Pru 1950: 18). The same year, families from the Matamuri river also came back to Bandarban. The Bohmong's group came to be known as the Rigiesa clan (also known as Reqratsa),<sup>169</sup> whilst other clans, notably the Palangsa clan (also known as Palatine), later to be headed by the Mong *Raja*, moved up into the Chittagong Hill Tracts by another route.

Thus, in the 1950s, U Tan Pru points to a hybrid group made up of faithful followers, Arakanese people and the Bohmong family, that came to the CHT together, splintering off due to internal group conflict but then coming back together again at different points in history. The next section will detail the difficult conditions in the Hill tracts that led the hybrid group to be further subordinated to British influence.

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<sup>168</sup> In 1825, Bohmongree Thet Than Prue became blind and so Thadaw Tun Hla Prue officiated and renewed the settlement with the British in the year 1826 (Pru 1950: 17).

<sup>169</sup> Mills (1926/7: 77) connects the Bohmong with the "Reqratsa clan" (Rigiesa).

#### 6.2.4 Pact with the “Friendly Tribes”

Life in the CHT proved to be difficult as various Bohmongs suffered attacks from the Lushai who lived in the upper reaches of the Karnaphuli river and as far as the Lushai Hills in Assam. In order to protect their new settlement, various Bohmongs made a pact with friendly tribes against the offensives from the Lushai, whilst the town of Bandarban was slowly establishing itself. When Maung Prue assumed the Bohmongship in 1866, raids by bands of Lushai were almost a weekly occurrence.

“They were a troublesome tribe, still unsubdued by anyone, and the British found it rather difficult to check their marauding excursions into the plains. To end these raids, a punitive expedition was sent against them...” (Pru 1950: 21)

Successes were only temporary and within a few years the Lushai were again on the war path. When a young Scottish girl - Mary Winchester - was captured and taken hostage by the Lushai in 1871, she was rescued by a British campaign called the Lushai expedition of 1872.<sup>170</sup> This campaign resulted in the subjugation of the “savage” tribes to British control in the region.

Although the Bohmong worked with the British to maintain peace in the CHT,<sup>171</sup> U Tan Pru also conveys the Bohmong’s distrust of British influence in the area. Through his writing, Pru claims that the British had wanted complete subjugation of all tribes in the area and towards this end, had started to control and limit the powers of local leaders.

“The Chiefs did not like this, nor the people appreciated the idea of a white foreigner ruling over them. Matters came to a head when Bohmong Kong Hla Prue disallowed the government raid to go unchecked through his territory. The result was disastrous as he was deposed and his cousin Maung Prue made Bohmong. A series of encounters then followed between particular bands of people and the government. But owing to lack of unity and leadership it frittered away without achieving any result. From

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<sup>170</sup> This historic event marked the beginning of British rule in Mizoram that lasted until Indian Independence in 1947. Indirectly, it also paved the way for Christian missionaries to introduce Christianity among the Lushais who came to be known as Mizos.

<sup>171</sup> British practice of rewarding with gifts and titles those who rendered services for their causes. In the Lushai expedition, the Bohmong Chief was honoured with a Burmese title that meant “the Chief who holds the golden title” (Baura 2019: 46 and 32).

then onwards, the Chiefs and people have been continuously fighting a losing battle against British injustice and enduring the high-handedness and petty insults of their agents in The Hill Tracts.” (Pru 1950: 21)

To this day, the Rigiesa clan are descendants of the Bohmong-led group. It is through his rights as clan chief of the most numerous of the Magh clans that the Bohmong was able to oversee *jhum* tax collecting rights over large swathes of the Bohmong circle, including other groups that already lived in the area. Mills points out the opinions of the other tribes, for example, the Khyangs who told Mills that they resented paying taxes through the Bohmong as they regarded them as a newcomer empowered by the British Government to dominate them. They said that the Bohmong and his Maghs arrived in the hills long after they did, and that they never paid taxes or tribute to him until, without being consulted, they found themselves placed under his jurisdiction (Mills 1926/27: 69).

### 6.2.5 Discussion

Stateless, migrating peoples are often labelled by neighbouring cultures as “peoples without history” or as lacking the fundamental characteristic of civilization, namely historicity. James Scott (2009) contends that this presupposition is wrong on two counts. Firstly, the assumption is that only written history counts as a narrative of identity and a common past. Secondly, how much history a people have is not an indication of whether they are evolved or not, but rather reflects an active choice to select history for purposes that better position them vis-à-vis the State. This chapter has revealed the central role of Marma oral history. With the flight from Burma, texts and writings were left behind, yet the past that was lived in the valley<sup>172</sup> continues to be retold orally. The chapter has also shown, in recent decades, that oral histories and genealogies that have been committed to ink are part of a political project to anchor the community in its surroundings.

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<sup>172</sup> Lowland padi states were centres of literacy as writing was a crucial part of administration and statecraft.



“Contingent though they are, they become, once erected or written down, a sort of social fossil that can be “dug up” at any time, unchanged. Any written text makes a certain kind of orthodoxy possible—whether that text is a legend of origin, an account of migrations, a genealogy. The text becomes a fixed point of departure.” (Scott 2009: 227)

In the Marma group, a series of “actors” created a world in their own terms by instilling it with order, meaning, and a new value. From the unknown actors that began the narrative of the origins in Pegu - as opposed to Arakan - at the time of Hutchinson and Mills. To the historian’s handwritten notes from the 1950s, written at the same time as the group was named Marma, and to the architect of the royal chart. The other actors are the Arakan King and the British who act as protectors of the community as they journeyed across difficult and uncharted terrain. But also, as foe since protection of the community came at the price of subordination and constant intervention.

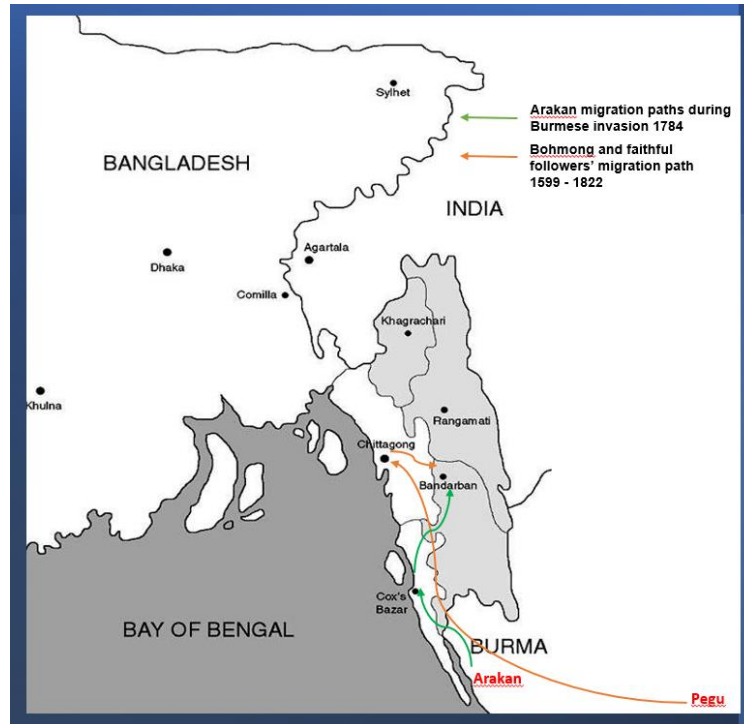
During fieldwork, the two young princes repeated the Bohmong history as written down by U Tan Pru: the same main facts that elaborate on the important influence of the royal family as part of a bygone historical period. An influence which still lingers on and is embedded in titles, and privileges that U Tan Pru, occupying a prominent place in the royal family, is himself part of. In U Tan Pru’s portrayal of their history, it is as if a diachronic succession of events was simultaneously projected on the screen of the present in order to reconstitute piece by piece a synchronic order which is later substantiated by the roster of Bohmong names embodied in the royal chart. To add weight to Pru’s written recount of the group’s oral history, he refers to the colonial records of Lewin and Mills. All three corroborate the ideas of an epic defeat and journey of a distinct group of people who have settled in an area with British patronage, practicing a culture that has mythical elements, and emphasizing the group’s connections with a glorious past. All three agree on the point that the British supported the community to stabilize the area for tax collection. However, U Tan Pru also expresses his distrust of British interference in his community.

These sections have plotted the numerous and repetitive defeats and triumphs of the community – which no doubt contributes to their contemporary identity - as well as the continued subjugation of the group, first under the Arakan king and

then under the British. From the history of the group, we see a repetitive cycle in the structures of the long run. Migration begins from the East in Pegu towards the West in Arakan, then North towards Chittagong and finally North Eastwards towards Bandarban (see map in Figure 15). The effect of the circularity of migration and the repetition of experience creates an impression of continued struggle and defeat. Sometimes glory, but with the ultimate triumph embodied in a peaceful settlement in the CHT.

What is being conveyed by this narrative of nobility, war, defeat, migration, incorporation of groups-along-the-way as followers, further war, defeat, migration? It seems that the Marma are a hybrid group who are destined to move further and further away from their origin, never becoming truly indigenous and always retaining a separateness that is rooted in history. Consequently, the maintenance of a strongly bounded ethnicity, identity and difference appears to be about perpetuating this history and remaining part of it. Moreover, the retelling of this history underlies the Marma's strong presence in the CHT, as the body-politic and society of a foreign nobility.

**Figure 15: Migration paths from Arakan State and the city of Pegu in Burma**



Moreover, interactions with powerful outsiders resulted in manifestations of indigenous foreign-ness within the Marma group. Sahlins' study of the Sandwich Islanders (1981) contributes to this understanding as he illustrates how a Polynesian community incorporates aspects of the powerful outsiders.

“The Kauai chief ... was convinced that, as beings from Kahiki, the British had journeyed to the sun between their first and second visits to Hawaii, the overseas lands also retain the connotation of the above.” (Sahlins 1981: 16).

This Polynesian community already had an established society and cosmological belief system, were enveloped by their culture and when they acted upon their culture, they were acting from within it, not from outside it. In contrast to the Sandwich Islanders, it was the Arakan King – an outside power - who guided the culture of the migrating group by restoring the displaced royal prince to the honoured status of Bohmong. When the migrating group arrived in the CHT, the hybrid group assessed the existing tribal practices of the CHT and decided to align themselves with the British against the Lusai tribes. In effect, as a group that

was new to the CHT, and with the help of an alternative British Empire schema, the hybrid migrating group were able to formulate a culture in opposition to the Lusai, and with the tax collection hierarchy - which will be explored in more detail in Chapter 7 - the group took on more elements of a British polity.

The hybrid nature of the group is revealed as royal leaders and the subgroup of faithful followers form a group with new people joining along the migration path. The membership of the elementary unit was in flux, as was the very existence of the unit itself. But fluid as they were, these elementary units were the only building blocks available to the royal lineage that led them. From the late 1880s, the subgroups splinter off and then come back together again. Although the reasons for the fragmentation of the group revolved around disputes in leadership, there is evidence that the turning point for the hybrid group, when they started to bury their differences and to come together as one group, may have been triggered by the dangers of being isolated from others in the hostile region of the CHT. The group is then collectively seen as one community of Maghs led by the Bohmong king (Mills 1926/27: 69). With historical data of this nature, it is challenging to find examples or insights into the processes at work when each band of newcomers, with their imported new cultural elements, join the group or evidence of processes of assimilation into the Bohmong's group. However, Chapter 9 will explore in some detail the inclusion of one new group as part of the contemporary Marma hybridity.

The next section covers Pru's notes and my field work data on the challenges of rooting the community in their new home of Bandarban as they define the boundaries of their community against the marauding "other".

### **6.3 Settlement and Defining New Mythical Boundaries**

"There we were at last, far away from civilization, on the banks of a new river, which the Roaja informed me was the Rigray Khyoung, or, as the Bengalis called it, the Sangu River, which flowed to the sea through the territory of a potentate styled the Bohmong." (Lewin 1885: 152).

The new home of the Bohmong-led group consisted of a thousand houses stretching along the banks of the Sangu River<sup>173</sup> and came to be known as Bandarban. When the community first arrived in the area, they underwent a process of defining and protecting the boundaries of Bandarban with spirit shrines. These shrines were set up on the edges of the forest and along the banks of the Sangu River<sup>174</sup> which plays an important and sacred role in the Marma community.

“Since ancient times when kings started to rule Bandarban, the river was worshipped by the people here as God. The people of Bandarban believe the river is God and the tradition of worshipping it still goes on today, every year.” Interview with Mong (commoner).

### 6.3.1 The Four Spirit Shrines

In the Bohmong circle, as in most Southeast Asian polities, the relationship with the world of *nat* spirits plays an important role in local cosmologies. In the Marma community, the legends around defining the boundaries of the settlement focus on the help and protection provided by the *nat* spirits to protect the new settlement from misfortune and attack from outsiders. A series of legends are recounted to provide background as to why boundary setting was necessary. According to local legend, a plague or cholera broke out when the group led by the Bohmong first arrived in the area. In response to this, the astrologer advised the Bohmong to worship the *nat* spirits to protect the town. The Bohmong Thet Than Prue duly created 4 shrines sometime after the 1820s to mark the boundaries between his kingdom and the outside world and to honour the different *nat* spirits of the area. When the shrines were built, the dying stopped.

Another legend is recounted which reaffirms the community’s work on boundaries and shrines for worship. In 1840, when Bohmong Thet Than Prue died, his coffin

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<sup>173</sup> “The Regray Chaung was tidal and deep then and big boats could come up far.” (Prue 1950: 15)

<sup>174</sup> “... since ancient times when kings started to rule Bandarban, the river was worshipped by the people here as god. The people of Bandarban believe the river is God and the tradition of worshipping it still goes on today, every year. From very early morning, the people came to the river. All the people from the Marma community came together.” Interview Mong of Bangladeshi Idol (2013).

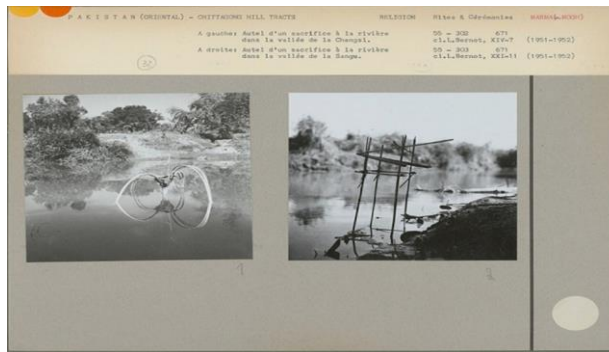
was kept in state in preparation for his cremation. However, a heavy rain fell that was so severe that the river burst its banks and completely inundated Bandarban, forcing the people to seek refuge in the neighbouring hills. The coffin, which was in the house at the time, was carried away by the current but was caught securely by the top branches of a tree under which the Bohmong's wife was cremated near the old village site. When the water receded, the coffin was brought down and cremated on the spot and a shrine was built to mark its significance (Pru 1950: 15).

Consequently, Bandarban is protected by 4 *nat* shrines which allow the community to appease the *nat* spirits of the river and the forests so that the community can live in peace or *chaing* alongside other tribes.

See Appendix D for map of Bandarban with numbered shrines.

1. **Champa and bodha tree near sawmill – North Chengabaaan:** This is the home of the tree spirit. The 5<sup>th</sup> Bohmong was worried that the original champa tree would die so he allowed a bodha tree to grow there as well and both trees are now intertwined. This place is also close to the old cremation ground, between the edge of the town and the beginning of the forest.
2. **Water shrine on Sangu (West) - Ujani Ghat:** This comprises of 2 shrine structures built from bamboo which mark a point in the bend of the river for *kyang pwe cha* (river worship). This point is where spears and *Palang Makey Dong* (gun shots) from the other side of the river resulted in bullets falling into the waters within a specific range. The point marks the safe boundary in the river from gun shots and spears.
3. **Below bridge and to the left of Upper Ghat:** This is the point where the Marma village ends, and foreign lands begin. Again, a bamboo structure in the river is built for worship.
4. **Bodha tree:** On the way to the tennis courts, to the left of the police station. Here, there is also a Bodha tree, signifying the edge of town and overlooking the valley.

**Figure 16: Photos from Bernot's visit to the shrines in the 1960s**



The history of the installation of the four shrines is remembered every year during the New Year Water festival celebrations in April, when the Bohmong or a male representative of the royal family leads an all-male procession, with one male representative from each household. A band of musicians and music accompanies the entourage as it walks with swords and parasols and visits each shrine. The procession starts at the Sawmill (1), then moves to the river 'fire shots' shrine (2), along the bazaar road to the bridge and water shrine (3), and then up to the police station to the final tree shrine (4). Offerings are made at the shrines of sweet-tasting food: rice popcorn, banana, coconut, biscuits, and sugar cane. At each stop, the Bohmong office reads scripts from a book recounting the story of how they came to Bandarban and created the boundaries and shrines to protect the community.

**Figure 17: Annual 4 shrines celebration led by royal prince and an all-male retinue**



### **6.3.2 The Bandarban Edict: Boundary Maintenance**

The shrine boundary of Bandarban was an important conclusion to the community's migration story as it protected the group from their first encounters with the dangers beyond their town – whether in the form of wild animals or hostile tribes. However, Marma beliefs around protecting the boundaries of the settlement have been recently reiterated and embodied in local practice. There is an edict that a Marma person cannot die far away from their home as they believe that a dead body is a vessel that is vulnerable to a potential occupation by an evil *nat* spirit. The edict was put together in order to protect the people in Bandarban from outside evil spirits and has been perpetuated by four generations of Bohmongs and enforced by the local leaders – the headmen of the districts and the *Kabari* leaders of villages within those districts.

This edict originates from the time of the 14<sup>th</sup> Bohmong and during the liberation war (1970s) when there was a flood and at the same time, an outbreak of cholera and typhoid. The story recounts that a Bawm tribal man went to hospital during the floods. He died in Chittagong city but when his body returned to Bandarban – the floods rose up and swallowed the town. The elders of Bandarban held a meeting with the Bohmong and his headman. The elders claimed that during the journey home from Chittagong, the dead body was possessed by evil spirits and



that this had caused the floods. They received permission to offer the Bawm man's body to the river to appease the angry water spirits. As the body was thrown into the river, the floods receded. Since this incident, it has become a commonly held belief that to prevent an epidemic, dead bodies need to be kept in their place of departure to the next life.<sup>175</sup> For example, if a person becomes seriously ill and dies in hospital – outside of the town's boundaries - then their body will not be allowed to have a Buddhist wake and return to Bandarban. Instead, the body is transported directly to a grave outside the town's boundaries.

As demonstrated in this relatively new edict, the four shrines have a strong grip on the population: it seems to not only convey the importance of the boundaries of the town in protecting the people within, but it also reveals the potential destructive power of local *nats*. Once the onslaughts from other tribes slowly receded, the community seems to have transferred the fear of attack to evil *nat* spirits that live outside the boundaries of the town. Protection has been an important theme as first the community were protected by the Arakan King, then the British and now the *nat* spirits in a hostile Bangladeshi landscape. Interestingly, the *nat* spirits hold the capacity to be both good in that they provide peace and protection - especially during marriage rituals - but also capable of causing disorder and harm.

Although the group conceive their difference in the Hills in terms of their foreign origins, hence the stress on migration, their ethnicity is not one of rootedness. Indeed, the practice of bounding territory with shrines that make up borders and keep evil spirits out, contrasts strongly with ancestor shrines and rites that other groups have which stress and cultivate strong links with 'the land'. In many ways, the Marma relationship with the land is unique. Their land is primarily elsewhere but they have cultivated over time a bounded territory in the CHT where ritualised roots have developed over time.

It is useful to look through Scott's lens (2005) at this hybrid group to understand the shrine-building and edicts relating to the new settlement. We have already seen that the royal family are a dynastic elite that originates in Pegu and draws in

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<sup>175</sup> However, because of this edict and tradition, people who are seriously ill in Bandarban are refusing to go to hospital, for fear of dying and not being able to return home and have a Buddhist funeral. In fact, local NGOs flagged this edict as being partly responsible for a rise in maternal mortality in the region.

followers during the migration to Bandarban. When they arrive in Bandarban, they feel themselves to be a single group that demands isolation from the dangerous natural environment. As with Scott's theory, the hybrid group constitutes chaos but when the group meets the external setting of chaos, for example, the uncharted jungles of the CHT, the empty land or "vacuity" and space are areas of chaos that need "placemaking" activities. In fact:

"The production of locality is... one of the most tangible registers in which people strive to bring order out of chaos." (Scott 2005: 198)

Employing Scott's lens, the chaos as embodied in the hybrid group meets the chaos of an unlive land or vacant land. This semantically empty land triggers an identity-making process within the hybrid group which entails the hybrid subgroups uniting against the chaos of the external – the unruly tribes, the onslaughts, the diseases that inflict the group – to create a boundary around their new land. During this process, they define who is allowed to live within the boundaries and who is excluded, and this helps the group to live together in clearly grounded polities. Moreover, the process of order production is periodically revisited, as can be seen through the Bandarban edict. Therefore, in this section we see hybridity at work as the group slowly becomes singular in response to external changes in the environment, and also due to a process of differentiating the group from others in the area. As internal order is created, the diaspora began to settle and develop roots in the region since the 1830s.

The next section will illustrate how chaos reappears almost 200 years after the first settlement and place-making activities in the Bandarban region as royal lands are sold off to Bangladesh investors. Furthermore, it will illuminate how royal succession and disputes around succession have further weakened Bohmong leadership of the group.

## **6.4 The Decline of Bohmong Power**

We learn from the history of the Bohmong family that they received the gift of land: first in Chittagong from the Arakan king and then in the CHT as it became part of a protectorate of the British Empire. Every Bohmong displayed their right to rule

over the land by building palaces called *rajbaris*. This section will explore the importance of the royal palaces to the Marma people and what one photograph of a *rajbari* has come to represent and convey in terms of their past and future.

Every Bohmong family was required to build a *rajbari* or royal palace and as a result, Bandarban is populated with many different palaces. They were originally made from bamboo and rebuilt every year, but the first cement building is still standing in Bandarban and belongs to the 14<sup>th</sup> Bohmong. The separate palaces of the 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> Bohmong are more modern and currently hold a commanding position in the centre of the town. Because the population of the town is estimated to be only about 32,000, it is remarkable that there are still three visible palaces remaining.

In direct contrast to the reverence for the royal family that emanates from the royal chart, I observed a counter sentiment that emerged from a recent selling of royal lands to Bengali investors. The palace and land in question had been demolished in 2012 and was located at the king's pond. During my first months in Bandarban, I was shown photos of the palace before its destruction, as I listened to the collective anxiety that seemed to be triggered by its loss.

### Figure 18: *Rajbari* before its destruction

Photo of *rajbari* of 13<sup>th</sup> Bohmong just before its destruction

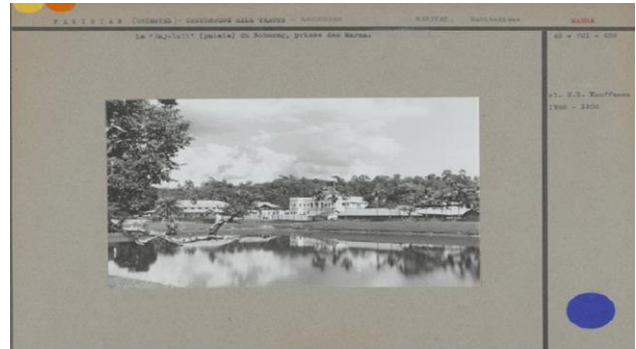


*Darbar* (meeting hall) with corrugated roof next to *rajbari*





A photo by a visiting anthropologist of same palace with view from King's Pond - Bernot from 1950s



Two younger princes in their 20s described the situation on the destruction and loss of the 13<sup>th</sup> Bohmong's palace (date) in the following way:

“At that time, the kings had elephants and old vehicles. But now you can see everything's ruined. And not the same as before. There was a huge wall over that side and guards and all...when we were young, the building was still here. Both of us lived in here. His father, his mother, my grandfather my grandmother.....Well it was really a nice place. On the ground floor, there was a big hall of rooms and other rooms where we could play six-a-side football.”

When asked what had happened, this was the explanation offered:

“Basically, too many descendants, too many successors. Infinite needs... .. it is still a huge family so everyone had to be individually given a piece of land from here. So it had to be sold and demolished. There was no choice.”

According to the current 17<sup>th</sup> Bohmong:

“Money is divided to all family people. My grandfather (13<sup>th</sup> Bohmong) had six wives, fourteen sons and nine daughters. Nothing now...my grandfather said I am the last king... my grandfather said there will be a king but he'll be nothing.”

The sale had arisen due to too many royal family members inheriting royal lands. With further prodding, I discovered that the royal succession rules were behind this problem as it had widened the network of royal families and thereby put pressure on royal land ownership.

Earlier in this chapter, we learn through the royal chart that the royal family is extensive, and that this was mainly due to unique royal succession rules which came into practice as a result of a specific set of circumstances. In the Chakma

circle, succession is father to son or in the absence of a son, to a nephew. Whereas in the Mong circle, it is to any eldest child, boy or girl. In the Bohmong circle, succession was also father to son but when Hari Prue died in Arakan in 1687, there was no male heir for the Bohmong circle. His brother, Thadaw Aung Jaya, had died before him, so Hari Prue was succeeded by Hari Kgao (1687-1727), his brother's son. This succession from brother to brother's son set a new precedent of power being shared beyond the primogeniture governing rules.

Oral history further claims that the father-to-son succession actually ended after the death of the 5<sup>th</sup> Bohmong Kong Hla Prue (1727-1811), when British officials intervened in the succession to resolve violent family disputes.<sup>176</sup> In direct contrast to this, colonial reports (e.g., Mills 1927: 421) claim that the significant intervention on succession by British colonial officers happened much later. In 1866, Kong Hla Ngao was considered by his people to be a poor Bohmong ruler and was made to resign in favour of his cousin Maung Prue. On the death of Maung Prue in 1875, quarrels broke out anew, and the assistant commissioner to the region - Lieutenant Gordon - was tasked with investigating the customs regarding succession. To foster stability in the region and to be able to collect revenue without disruption, the order of succession appears to be changed so that the throne passed to the senior male member of the male dynastic line rather than from father to son. Gordon reports that succession to the office of Bohmong was thereafter governed by fitness and age,<sup>177</sup> and not by primogeniture, thereby transforming succession rules to the office of Bohmong forever. This finding was accepted both by Government and the Bohmong family, and Sanaio (Tsaneyo) was acknowledged as the ninth Bohmong. This criterion was then incorporated in the Regulations Act of 1900, which later included a step in which the Government would validate the selection of the most eligible person to be the Bohmong Chief, thereby extending British influence in the area. During my fieldwork, a council of senior princes met regularly to review the succession list which carried the names of all the senior males of the royal family.

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<sup>176</sup> Of the six sons of Bohmongree Kong Hla Prue, all had died except Tun Hla Prue who was old and infirm and Ray Myo Tho, the youngest who was a mute. In 1847 Commissioner of Chittagong called a meeting of family (Pru 1950: 18).

<sup>177</sup> Also: "I am of the opinion that he is the heir indicated by the clan law of succession. Age and fitness are acknowledged to be the requisite qualifications. (vide Government letter No. 2549 P. of the 22 February 1917) quoted in Mills 1926/7.

Returning to the destruction of the *rajbari*, this palace belonged to the 13<sup>th</sup> Bohmong who had had the largest and most impressive *rajbari* to house his family from 6 wives. After his death, his practice of polygyny had eventually resulted in a large family that was financially weak. Members of the royal family resorted to selling off valuable land to the highest bidder in order to continue living in the region. Significantly, the sale had happened after the Peace Treaty of 1997 that had enforced land registration, which in turn had triggered a scramble for land ownership by Bangladeshis in the CHT. As a result, the royal lands were sold to people outside the community, breaching the shrine boundaries and causing a huge anxiety in the Marma community. Moreover, the consequence of having a large extended royal family has meant that some members of the royal family are now financially weak and since wealth is considered to go hand in hand with power, the royal family has recently experienced a diminishing of respect from some other nonroyal members of the community. Another incident occurred during the time of fieldwork, which was hugely distressing for all, including myself. A young boy who frequently visited the compound where I lived had drowned mysteriously in the shallow waters of the Sangu River whilst playing with his friends. After his death, the narrative that circulated in the Marma community was that the *nat* spirits were angry with the little boy's family for selling off land to Bengalis and therefore claimed his life. This theme of loss of land to another group seems to dominate and underpin much of the Marma anxieties encountered during fieldwork.

With every new Bohmong comes new approaches and fresh ideas which has the potential to increase the contribution to the community. Knowledge and experiences of kingship, interactions with government and the other circle chiefs are shared with the wider family, making many members experts of government and customary law. Furthermore, on becoming the Bohmong, the whole family gains influence and leverage. However, with every new succession, existing royal lands are allocated to the new king and his family, causing even more pressure on royal land tenure. Moreover, with the succession rules, different branches of the royal family engage in a battle for their most senior male to be the next king. Even though there is a succession list, there are stories of manoeuvrings and even assassinations. Some wealthy members can push their way up the succession list

by taking their case to the High Court. A recent example of this was the struggle for power after the death of the 13<sup>th</sup> Bohmong. The man at the top of the succession list was Aung Shwe Prue, but he was outmanoeuvred in the kingship contest by Maung Shwe Prue, who became the 14<sup>th</sup> Bohmong (1959-1995).<sup>178</sup> Coalitions exist today that revolve around an even more disruptive battle for the 15<sup>th</sup> Bohmongship. Aung Shwe Prue fought again but this time he won against Kyaw Sain Prue in the High Court with the Supreme Court ultimately recognizing him as the 15<sup>th</sup> Bohmong (1998-2012). As a result of the conflict within the royal family and the impasse that followed, the Marma community did not have a leader for three years, which is believed to have severely damaged the prestige and dignity of the royal office.<sup>179</sup>

As Guru Bhante explained:

“It’s actually a family problem but also I have to say it’s a political problem that gets worse day by day. They have lost everything - the royal family - and we are still bleeding.”

The succession rules are still a hotly debated topic and have contributed to divisions within the community and this, together with the Bohmong’s depleted finances and subsequent selling off land, has resulted in an erosion of respect from nonroyals towards the royal families.<sup>180</sup> As with the strong egalitarianism in Ortner’s Sherpa culture, there are contradictions that give way to competitiveness. Similarly, the Bohmong family, as a result of the “fair” succession rules, has experienced an increase in rivalry, resentment, and a constant striving to come out on top. Added to this is a decline in wealth of the Bohmong family: if all royal members inherit equal shares of a given amount of land, it will not take long before each person’s plot is too small to support a family. Thus, the inheritance rules of the Marma group have produced a decline in the standard of living for the royal family. This section has illustrated that towards the end of the cycle of the

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<sup>178</sup> The 15<sup>th</sup> Bohmong was apparently paler in skin tone than the 14<sup>th</sup> BM - an important consideration for Marma people as whiter skin tone links rulers to Southeast Asia rather than South Asia.

<sup>179</sup> The rumour this time was that Aung Shwe Prue (ASP) was a descendant of the female line. This was probably started by the 14<sup>th</sup> BM who was younger than ASP but had money and the family to back him. When he died, his family rallied around K.S. Prue, again denying ASP his succession rights. This was probably because by removing ASP his sons would be removed as well from the succession list. The 14<sup>th</sup> BM sons would then have a greater chance of becoming kings.

<sup>180</sup> “Money speaks louder than swords”: a young man called Mongto, with family abroad, did not bow to the Bohmong.

history of this group, the stretched structures of the system seem to have reached a point of exhaustion, reverting the group back to a sense of uncertainty.

## 6.5 Conclusion

As with Geertz's *Negara*, this chapter has plotted the various phases of the Marma community's migration to and settlement in the CHT on an historical timeline. We learn about the defeat in Pegu and that a group formed around the surviving royal heirs. Then followed a cyclical process of war and defeat as difficulties were overcome in stages through triumphs in military battles. Moreover, the group had migrated from a splendid royal court to the savage lands of the CHT,<sup>181</sup> and that during that journey, the leaders emerged as Bohmongs who became warriors, peacemakers, and diplomats, leading the migrating group to its new home. The group ultimately re-established itself again to a former glory through the Bohmong Circle, headed by a Bohmong leader and with the protection of the British and the local *nat* spirits who also held the potential for harm, unless appropriately appeased.

We learn that the community is a hybrid group that at the same time strives to display a distinct ethnic identity that sets themselves apart as a group in the CHT. The syncretism theories of Herskovits (1937) shed some light on the adaptation process of this migrating community, as it seems that the closer the group are to their Burmese origins in the early stages of migration, the less their ancestors go out of their way to be endogamous. In contrast, the closer they are to the CHT, the more the group emphasise their boundaries, the more they become endogamous and the more they become a single ethnic group. The Marma people themselves have over an historical long *durée* synthesised the themes to stress a continuous existence in the region and to demonstrate that there is a thread that connects the Marma of today to Burmese times.

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<sup>181</sup> Similarly, Ortner's early clan-history of the Sherpa repeatedly mention the carrying of gold and silver objects, riding horses and visions directing migration choices (Ortner 1989: 27-29).



The Marma unique oral history specifies their distinctiveness as neither diasporal nor indigenous but something along the lines of diasporal-becoming-settled, whilst pointing to their irreversible presence in the CHT through the boundaries of the 4 shrines and the building of royal palaces. Early external British intervention on succession rules have resulted in a multi-family dynasty which increased the pool of royals so that different branches of the royal family have at some point in the history of the Marma group become part of the ruling family. This expanded royal family have been recipients of Marma oral history and played an important role in maintaining and reproducing its narrative. However, with the rising Bengali settler population in Bandarban town, the integrity of the boundaries of the town has been breached. If we employ Scott's concept of the production of order to these recent events, it will appear that the once ordered hybrid group has been thrown back into chaos again.

This chapter has looked at migration and settlement of the group and covered some important objects – the royal chart and the photo of the *rajbari* – that embody the different narratives of the group. The next chapter will turn to a further selection of material culture of the group by focusing on specific events and objects that help to further define and differentiate the Marma group from their neighbours. The chapter will study the social cultural processes behind inventions of culture, and the way material objects contribute to the overall Marma narrative as well as achieve a continuity with the past. Various theories will be applied to the ethnographic data to understand the use of these “resources”, whether oral narratives or material objects, in maintaining an unchanging identity at the group's core.

## Chapter 7: The Invention of Marma Material Culture and Ceremonials

The chapter on migration and settlement revealed the changing form of the hybrid group, as the group mainly made up of the royal family and faithful followers, were known as the Magh group led by the Bohmong. From the 1950s, they became known as a single ethnic group called the “Marma.” The further the migrating group travelled away from Burma, the more the group became an endogamous group and a stable, ascendant power. The royal chart as an object within Marma material culture enabled the recounting of the group’s narrative which stressed both the connection with Pegu whilst at the same time reiterated their long history in the CHT region. In contrast, the photograph of the *rajbari* was an object that signalled the beginning of a loss of royal power and land ownership in the CHT, as well as the trigger for an increasing uncertainty around the group’s future in the region.

There are other narratives being told that do not necessarily follow an historical timeline but contribute in different ways to the overall progression of the Marma narrative. Marma Identity and tradition is created and bolstered by material objects, commemorative rituals, and symbols of kingly power. This chapter will explore in more detail the significant role of material culture in the Marma community and how it is able to convey simultaneously a sense of a distinct culture, continuity over time and the unchanging essence of the group.

Alongside the spinning looms,<sup>182</sup> bamboo shrines to *nat* spirits and the Buddhist structures in the CHT, Marma material culture is distinct from other groups as it draws heavily upon the concept of shininess or radiance to emanate power from the apex. There are many Marma words that convey this sense of shininess or radiance. *Taukte* and *lanre* are two similar words that mean shininess or radiance,

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<sup>182</sup> “The whole material culture of the tribes of the Chittagong Hill Tracts, under a superficial layer of Bengali and Buddhist culture, is purely and typically Indonesian. They have the typical Indonesian tension-loom, the typical fire-thong, the typical fish-trap lined with cane-thorns, houses, type of hearths, traps, method of cultivation, and so on.” (Mills 1926/7: 288).

respectively, and when *al* is added in front of the words, the phrase conveys a sense of added or increased shininess. Another term - *alan raung* - has the combined meaning of “the shininess of power”. According to my respondents - the royal princes, and the elders - and colonial visitors to the region, the preoccupation with shininess in the group appears to be connected to the Pegu of the 1600s. Pegu was then a highly developed Burmese city with wide streets, fabulous golden pagodas and a rich and sophisticated court with its much-esteemed retinue of white elephants. In 1584, Ralph Fitch,<sup>183</sup> a merchant of London visiting Burma to ascertain products and enquire about trade, described Pegu - the capital of the region - as being grander and more extensive than London (Farrell 2007-2008: 16-18). Moreover, the oral narratives of the Marma list the spoils of war and symbols of royal power that accompanied the royal family after their defeat in Pegu: weapons, gold and four white elephants. The list of spoils of war were repeatedly recounted by the royal respondents during my fieldwork, which reinforced the symbolic power of this first generation of Marma material culture.

This chapter will examine a selection of Marma material culture and ceremonials that support the Bohmong narrative about themselves and bring together the subgroups within the hybrid community. It will illustrate the crucial role of the royal family in developing the intimate connection with the recounted past through the deployment of both royal objects and royal bodies in ceremonies. It will firstly explore kingly power through the narratives around the Bohmong sword, followed by an outline of the annual re-enactment of the tax collection ceremony, locally known as the *raj punya* which means the festival to honour the chief. This ceremony combines elements of kingly shininess and authority. The chapter will also illuminate how the ceremonies enable the leaders of the group to assert their authority over the other non-Marma tribes in the Bohmong circle and between the rural and urban peoples of the Bohmong circle. The final section will explore the coin garland which is an object of value to the non-royal members of the group. It symbolises value and shininess as it strings together the universal kings whilst primarily serving as a form of bride price or bride wealth for the protection of

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<sup>183</sup> Ralph Fitch,<sup>183</sup> a merchant visiting Pegu at the time of Emperor Shweti was not only interested in noting commercial opportunities in the various places he visited, but as with Francis Buchanan's travels (1798), he also included descriptive material about the people he met, their dress, appearance and any strange and exotic customs.

women. The chapter will conclude with a discussion on the role of material objects in bolstering Marma identity from within the boundaries of culture.

The observations in the chapter are based on my interpretation of the data collected and the conversations around the objects with different members of the community.

## 7.1 The Shininess of the Sword

On my first visit to the home of the leader of the Marma group – the 17th Bohmong,<sup>184</sup> I was shown a gallery of photographs of the various Bohmongs in their royal regalia, with the first image dating back to the 1930s. Each Bohmong appeared to be carrying the same sword with ornate hilt which was part of their ceremonial dress. There was also a gold chain which was believed to be a gift from the British to the Bohmong who helped the Lusai expedition of 1871 to 1872.<sup>185</sup>

The 17<sup>th</sup> Bohmong described what he knew about the significance of the sword:

“...I want to show you the sword that we have long ago. We hand over this sword from one to another. I think this is during British time. British offer this sword to the *Raja*. I’m the 17th Chief still carrying this regalia and hand over to the next. When I die, this will go to the 18<sup>th</sup> king of Bandarban... See there the architect of the sword. So nicely flowers here and there. ...See the head, dragon head...only the king can carry the sword, can hold the sword.” Interview with 17<sup>th</sup> Bohmong – see Appendix E for full transcript of interview.

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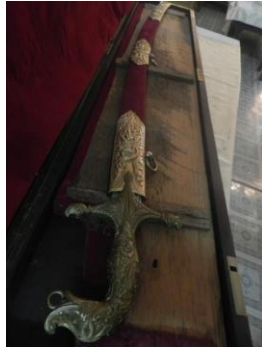
<sup>184</sup> “Luck, everybody cannot become king due to being eldest and fittest, so before me 20 candidates died. I crossed 20 members. But I became king anyway.” 17th Bohmong interview.

<sup>185</sup> According to local historian, the 9<sup>th</sup> BM was honoured with a cross chain at the time of the Lusai expedition and when Queen Victoria was Empress of India. The group was also given 160 musket rifles. The local historian believes that the sword of the Bohmong was stolen during Partition and is now in a Delhi Museum.

## Figure 19: Kingly swords

The Bohmong sword, thought to be a gift from George V.

Below, swords of the faithful followers, stacked under the bed of the present Bohmong. These swords are currently carried by the bodyguards of the Bohmong during ceremonial events.



When the 17<sup>th</sup> Bohmong recounted the history of the sword, he stressed that the sword was connected to the hostage prince of Pegu who was made governor of the land to the West of Arakan (Chittagong). This prince had the opportunity to regain his former glory by defeating the Portuguese pirates. He became the first Bohmong of this dynasty and according to oral history, he was also the first ruler to receive a sword as a gift from the King of Arakan. From then on, according to the 17<sup>th</sup> Bohmong, each new ruler inherited this kingly sword. However, the first sword, gifted by the Arakan king, was lost at some point and the current sword, as seen in the photo gallery in Figure 20, was thought to be a gift from George V when the CHT region became part of British India.<sup>186</sup> Even though the sword was replaced by a new one, the current Bohmong referred to the sword as if it was one sword with a continuous history that lives on in the photos that were curated by him.

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<sup>186</sup> Given the migration history of this descent group, it was interesting how the sword had come to symbolize kingly power, even though there is no coronation (no crown) but instead a handing down of a sword at an installation ceremony sanctioned by the Bangladeshi government. The sword's history is mostly unknown in this Marma family. The first reference to the Bohmong sword can be found in literature when Francis Buchanan recounts Kong H. Prue's (5<sup>th</sup> BM) narrative on Marma naming and sword (Buchanan 1798). However, the theme continues as another type of sword is given to the circa 95 headmen that run the smaller districts in the province for the Bohmong. Moreover, I observed that the *dao* sword was used at wedding ceremonies.

**Figure 20: Bohmongs over time with ceremonial sword**



**13<sup>th</sup> Bohmong-Gree U Kyaw Zaw San (1933-1959)**



**16<sup>th</sup> Bohmong-Gree Kyaw San Prue (2012-2013)**



**14<sup>th</sup> Bohmong-Gree Mong Shwe Prue (1959-1995)**



**17<sup>th</sup> Bohmong-Gree U Chaw Prue (2013 -)**

The current sword is kept in a beautifully engraved box and stored in a secret place within the King's palace. It is worn only during ceremonial events such as the tax collection ceremony or other official state ceremonies.

The next section will explore how the Bohmong sword has become part of the invention of a Marma tradition. It will analyse how Marma material culture, as embodied in the sword, still serves the same function as it did when it was bestowed upon Maung Saw Pyne in the early 1600s, despite being replaced by a newer sword.

The kingly blade and the symbolic power that it holds is another entry point into the community's history. As can be seen from the above description, the current Bohmong recounts how the sword connects his current position as ruler to that of the earliest Bohmong. Since the sword is mentioned at the beginning of the group's history as a prize from the powerful King of Arakan, the sword seems to incarnate the legendary rise of the Bohmong within the legend of the migration of a group of people, as well as providing physical evidence of that narrative. Moreover, the sword's linkage with lineage and roots in Pegu, seems to add a mythical quality to the object as it reinstates the original Bohmong, the vanquished Prince of Pegu, to his former kingly power.

Even though the version of the sword that can be seen in the photographs above was a relatively recent replacement of the original sword, its addition to the ceremonial wardrobe seems to continue the link with an ancestral heritage, connecting the present with different moments in the history of the royal family and affirming the close relationship of the Bohmong with the rulers of Burma, Arakan and the British Empire. These links are important as it legitimates each new leader as the ruler of this migrating community. Later, in the 1990s, the Bohmong sword converged with another cultural asset, the royal family genogram, and together they became the main objects of veneration, remembrance, and validation of the royal family.

The more recent rendition of the sword seems to carry the same shininess or power of the old and original sword provided by the Arakan king. This adjusted schema is not unlike the analysis of traditional societies on the windward part of Hawaii (Handler and Linnekin 1984: 284) and the use of *lomi* salmon. *lomi* salmon is a surrogate for the *kiumu* fish.<sup>187</sup> Very few modern Hawaiians are aware that the salmon has replaced the *kiumu* fish as for Hawaiians today, this historical relationship is irrelevant since the *lomi* salmon has become just as traditional and meaningful. Through this example, Handler and Linnekin are showing that these adapted customs have as much force and as much meaning for their modern practitioners as other cultural artefacts that can be traced directly to the past.

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<sup>187</sup> It is made from the red flesh of imported, salted salmon, massaged between the fingers and mixed with tomatoes, crushed ice, and green onions. All these ingredients are foreign introductions.

Moreover, the example shows how the re-invention of a tradition in the present is able to continue the link with the past.

Although it does not seem possible that the Bohmongs of the twentieth century would have been directly involved in battle, it is likely that the early rendition of the sword was a battle-ready sword, not just a symbol of military prowess. In fact, the sword represents victory over the various enemies during the group's migration: the military bravery in the face of Portuguese and Mughal invaders and military campaigns against the hostile tribes of the CHT. Moreover, the "shininess" of the Bohmong sword signifies a transformation from defeat of the royal family in Pegu to the success of military campaigns during the migration. The fact that the sword was sanctioned both by the Kings of Arakan and then later by the British Empire points to an object that embodies the military achievements of the Bohmong but also their right to lead the migrating group. The resources such as the sword further help the royal family to establish its authority in the new lands, are deployed in various ceremonies and scenarios, as the sword bolsters the exemplariness of the centre, making "the realm" more real and powerful.<sup>188</sup>

## **7.2 The Bohmong *Raj Punya***

The Bohmong circle has maintained the impression of an independent native state with 'exceptional status' that was codified in the Chittagong Hill Tracts Regulation of 1900 and sanctioned by an external power - the British - in order to facilitate a more efficient system of tax collection. The political structure of circle chief, headman (leader of district or *mouza*) and *karbari* (village leader) which was embodied in the Act of 1900 and later in the Peace Accord of 1997, is reaffirmed annually in the tax collection ceremony. The tax collection ceremony used to be held in all three circles, however now, only the Bohmong circle continues the re-enactment. Local anthropologist Barua in 2001 points out the reason why the ceremony was discontinued in the Mong and Chakma circles:

"In the past such ceremonies were also held in the Mong and Chakma circles for the collection of jum tax. But rajpunna is not being held

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<sup>188</sup> "The driving aim of higher politics was to construct a state by constructing a king. The more consummate the king, the more exemplary the center." (Geertz 1980: 124)



nowadays in these circles due to deterioration of law and order situation caused by the threat from the insurgents.” (Barua 2001: 42).

“These days the two hill districts are no longer arranged in a ritual style but Bandarban is still preserving the ritual. Some intellectuals seem to complain about the cost behind the ceremony and the class division it shows in this modern world.” Interview Venerable Nagasena Bhikku.

The tax collection ceremony in the Bohmong circle, called the *raj punya*, is held between December and January every year. This event is not only a ceremonial collection of tax from the rural parts of the Bohmong circle, moving through the hierarchies of leadership to the apex. It is also a fair or carnival in which thousands of tribal people take part and pay respect to their chief. The festival, according to my informants, has been re-enacted annually since 1875: at the time of the 9th Bohmong when British officials intervened in the royal family succession rules. There are no details about the first recorded *raj punya*, but Lewin in the 1870s mentions a 3-day carnival in the Hill tracts:

“I had not seen one drunken man nor witnessed any discourtesy to a woman. They seemed an honest kindly people, happy in their homes and in their simple Buddhist faith...” (Lewin 1885: 223).

The next section will examine the ceremony as outlined by the latest Bohmong who lives on the second floor of his own hotel - the Hotel Sangu. Bohmong U Chaw Prue was 69 years old at the time of fieldwork. The Bohmong sees that his main role is to maintain peace, collect taxes and administer justice through customary law. His sphere of influence covers the entire Bohmong Circle and the majority Marma districts in other circles.<sup>189</sup>The Bohmong is also responsible for collecting taxes from other ethnic groups in the circle and this happens at the *raj punya*. As the tax moves up the hierarchy from the *jhum* cultivators to the Bohmong office, the tax is also delivered to the government office. The office of the Deputy Commissioner - originally British and now Bangladeshi - receives 21% from *jhum* cultivation, the headman 37% and the Bohmong office 42%.<sup>190</sup>

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<sup>189</sup> This would include a huge area of 9 upazalas (districts) of which 7 were in the Bohmong Circle and 2 upazalas with a majority Marma population in the Chakma Circle; 31 unions or districts; 95 mouzas (village clusters/areas) with 95 to 97 headmen; and 1482 paras (villages) headed by *karbaris*.

<sup>190</sup> The ceremony is expensive, costing 37 lakh and local power structures that are required to attend also contribute to the event: UNDP, DC, HC, Army, Bohmong office. The UNDP has the specific role to help organize and strengthen this tradition. <https://www.thedailystar.net/backpage/raj-punnah-fest-begins-hills-189367>

According to the Bohmong, the *raj punya* is the biggest and most colourful traditional festival of the Bohmong circle. The festival is held in Bandarban and requires the compulsory attendance of headmen, *kabari* and representatives of all tribes from the Bandarban district. The annual re-enactment follows these steps. All groups – whether Marma or non-Marma - travel across the circle to Bandarban town. The groups include not only the Marma but also the Chakma, Tangchangya, Tripura, Mro, Khumi, Pankhua, Lusai, Khiyang, Bawm and Chak communities. All tribal cultures come to celebrate the re-enactment of tax collection but also their own cultural contribution to the region. The event is held at the *rajbari* compound - the kings' residence in the Hotel Sangu - to celebrate the festival. The 'troops' give the Bohmong and his VIP guests, a guard of honour when entering the *darbar* (hall) of the royal palace. Young Marma boys and girls greet the king, showering petals on him and performing traditional cultural dances.

**Figure 21: *Raj punya* across time**



**17<sup>th</sup> Bohmong**



**15<sup>th</sup> Bohmong**

Local public representatives, foreign guests, top government officials in the police and army are present at the function and sit alongside the Bohmong (see Figure 22). On the opening day, *jhum* farmers from all over the BM circle, hand over their annual *jhum* tax to their respective headmen and *karbaris* who formally hand over the money to the king. The Bohmong receives this tax and hands it over to local representatives of the nation state. The *raj punya* is therefore a regional ceremony with all tribes in attendance and the ceremony is led by the Marma leaders who follow the rules and processes of the collection of *jhum* tax as defined in Rule 42 of the Regulations Act.

“The Raja (who was in his 90s) was escorted to the stage and the people of power in the area - the government representatives, the army, the hill

district council, and the district commissioner - were positioned around him. The front rows of the audience were occupied by the institutions of power. The indigenous people stood around the edges.” Observations by Jerry Allen during *Raj punya* of the 15<sup>th</sup> Bohmong.

**Figure 22: *Raj punya* with local representatives**



### **15<sup>th</sup> Bohmong**

Each of the headmen and the *karbaris* bring a bottle of wine, cocks, goats, and pigs as gift for the king on the day. Groups belonging to the Bohmong circle also bring different kinds of traditional gifts for the king during the festival. They then stay on in Bandarban for the week and, traditionally, the Bohmong entertains them. Originally a 3-day festival, more recently the *raj punya* has increased to 5 days to include a commercial fair and market to showcase and help sell tribal produce and goods (see Figures 23 and 24). According to respondents, in the last circa 130 years, the programme has been enriched by incorporating different cultural aspects of the people of different religions and castes living in the area as well their forms of entertainment. The ceremony not only brings different groups together to commemorate the ceremony, but it also provides an opportunity to display the “shininess” of the Bohmong. During the festival, kingly regalia – golden horns, gongs, spears, parasols, and swords of the faithful followers are on display, as well as all the photographs of past Bohmongs.

**Figure 23: Entertainment at *raj punya*: A circus tight-rope walking goat**



**Figure 24: *Raj Punya* Fair/Mela 1935**



Sahlins (1981) and Ortner (1989) offer perspectives on how societies negotiate the influence of external forces on their respective communities. Whilst Sahlins' (1981) islanders creatively used pre-existing cultural categories and schemes of practice to incorporate Captain Cook into their cosmology. Ortner (1989) highlights the importance of schemas that are worked upon to help the group manage encounters with the other:

“In the final analysis, both temple foundings and offering rituals are transformations on a common underlying structure, which takes the form of a schema for encountering and overcoming hostile forces, for expressing triumph of that encounter, and for routinizing the relations that make that triumph possible.” (Ortner 1989: 74).

In the Marma case, there is a pre-existing social structure within the hybrid group headed by the Bohmong. This structure is then replicated and endorsed within the context of the British circle system which has the effect of hybridising and expanding the tradition of tax collection.

According to Hobsbawm and Ranger, longstanding traditions are eternally unchanged. But oftentimes traditions once invented can be reinvented. In the case of the Marma, there is a reinterpretation of a longstanding tradition. Even though the tax collection ceremony is a replaying of the subjugation of the Marma royal family to the British and to the subsequent powers in the region. It appears that the ceremony has been reinterpreted as an annual re-enactment of a founding event in which the structures of the circle are reaffirmed. This strengthens the cultural content from within and on the boundaries of the Marma group. Moreover, through this manifestation of strength, the ceremony seems to convert a sense of defeat and subjugation to a foreign power, into a narrative of renewed power and triumph.

The importance of the display of power is also explored by Geertz. In the Negara state, rulers reached their subjects in rural areas through ritual and symbolic means so that they would hand over tribute during state rituals. With regards to the pomp and pageantry of the event, Geertz provides insights into the crucial function of the display of power in state ceremonies:

“The ceremonial splendor imaged the king's centrality by converging on him as its focus; it imaged the powers that lodged in that centrality by depicting them in terms of assembled wealth; and it imaged the social field over which those powers ranged in terms of the populace from which the wealth was assembled. The extravagance of state rituals was not just the measure of the king's divinity...it was also the measure of the realm's well-being. More important, it was a demonstration that they were the same thing.” (Geertz 1980: 129)

Similarly, the *raj punya* not only brings different groups together to commemorate this ritual, but it also provides an opportunity to display the “shininess” of the Bohmong and the well-being of the circle. During the festival, kingly regalia – golden horns, gongs, spears, parasols, and swords of the faithful followers are on display, as well as all the photographs of past Bohmongs. The *raj punya* re-enacts

the old hierarchy of power of King, courtiers, and their combined regalia to underlie the authority of the royal layer of Marma society to not only to lead the Marma group but the whole circle and other sections of the population living in the rural areas of the circle.

The *raj punya* is therefore a tradition that in many ways was developed because of an encounter with the British, which took the existing tributary system to another level. It imposes fixed practices such as repetition to make sure that the cultural content expressed in the event is reproduced over time. Through the commemorative practices of the annual tax collection ceremony, the community are reminded of the early British interventions in the region when the circle of chiefs was first set up. However, through the display of regalia and pomp, the group are also able to link the ceremony to their origins in Burma. Thus, this reinterpretation of a tradition helps the group to maintain social cohesion and display power, which in turn bolsters the society on its Barthian boundaries with “the other”. Moreover, since this “tribe” is institutionalized as a political identity - as a unit of representation with rights, land, and local leaders - the maintenance and reinforcement of that identity becomes important to most of its members.

### **7.3 The Coin Garlands - *Puaita Loing Hrui***

In this section, coin garlands<sup>191</sup> will be examined as part of Marma material culture which both symbolically and financially convey a sense of protection for brides.

Interviews around the coin garland were conducted in the rural areas surrounding Bandarban. I interviewed a widow who was keen to sell her garland to the Marma collection to be displayed in the Horniman Museum in London. She wanted to sell her garland so that she could become financially independent as a widow with no children. And there was an interview with a family whose mother was very ill. Her husband sold the garland to raise funds for his wife’s medical treatment.

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<sup>191</sup> Equally interesting is the fact that all the local CHT tribes wear and value similar kinds of garlands. Whilst the Marma call the garland *Puaita Loing Hrui*, the Chak call it *Tang Grik*, the Mro, *Keng Leng* and the Lusai *Cheng Thui*.

In rural areas of the Bohmong Circle, there is a custom of coin garland-making. Mostly the men of the family would collect the coins from markets and private sellers, and when there were enough coins, a garland of coins would be made. The garlands are typically made up of Indian Rupee coins, threaded on a string or on a small chain. Sometimes there are plastic beads between the coins or white metal beads made from melted-down local coins. I was informed that the garland designs are Burmese in origin but that the garland-makers had to rely on local Bengali smelting techniques and craftsmanship as well as local materials such as plastic beads and chains.

The garlands would be employed as a bride price or bride wealth that would be taken to a marriage table by the bridegroom. Once married, the wives would wear their garlands all day, while working and sleeping, carrying their 'personal value' with them.

“She used to wear outside her necklace because, it is made for showing its beauty and preciousness.” Interview Sathowing Aung, married to woman who owns coin garland that was 100 years old.

Wearing the garland also kept them safe, as there was no way of keeping valuables secure in their remote bamboo homes.

Nowadays, the practice of making coin garlands is disappearing, as there are fewer collectable coins on the market. Also, coin garlands have been converted from bride wealth into heirlooms which are mostly handed down to daughters in the families, with the main function of protecting them from poverty, and the garlands are only worn on special occasions or at Marma cultural events. If not in use, the garlands are dismantled and squirreled away or buried like treasure in the lands surrounding a bamboo home, protecting the coins from theft. Many of the coin garlands have been purchased by the Tribal Cultural Institute in Bandarban and put on display. The coin garlands on show were made from Indian Rupee coins with the heads of Queen Victoria, Edward VII and George V and post



partition of India, there were East Pakistan Taka coins depicting George VI.<sup>192</sup> The coin garlands therefore reflect the chequered history of the region.<sup>193</sup>

**Figure 25: A coin garland**



The coin garlands not only play an instrumental role in cementing marriages and protecting women after marriage, but they are also symbolic of many themes in the region that convey value and power. The coin garland displays the bride's prestige in terms of "shininess" and this comes from the ongoing connection with the past powers of external, distant kings. Owners of the coin garlands interviewed during the fieldwork claimed that the heads of British kings and queen on the coins are the most powerful rulers. Therefore, the garlands seem to convey a kingly cosmic sacred power which linked the rural communities to the "Empire of everywhere". Moreover, the coins symbolize royalty, durability, and brilliance, likening all who wear them to be ritually connected to the same shininess of the

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<sup>192</sup> Monarchies and key periods: Queen Victoria (1837-1876). Colonial Annexation of Chittagong Hill Tracts under Edward VII (1901-1910) and George V (1910-1936). CHT becomes 'totally excluded area' under George VI (1936-1952).

<sup>193</sup> "We arrived in the village in Ruma to discover that people were working the *jhum* fields and had been there since sunrise. Slowly, the elders come out to see us and out of curiosity the owner of the coin garland invited me to his house. He was not willing to part with the garland but allowed me to see it. I explained how long I had been walking and that I felt far away from anything I recognised. Yet here on this table, there were coins with my British king on them. They laughed with me. Why did they collect coins with another king's head on? They were after all subject to their own king – the Bohmong *Raja* - but here they were wearing the coins of another king far away. They told me that these British kings were the kings of everywhere and that the coins held great power and value as a result." Field notes "Hiking Ruma hill tracts in search of a coin garland for the Horniman Museum."

rulers that lived beyond the boundaries of the CHT. Therefore, the value of the coin garland is not only monetary but also symbolic of shininess and radiance of the universal kings, which seems to promise further protection by linking the community of the isolated hill tracts to a place beyond the borderlands.

“It was really valuable and expensive at that time. The oldest coin is 170 years old. Even if you want the silver, it costs a lot. You can make a new one, but you can’t find like this original one.” Interview Sathowing Aung.

The weight of the silver coins also has monetary value<sup>194</sup>as many of the garlands have been lost or plundered during the military occupation of the CHT. Therefore, the garlands have become rare and as a result, even more prized. And finally, the mix of Burmese aesthetics and Bengali craftsmanship connects this object to the past and present realities of the community, pointing to a sense of continuity and adaptation.

#### **7.4 Discussion: From Hybridity to Shininess and Single Essence**

Marma material culture has synthesised elements of key historical events whilst adjusting existing schemas. Whether two swords serving as one, or the existing hierarchy of the hybrid group becoming part of the British instigated Bohmong circle, or when the coin garlands incorporate elements of Bengali craftsmanship to continue the Burmese cultural practice of bride wealth. There is a change in form, but the material culture and ceremonies still seem to convey an unchanging essence and despite the discontinuities in material form, the present continues to incarnate past realities. Through the processes of creation and maintenance, the objects and ceremonies also bring together the hybrid groups as one ethnic identity. To understand the nature of the processes that have instilled singularity in meaning through Marma material culture, the next section will examine the three objects and ceremonies from different theoretical perspectives.

The material culture in this chapter are part of Marma inventions of tradition and culture. The group is far away from the centre, busy developing a new centre and

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<sup>194</sup> Coins also contribute to a sense of permanence. According to Felix Martin (2014), coins survive because they are made from durable metals. They do not rust or corrode and as a result, they tend to survive the ravages of time better than most.

is aided in this endeavour through the invention of material culture and ceremony. It seems that there is a sense of Marma histories being re-invented and reproduced through the sword, the tax collection ceremony, and the coin garland. The traditions and form of the objects and ceremonies undergo some adaptations over time, that help the invented traditions to continue to act as a link with an historic past (Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983).

With the lens of invented traditions, we can also see that the sword, which was gifted from different external kings, carries the shininess and power of those kings. This shininess was borrowed for different purposes, whether to enhance the authority of the Bohmong who wears the sword or in the kingly regalia at the *raj punya* that gives the king authority over different communities in the circle of power. The annual re-enactment of the tax collection ceremony, although it represents a subjugation to first the British Empire and then the State of Bangladesh, is reinterpreted today as an opportunity to display shininess and power which helps to bolster the apex and therefore help towards legitimizing Bohmong authority. The effect of invention of material culture and re-enactment of ceremonies is that it reproduces a cultural identity that signals shininess and triumph, which in turn cements the group and helps it to manifest a singular identity in the region.

There are some common elements to the three examples of Marma material culture which point to processes at work as part of the hybrid group's move to singularity. The sword, the annual re-enactment of the subjugation of the group to first the British and then the nation state, and the coins with British rulers point to Marma material culture and ceremonies as entangled objects and ceremonies. For example, Thomas describes the effects of entanglement on a culture which seem relevant to the Marma:

“In some areas, entanglement with colonizing agents of various kinds has gone on for hundreds of years and has prompted a distinctive indigenous historical consciousness in which local customs and solidarity are explicitly contrasted with the inequality characteristic of relations with outsiders. But such contacts are not only historically crucial—they also energize a new way of thinking about material culture.” (Thomas 1991: 4)

The Bohmong's power is in itself already foreign, originating from Pegu and deriving its new power from Arakan. Thus, where other ethnic groups have entered into subordinate relations with the Bohmong, they are also subordinating themselves collectively to this shiny powerful foreignness, unifying different groups to be ruled by the same power. The group was gifted the sword, power was given to circle chiefs, and coins introduced to the region as it became part of a wider state and then a global economy. These objects and ways of collecting tax originated from foreign kings and empires. At first, the group became part of a gift economy as they embodied the characteristics of the donor which embedded the group in relations of indebtedness and reciprocity. However, over time, the objects and ceremonies became incorporated within the framework of local meanings as foreign things or "entangled objects" as actors incorporated some of the values of the objects and rejected others as the group shaped their own singularly entangled history.

The ritualised appearance of the sword and ceremonies, and even the coin garland, instantaneously evokes to a greater or lesser extent the narrated history of the group as well as the dualities of defeat and then triumph. To understand how such objects and ceremonies can embody different associations, the Freudian concept of "condensation" is helpful. Condensation illustrates the psychological process by which the dreamer hides their feelings and/or urges through either contraction or minimizing its representation into a brief dream image or event. The images and the connecting associations have their emotional charge displaced from the original ideas to the receiving ones where they are merged and condensed together into key symbols. As a result, multiple dream-thoughts are combined and amalgamated into a single element such as a particular symbol. The various material objects and ceremonies condense a memory of a glorious past that is associated with power and stability, and which serves to displace feelings of the loss of power and defeat at the start of the migration and vulnerability at the end of the migration. For example, the sword quite possibly helps the group to divert attention away from the stories of defeat and subjugation in Pegu, as the Marma emerged from a migration history in which repeated defeats were preludes to subsequent triumph and stability. The narrative is now focussed on the sword as representing military prowess, royalty, shininess,

power, legitimacy and a connection to the Emperors of Burma, the rulers of Arakan and Britain.

Sahlins' theory also provides insights into the sense of continuity and singularity of Marma essence. For example, when he discusses the incorporation or grafting of new elements onto old core ones as part of the reproduction of structure.

Shininess is similar to *mana* as the appropriation of Cook's bones leads to the *mana* of Hawaiian kingship becoming British and this entangled nature of *mana* is reinforced by objects such as swords that were gifted by the British to Sahlins' islanders.<sup>195</sup>

“... *mana* is the creative power Hawaiians describe as making visible what is invisible, causing things to be seen, which is the same as making them known or giving them form. Hence the divine of chiefs is manifest in their brilliance, their shining.” (Sahlins 1981: 31)

Both the sword and the coin garland have a metallic quality, conveying a sense of shininess, brilliance and radiance which also quite likely alludes to the kingship's eternity. Moreover, the amplification of the elements of shininess in all the royal bodies and objects, acts as the cement between the hybrid subgroups of Bohmong families and followers, whilst at the same time, radiating a single essence of the group.

Another important aspect is the process behind the Marma's synthesis of these objects which are foreign yet merged with Burmese practice to create a sense of continuity with Pegu and Burma. As with Herskovits' syncretism, these elements of culture from a past also offer a mode of uniting the past with the present. Additionally, when there is nothing familiar in the new context, cultural traits that are more dominant are carried over into new cultural contexts and reinterpreted considering their new surroundings. The coin garland, the sword and the hierarchy of the tax collection ceremony are survivals from the past, adapted to the new environment and updated. Moreover, Herskovits saw the importance of the journey of an ethnic group as contributing to this process. For example, with

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<sup>195</sup> Reference to iron daggers that the British put into trade which were highly coveted and constantly affected as signs of rank.

Marma material culture, the further the group moved away from Burma, and to its new home, the more it held on to certain elements of Burmese culture such as shininess, garland making and the hierarchy of power, and these were maintained and elaborated upon whilst other elements fell away. More recently, Stewart (1999) adds to this understanding of syncretism the concept of metasyncritic as registered perceptions of whether amalgamation has occurred. In the Marma case, the amalgamation is recognized through the embodiment of the royal chart and the Marma label.

## 7.5. Conclusion

In Part 3 of the thesis, we learn that the community affirm their essential Marmanness that is rooted in history, and which is also reflected in their material culture and ceremony. The two chapters have illustrated the value of examining the community in the *longue durée* as it shows the reproduction of structure plotted on an historical timeline, the cyclical nature of events and how structures reach a point of collapse as illustrated by the photo of the destroyed *rajbari*. Moreover, this chapter has employed the tools of invention of tradition and entanglement to illuminate the processes in hybridity when characteristics are defined and highlighted as part of the group moving towards a singular identity. Whilst the Marma group have absorbed many cultural elements from their wider environment, they regularly turn inwards towards the ritualized apex of the Bohmong. The emphasis on links with Burma and the symbolic power of material culture inform a culturally grounded action strategy that legitimates the Bohmong's right to rule over the ethnic group.

Traditional rituals have been reproduced as old structures in a new setting, with new elements absorbed along the way. Even if the rituals have been adapted or invented afresh, the Marma still perceive them as essential embodiments. Thus, the sword embodies continuity of power, the *raj punya* continuity in re-enactment and the coin garland, continuity through adaptation. All three embody "shininess" as the objects and practices travelled with the group from the land in the East where the sun rises, adding a further layer of enchantment to the narratives.

The symbolic value of iconic Marma material culture sits in historic fields of cultural entanglement but the layers of meaning adhering to these objects overrides the empirical history of cultural inter-penetration and invention to deliver objects that emanate Marma history and identity in extremely powerful ways. Moreover, the process of periodic replacement of older material forms by newer equivalents and the entanglement of objects stressed by Thomas does not undermine the continuity of transmitted meaning which can adhere to newer versions of important forms even where they are imported.

The Marma royal family have become a multi-family dynasty. However, the succession rules have also resulted in the overstretching of the system of the royal family and land ownership – and this is evoked in the photo of the *rajbari* and its loss to the community. More significantly, the photo symbolizes the royal family's waning of power in the region as well as the opening of the town's boundaries to outsiders. Even against the backdrop of the uncertain future centred around the loss of land, the royal family of the Marma community still have a clear narrative of where they come from and what makes them different compared to other communities in the area.

Although the Bohmong narrative covers much about power and the legitimacy to rule and live in the CHT, very little is covered in the Marma narrative that deals with other power structures and almost nothing is mentioned of the community's faith - Buddhism.<sup>196</sup> There are 3 *kyangs* or temples in Bandarban and the royal *kyang* houses monks who are related to the royal family. More significantly, the Bohmong as leader of the Marma community is still expected to bow to the most senior monk in the area. Part 4 of the thesis will explore the spiritual power in the Marma community and how, with the fading royal family, it has offered an alternative sense of rootedness and belonging in the region. So far, we have seen structural reproduction from a system-centred perspective in marriage customs as well as "internalization" - if one takes an actor-centred perspective - of structure through practice in the Marma narrative in migration and settlement. Part 4 will continue to examine the work of actors and agency on structures but this time, the

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<sup>196</sup> Pru (1994) does mention that Bohmong Mong Grai Prue was a pious ruler as he is recorded as making several pilgrimages.

emphasis will be on the transformation of structure, through a transposition of schemas as well as an innovation in practice.



# Part 4: Water Thicker Than Blood



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From Left to right: Prince Kong Hla Prue(brother of late 10th Bohmongree Chaw Hla Prue 1901-16), late 15<sup>th</sup> Bohmongree Aung Shwe Prue(1998-2012), Late Prince Chow Than Prue(C T Prue) (1919-1984), late Prince U Thowai Prue(1995). In the centre, Bohmongree Raj Guru (1935)

**Figure 26: Bohmong Inner Circle, date unknown**

## Chapter 8: Marma Buddhism

“I am so happy to be a Marma because I think there is no other nation that has such happiness as Marma. We celebrate lots of festivals like ‘sangrai’ (Marma new year celebration), ‘wagye’ (Probarona Purnima), ‘wacho’ (Ashari Purnima). Moreover, we have lots of fun in marriage ceremony and other ceremonies. ...I also want to say that we were born very close to this nature, we were grown up in this nature, we always want to be in this nature, and we never want to leave this place. We also never want that, someone else from the outside come here and destroy the beauty of the nature. I always pray that I would like to be born as a Marma in my next life. I would like to be born in this place so that I could meet all these people in my community again.”

Mong U Ching Marma, Bangladeshi idol. Interviews with Marma youth on Boat Trip, Nov 2014.

The thesis is concerned with how the Marma community differentiate themselves from other groups in the CHT and the majority population in mainland BD. The chapter on marriage rules and rituals in the Marma community revealed the closed nature of the Marma kinship system, as strict marriage rules help to maintain Marma boundaries with other ethnic groups. The community’s migration history provides various narratives that bolster Marma core ceremonies, and material culture that have become historically emblematic of Marma identity in the region in spite of continual change in the area. The previous ethnographic chapters indicated that Marma identity is intricately connected to their cosmological and religious beliefs. The next two ethnographic chapters will examine another essential characteristic of Marma identity – the group’s affinity with the wider Theravada Buddhist world.

The main aim of both chapters in Part 4 will be to show how Buddhism has become part of a specific assemblage or configuration that is unique to the Marma community. Theravada Buddhism has a strong presence in all three political circles of the CHT and helps to differentiate the mostly ethnically Buddhist tribal groups from the Muslim majority culture of Bangladesh. To situate Marma Buddhism in the wider region of Southeast Asia, Part 4 of this thesis will refer to two specialists in Buddhist societies that provide insights into the relationship between Marma kingship and Buddhism. The first chapter will draw upon

Tambiah's *The Galactic Polity. The Structure of Traditional Kingdoms in Southeast Asia* (1976) which gives a view on political structures within Buddhist societies. This chapter will explore the galactic polity in the Marma community in terms of the relationship between Marma kingship and its political structures with Buddhist power.

Tambiah first coined the phrase "galactic polity" in 1976 to describe the structure of traditional Buddhist kingdoms in Southeast Asia as being grounded in a Buddhist worldview, with social and religious power emanating from the centre to the periphery. Tambiah later provides more insight into this description:

"I have coined the label galactic polity to represent the design of traditional Southeast Asian kingdoms, a design that coded in a composite way cosmological, topographical, and politico-economic features." (Tambiah 2013: 503).

Both chapters in Part 4 will also employ the more recent works of Schober (1995, 2001), specifically *Engagement with Modernity in Southeast Asia: Whither the Social Paradigm of the Galactic Polity?* (1995). Schober takes Tambiah's ideas further by exploring the structures of the galactic polity in the context of colonization, post-independence, and modernization. Chapter 9 will also illuminate the adjusted schemas in Marma Buddhist society that have arisen in the contemporary CHT setting. It will explore how the agency of a few actors on the structures of society has resulted in the transformation of enduring Marma structures.

This chapter will begin by outlining the history of Buddhism from under the soil of the Bay of Bengal to the more recent layer of Buddhist practice which has travelled from Arakan (Myanmar) to be incorporated to varying degrees by the Buddhist communities in the CHT. It will then go on to outline the specific nature of Marma Buddhism and its relationship with Marma kingship, encompassing changes to the architectural symbolism of Buddhist temples to a shift in power from the temporal to spiritual, changes which have further differentiated the Bohmong circle from their Buddhist neighbours.

## 8.1 Background to Marma Buddhism

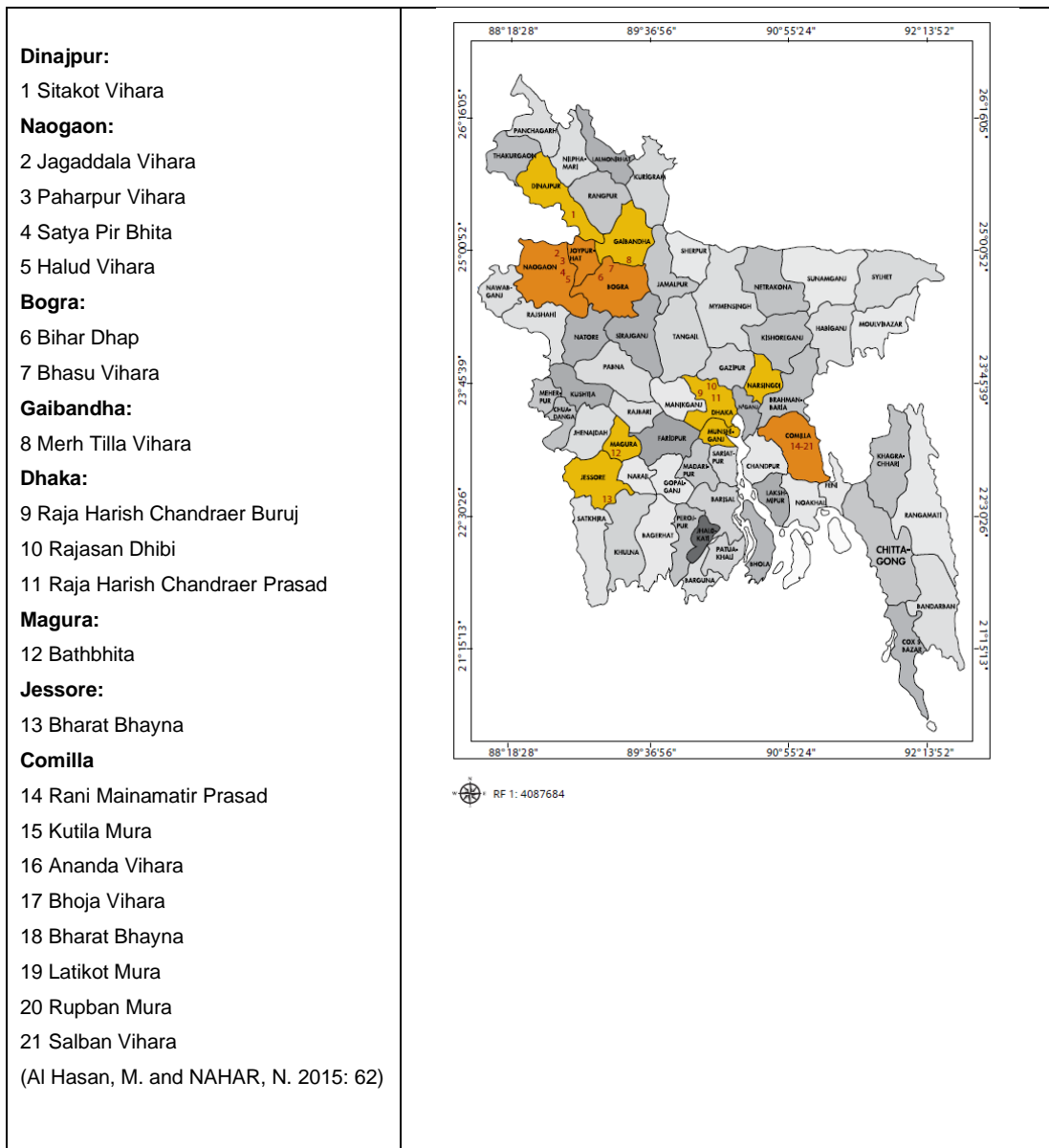
Although Bangladesh is a Muslim majority country, Buddhism has played an important part in the nation's history and culture. Buddhism is the third major religion in Bangladesh, making up 0.9% of the population<sup>197</sup> and constituting a little over one million people in Bangladesh, mostly concentrated in the Chittagong district.

Even with this small population of Buddhists, Buddhism has strong historical roots in the region. These roots can be found under the soil of Bangladesh as major Buddhist archaeological sites in the districts of Naogaon, Bogra, Comilla and Dhaka. The map below shows the ancient Buddhist monasteries across Bangladesh, which are scattered over the lowlands of the delta plain, but significantly for this thesis, not in the CHT.

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<sup>197</sup> According to 2020 world census; 89.1% of the population is Muslim, 10% Hindu and other religions make up the remaining 0.9% (including Buddhism and Christianity) of the population.  
<https://worldpopulationreview.com/en/countries/bangladesh-population>

**Figure 27: Map: Location of the ancient Buddhist sites (selected) in BD**



During the period 1879-80, Sir Alexander Cunningham carried out archaeological expeditions in Naogaon and Bogra districts of BD. The Paharpur site in Naogaon proved to be the biggest Buddhist monastery in the sub-continent<sup>198</sup> and is now a World Heritage site. Based on Cunningham's findings, we learn that during the reign of Emperor Ashoka (304-232 BC), Buddhism was the major religion of Bengal and it continued to thrive here until the 12th century AD, making Bengal

<sup>198</sup> Sir Alexander Cunningham's writings as presented in: *Report from a tour in Bihar and Bengal in 1879-1880. From Patna to Sunargong*, Archaeological Survey of India, Calcutta, 1882. Mahasthan: 104-117. Cunningham, *The Ancient Geography of India, I. The Buddhist Period, including the campaigns of Alexander and the travels of Hwen-Tsang*, 1871, reprint Delhi (Low Price Publications), 1990, 404-405. France-Bangladesh Joint Venture Excavations at Mahasthangarh, Mission française de coopération archéologique au Bangladesh, Maison de l'Orient méditerranéen-Jean Pouilloux (Lyon, France), Bangladesh. Dept. of Archaeology.

the last stronghold of Buddhism in the increasingly Hindu and Muslim dominated sub-continent.<sup>199</sup> Local historians of the archaeological sites quote travel records from Chinese pilgrims who visited the region at this time, and these records provide clues as to the extent of Buddhist influence in East Bengal. A fifth century Chinese pilgrim named Fa Hsien discovered 24 Buddhist monasteries in the area and in the seventh century, the pilgrim Huen Tsang found 40 monasteries with a population of over 2000 monks (Cunningham 1871). Between 750 and 1150, Buddhism reached the pinnacle in the present-day historiography of Bangladesh under the guidance of Pala Kings such as Gopala, Dharmapala and Devapala. They were devout Buddhists and under their patronage, several famous monasteries were established in the region.

Between 1150 and 1760, Buddhism began to slowly disappear from present day Bangladeshi soil following the decline of the Palas, and when Hindu and later Muslim armies came to rule Bengal, Buddhists were pushed to the peripheries of the region. Significantly for this thesis, the surviving Buddhists retreated to the Chittagong district and during this period, a Chittagong-specific term - *Rauli* - emerged which refers to a late medieval monastic tradition that represented a form of Indian Buddhism.<sup>200</sup> The monks of the *Rauli* tradition were identified by their ethno-designation such as Barua *Raulis* and Chakma *Raulis*, and were associated with a set of scriptures that were collectively called the *Agartara* (ancient treatises) written in a mixed linguistic tradition (Baura 2019: 54). According to Khan (1999b), seven *Rauli* monks created a new monastic order - the *Sangharaja Nikaya* - that eventually became a dominant institutional force in Chittagong and beyond and among the Bengali-speaking Buddhists (Khan 1999b: 13).

In 1760, as the British East India Company established its rule in the region, they enabled the Buddhists, though smaller in number, to re-establish themselves in Bangladesh on a solid foundation whilst being protected from Muslim interference. However, by that time, Buddhist religious texts were not available in Bangladesh and there were fewer Buddhist monks and monasteries. Those Buddhists that did

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<sup>199</sup> Historically, the Pala Dynasty of Buddhist rulers from 7th to 12th Centuries dominated the region of Bengal.

<sup>200</sup> *Rauli* monks in Portuguese and English accounts of travellers and missionaries in the Chittagong region challenge the dominant discourse of modern Buddhist studies that has persistently suggested that Indian Buddhism completely disappeared sometime in the early centuries of the second millennium (Barua 2019: 53).

exist were also influenced by Hindu Brahminic rites and rituals alongside Buddhist ceremonies. The Chittagong Buddhists at this time belonged to four distinct ethnic groups. The Chakma and the Marma peoples to the north and south sides of the Karnaphuli River, respectively. The third group were the Baruas, the descendants of Buddhists (and Hindus) who originally came from Magdhada (now known as Bihar state in India) who settled in the Chittagong area and married into Arakan Buddhist families from Burma (Myanmar). Today, the Barua people are a well-to-do Buddhist community in Bangladesh and many of them work as doctors, engineers, and teachers. This group eventually came to be known as Bengali Buddhists. The fourth community were the Rakhine Buddhists who lived along the southern coastal regions of Cox's Bazar and Paharthali.

In 1885, the colonial official stationed in the CHT, Thomas Herbert Lewin, visiting the Arakanese Mahamuni image replica at Paharthali (North of Chittagong city), described the newly built image as “a gigantic gilt image of Gautama, full forty feet high, in a sitting posture” (Lewin 1885: 220). During the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the Mahamuni Buddha and its site became the centre of Buddhist devotion in the region.

The colonial administration up to partition of India (1946) perceived that the Chittagong plains belonged to Bengalis who professed Hinduism and Islam, and that the hills belonged to the non-Bengali population, defined as Arakanese in language and ethnicity, and Buddhist by religion. According to Barua (2019), this colonial imposition of ethno-cultural distinctions over clear-cut topographical ones (hills vs. plains) did not reflect ethno-cultural demographic reality. For example, the Bangla-speaking Barua Buddhists also lived in the Chittagong plains, whilst the Arakanese-speaking Rakhine Buddhists also lived in the coastal areas of Cox's Bazar. Moreover, as discussed earlier in the thesis, the Chakma court in the CHT displayed cultural elements of a Hindu-Bengali, sometimes Muslim aristocracy and as a result, the Chakma people also did not fit into the neat demarcation of the plains vs. the hills. According to Barua, it was this issue of Chakma cultural ambiguity that prompted the British to question the legitimacy of the Chakma court to rule over the Buddhist population in the hills (Barua 2019:

67).<sup>201</sup> In 1860, the British powers at the time - The East India company - responded to this unclarity by dividing the Chakma circle into two circles, inventing a new one called the Mong circle, headed by a new chief, an Arakanese-Buddhist. The Mong circle came to rule over a mixed Buddhist and Bengali area in the hills with a Buddhist leader. The British powers believed that this move would better align the region to the plains vs. hills distinction and also make tax collection more efficient. However, with these realignments of the economic and political ties in the CHT, the Chakma rulers lost huge areas of their traditional territory and governance.

In response to the creation of the Mong Circle, the Chakma Circle and its ruler - Queen Kalindi (1830-1873) began a process of amplifying Arakanese cultural elements and the building of Buddhist religious sites<sup>202</sup> to counter the Bengali Hindu cultural and religious assumptions made by the British. The Queen at this point invited a monk and teacher from the Arakan State in Burma to teach his form of Buddhism in Bangladesh. In 1864, monk Venerable Sangharaj Samedha came to Chittagong with a full chapter of trained monks as Arakanese Theravada Buddhism was invited to the region. By honouring Ven. Sangharaj Samedha, the Chakma court revived its ethnic (Chakma) and religious (Buddhist) identities and remained the legitimate, albeit subordinate, indigenous power with limited colonial hegemony in the CHT. In 1959, during the Pakistan period (1947–1971), a Buddhist religious association named *Parbatya Chattagram Bhikkhu Samiti* (Chittagong Hill Tracts Bhikkhu Association), originating from Yangon in Myanmar, was set up and played a significant role in further spreading Buddhism in the Chittagong District.

Recently, there has been a crisis amongst the Buddhist communities in Bangladesh. Just before the fieldwork in 2012, a small town named Ramu saw the burning down of Buddhist temples, one of which was over 200 years old. Ramu is situated on the outskirts of the CHT and is claimed to be the first site of royal settlement during the migration of the Marma community from Arakan to the CHT.

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<sup>201</sup> Buddhism, the predominant non-Bengali or Arakanese/Burmese cultural symbol in Chittagong, was nowhere on the surface in the Chakma court culture. Linguistically, religiously, and culturally, the Chakma ruling class appeared “Bengali” and “non-Buddhist,” and ruled over the non-Bengali Chakma people.

<sup>202</sup> According to Barua, the Chakmas’ cultural connection to Arakan is debatable. They themselves have claimed to derive from an ancestral place named Champaknagar in medieval India’s Magadha region, and their ancestors migrated to Chittagong in the late fourteenth century. (Barua 2019: 56).



The attacks on temples and houses in Buddhist localities in Ramu and neighbouring areas in Cox's Bazar were apparently perpetrated by radical Islamists in response to the treatment of the Rohingya Muslims in Burma. The attacks were described at the time by newspapers as premeditated and a deliberate attempt to disrupt communal harmony. Following on from this, the influx of Muslim Rohingya refugees fleeing mass violence in Burma precipitated further retaliatory acts of violence against Buddhists. The burning of Ramu and the Rohingya crisis has therefore heightened tensions between the Buddhist minorities in the CHT and the Muslim majority of Bangladesh.

This introduction to Buddhism in the CHT provides the context and extent to which Buddhism has a notable presence in the region. Buddhism is historically under the soil of the region and the Buddhist archaeological sites are important pilgrimage sites for Buddhists from all over the world. Buddhist practice that came from the West to this region, disappeared or merged with local practices. However, from the 1860s, Theravada Buddhism was imported from the East - the Arakan state – to the Chakma circle and it is this form of Arakanese Buddhism that dominated the CHT until recently. Moreover, the convergence of Theravada Buddhism from India and Burma explains why the Buddhist population in this region is made up of Indian Bengali origin Buddhists and Southeast Asian origin Buddhists. Moreover, set against the background of Buddhism in the CHT is the presence of Marma Buddhism. As seen in the migration chapter, the hybrid group, later to be known as Marma, came to the region over 400 years ago, bringing with them a Theravada Buddhism that predates the Buddhist import initiated by the Chakma circle in the 1860s. The next sections of this chapter will illuminate the specificity of Marma Buddhism and how it differentiates the community from other Buddhists in the CHT.

## **8.2 Marma Buddhism**

Tambiah's *Galactic Polity* (1976) was based on the concept of a mandala as a cosmological topography. Composed of two elements – a core (manda) and an

enclosing element (la) (Tambiah 2013: 503), the mandala<sup>203</sup> designs display both simple and complex satellites arranged around a centre which symbolize representations in Hindu-Buddhist thought. Tambiah studied traditional Southeast Asian kingdoms that conformed to a mandala scheme from different perspectives: from village compounds arranged in complex centre-oriented design; to the Mon kingdom of Thaton that had 32 smaller princely kingdoms ringing the centre, linked together by the Buddhist cult of relics. In the Thai language, *muang*<sup>204</sup> signifies kingdom or principality in terms of a centre with the corresponding satellite domains (Tambiah 2013: 506-508).<sup>205</sup>

“What emerges is a galactic picture of a central planet surrounded by differentiated satellites, which are more or less “autonomous” entities held in orbit and within the sphere of influence of the center.” (Tambiah 2013: 511)

The galactic model therefore becomes a collective cosmo-political and ritual representation of structural relations where power radiates from the centre. If we take the concept of a centre from which power radiates and apply it to the CHT, we find three circle kingdoms with their own unique hierarchies, spheres of influence, linked by temples and relics. These kingdoms are also borderland communities or “periphery” that are subject to the power of the “centre” of central government in Dhaka. As sovereignties overlap, multiple lines of allegiances emerge so that the centre is not equally authoritative at all points of the realm.

What differentiates the Marma community in this series of concentric circle systems is that the Bohmong circle is not only subject to Dhaka but also to the Marma cultural heritage of Pegu in Burma. The centre-periphery relations within the Bohmong circle are ordered thus: in the centre is the king’s capital (Bandarban); in the areas surrounding the capital are “provinces” ruled by headmen appointed by the king, and these provinces are again split into tributary polities (village *karbaris*) that are more or less independent. The relationship between the power centres in the temporal realm are governed by local customary law, which is supported by the Bohmong’s advisers who are made up of representatives of both the temporal and spiritual realm. The capital itself is an

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<sup>203</sup> A mandala depicts concentric circles or a centre and gates leading to an external zone.

<sup>204</sup> Today the terms ‘muang thai’ for ‘Thailand’, ‘dtua muang’ for ‘city centre’ are used.

<sup>205</sup> “The Javanese analogy was that of a torch with its light radiating outward with decreasing intensity; the power of the center determined the range of its illumination.” (Moertono 1968: 112).

architectural representation of a mandala: a king's palace alongside a temple represents dual and complementary power as the king holds political power but is also cosmically connected and subject to the spiritual power of the temple as even the king must bow to the head monk of the temple.<sup>206</sup> Added to the concentric circle system, the king collects tax annually in the *raj punya* ceremony for the government based in Dhaka. Meanwhile, both the spiritual and cultural centre of the Bohmong circle gravitates towards Burma.

Dipping into the ethnographic data collected on Marma Buddhism, the next sections will layout a selection of practices and structures that are common to Buddhist galactic polities in Southeast Asia, whilst also highlighting the elements that are unique to the Marma community.

### 8.2.1 The Economy of Merit

This section covers the Buddhist practice of building merit within the context of the Marma community, which is also practised throughout the Buddhist world. In Tambiah's galactic polity, at the centre there is a temporal king, a Buddhist temple and the *sangha* or the community of monks. The laity encircle this centre and it is in the field of merit and merit-building that there is an interaction between all four - the laity, the king, the temple and the *sangha*. All members of the galactic polity share in merit-building activities through various ritual exchanges of gifts, that work towards future rewards for individuals and the community, and contribute to what Schober describes as the "economy of merit":

“Traditional Theravada Buddhist society shares in the economy of merit and future rewards for ethical action through an elaborate system of ritual exchange of gifts for merit that encompassed all levels of society. One's position within the social hierarchy was at once a reflection of this system of ritual patronage of religion and a vehicle for negotiating it.” (Schober 1995: 311).

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<sup>206</sup> The most revered monk - both wise and senior in age - in the Bohmong Circle - is selected by the Bohmong and is honoured annually at a special celebration on a full moon day. This ritual of reverence is called the *Achiria Puja* and the name of the revered one is called *Pamokha*. The senior monk resides at the monastery of Chitmoron which is in the Chakma circle but the monastery falls under the Bohmong circle spiritual jurisdiction due to a pocket of Marma people living nearby. The Bohmong travels into the Chakma circle to pay respects and to develop merit through pouring water to be witnessed by all of the community at this ritual. As the "most revered" is seated on a stage, the community witness the Bohmong king bowing before him on his hands and knees. Subjugating himself to a spiritual leader shows the Bohmong's humility and therefore the potential to accrue significant merit for the king and his subjects.

What drives the economy of merit is the Buddhist concept of suffering. This concept is detailed in the four noble truths, which the Buddha came to understand during his meditations under the *bodhi* tree. The truth of suffering, the truth of the cause of suffering, the truth of the end of suffering, and the truth of the path that leads to the end of suffering.<sup>207</sup> As part of this, the karmic results of past sins are considered to be de-merits which means that followers in the present who inherit the de-merits, can work towards removing future suffering, i.e., by eliminating the desires which produce sins, a person can look forward to a reincarnation of the soul into a life with less suffering.

Thus, working to remove de-merits and building future merit is the aim of the economy of merit in a Buddhist society. For example, the Marma community contribute to the field of merit in various ways. The merit-building activities range from pilgrimages, to making food offerings for the *sangha* or sponsoring initiates and donating lavishly to all religious ceremonies. To selflessly refilling drinking water jars in public places so that anyone can use it. Whilst there are daily low-key examples of individual and family merit-building activities, in contrast, community merit-building is a monthly occurrence with much pageantry and spectacle, and an abundance of food. As patron over a powerful field of merit, the Bohmong also gains legitimacy and influence from the daily contributions to the economy of merit. Moreover, whether in the huge amounts of food offerings at temples or the large offerings at marriages and funerals, it seems that merit-building is an opportunity for the community to come together to display generosity and to share in the rewards of the practice. The normal barriers between the laity and religious orders, or between the Bohmong and his monks are removed temporarily during the various rituals and ceremonies in the field of merit. Even though the amount of the contribution depends on the status of the individual or family, the ritual

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<sup>207</sup> In the First Noble Truth, suffering (*dukkha*) comes in many forms such as old age, sickness and death. Human beings are subject to desires and cravings, but even when we are able to satisfy these desires, the satisfaction is only temporary. The Second Noble Truth explains the origin of suffering (*samudāya*) in which the Buddha claimed to have found the cause of all suffering - and it is much more deeply rooted than our immediate worries. The Buddha taught that the root of all suffering is misplaced desire, *tanhā*. The Third Noble Truth explains the cessation of suffering (*nirodha*) as the Buddha taught that the way to extinguish desire, which causes suffering, is to liberate oneself from attachment. Someone who has attained enlightenment is filled with compassion for all living things and moreover, after death an enlightened person is liberated from the cycle of rebirth. The Fourth Noble Truth gives the path to the cessation of suffering (*magga*) which is the Buddha's prescription for the end of suffering.

activities act as a leveller of social classes and gender, as all come together to share the same space in a temple and sit alongside each other in prayer.

To unpick the dynamics behind merit-making, this section will examine a selection of festivals and events that I was able to observe during fieldwork.

What is common to Theravada Buddhism in the region - not only in the Marma group - is the practice of male initiation into temporary monkhood which is the easiest way to build merit for a family and contribute to the economy of merit in the Marma community. In fact, the birth of a son is considered particularly auspicious because of the opportunity to gain merit through the initiation rite. The ritual involves a young man staying in a monastery as a novice for 9 days (9 great virtues) or 3 days (3 great virtues) depending on the wealth of the parents or sponsors of the child.

Day 1: Parents and relatives visit the monastery with the boy accompanied by music, gong, drums, and flute. The boy circles the temple three times, and the relatives enter the shrine and offer prayers. He goes home and is adorned with silk, gold chains and jewels and is seated on a dais. The table placed before him is filled with coconuts, banana, betel nuts, betel leaves, rice, biscuits, and candles. Neighbours visit the boy and food is prepared for guests.

Day 2: Before sunrise, the boy is dressed in special clothes, and monks visit him to give a blessing. Monks are served breakfast and then they return to the monastery. In the evening, the boy visits the monastery with his family. Women take plates of ceremonial items over their heads. They move around the temple 3 times, and on entering the shrine, the boy utters *Trisarana* (I take refuge in the Buddha, in the *Dhamma*, in the *Sangha*) and he takes the vow of the 5 precepts: *Pancha sila* – to not kill any living being, take what is not given to him, speak falsely, drink intoxicating drinks and have sexual intercourse.

Day 3: The boy drapes himself with fine clothes, gold chains and jewels. Shaded with an umbrella as a mark of respect and with music following him around, he returns to the monastery and circles it 3 times. He then puts garments and jewels to the side. This symbolizes the boy's renunciation of family life and comforts, which is also an echo of Prince Siddhartha's life. After accepting the life of a person with no attachment – he has his head shaved, is bathed, and clothed in a

simple loin cloth. The boy requests that the head monk accepts his robes and him as a novice. Then the boy prays for the 10 precepts:

“I take the vow not to destroy life/to steal/to abstain from impurity/not to lie/not to take intoxicating drinks/to eat at forbidden hours/abstain from dancing, singing, music and stage play/to use garlands, scents, ornaments/to use high or broad bed/not to take gold or silver.”

*Pabajjya* is conferred on the boy and the novice receives a new name. A monk is assigned to him and watches over the education of the novice, teaching him the 75 *Sekhiya* (rules). On the last day, the novice returns home and is honoured with a great feast. This route is the most common route for a family to gain the greatest possible merit that a family can achieve. Significantly, the ordination of boys as novices and young men as monks are ways of creating the biggest store of merit that is available for women and mothers especially. For men the largest store of merit is created when they themselves become monks.

In the three circles, it is at the funerals of royal kings and queens<sup>208</sup> that the greatest merit can be attained for the community. It is a commonly held belief that if one goes to a funeral, a Buddhist gains 7 merits and even more if the person who has died is important and influential – such as a Queen or former King. During fieldwork, the wife of the late 15<sup>th</sup> Bohmong died and in the same month, there was a memorial commemorating the 16<sup>th</sup> Bohmong who passed exactly one year before this. There was a huge outpouring of community grief that lasted over a week for both ceremonies and influential members of society contributed lavishly.

Moreover, facing death is seen as part of life’s teachings around suffering, which can give insights into life’s mysteries and help to develop compassion. I was often told the story of the young lady Sinma from the time of the Buddha. According to my respondent - Guru Bhante - she was a high-class prostitute who provided meals to 7 monks every day of the week. One monk fell in love with her and when the Buddha saw this, she fell ill and died. The Buddha ordered that her dead body

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<sup>208</sup> “A royal person was automatically conceived as having merit accumulated in previous lives. It was *dharma* of a king to act in the world and distribute merit.” (Tambiah 2013: 517)

be kept for 4 days before the funeral ceremony. Her body turned from beautiful to ugly and the monk who loved her, slowly let go of her because he saw her body decompose over time. It reputedly helped him to let go of desire and longing because she had become “ugly”. Similarly, a funeral with a long period of mourning allows family members to make offerings and to gain merit, to develop their spirituality and it appears, to let go of the person that they are mourning. At funerals, the level of merit-making is connected to the status of the deceased as funeral goers financially contribute to the economy of merit by placing bank notes on a money tree.

Going on a pilgrimage can offer an individual the possibility of investing in one’s spiritual growth and thereby building merit. This is a common practice for the Marma as they have several pilgrimage sites within their circle. One of the 3 pilgrimage sites in Bandarban district is called Rowangchori Temple, approximately one hour away from Bandarban town. I travelled to this “centre” with my companion Dauki, a mother of two college-going daughters. For the pilgrimage, she brought gifts of candles, a sacred piece of a monk’s cloth as well as a beautifully prepared meal spread over 3 tiffin boxes. The monk who received the gifts and food started to ritually undress a small Buddhist statue that was originally from Myanmar, washed it clean and then re-dressed it with Dauki’s fresh cloth. The water used to clean the statue was then bottled for sprinkling on the head or drinking, as it was considered sacred – See Figure 28.

**Figure 28: Ritual cleansing of Buddha statue**



After the dressing of the Buddha, the followers sat around the monk to listen to a *sila* (a teaching) on life, death and suffering. Through this ritual, Dauki was able to expand her knowledge of suffering and gain merit for herself and her family. Moreover, through the ritual cleansing of a Buddhist statue, Dauki was not only following a Buddhist practice but also experiencing a connection with her ancestral roots in Myanmar.

This section has shown ethnographic detail on the various practices that are common to Buddhist societies and also being practised within Marma Buddhist society. The next sections will explore an aspect of Buddhism in the Marma society that reveal a unique Marma inflection in both the structure and practice of Buddhism

### **8.2.2 Buddha's Relics as Centre**

Veneration of Buddha's relics or statues is a central aspect of the state cult in the galactic polity (Schober 1995: 310) since the relics represent the ongoing power or act as mnemonic devices for recalling Buddha's teaching (Oldenberg 1928:



377). In the Marma community, there are 3 traditional pilgrimage sites that house Buddha relics or statues that are located throughout Bandarban district. The sites are: Khyangwa Kyang in Bandarban, Ching Mrong Kyang in Ching Mrong Kaptai<sup>209</sup> and Rowangchori Kyang in Rowangchori. Interviews with respondents claim that the three temples house relics or statues of Buddha from Burma – either from Arakan (Rakhine) or Pegu (Bago) and that they travelled with the first wave of migration, over 400 years ago. These relics at the centre therefore differentiate the Marma from other Buddhist groups in the region.

In addition to this, there are unique stories around the Buddha statues and how they were often stolen during their history in the region, but then rediscovered again through people's dreams.

“... there are seven Buddha images found by a dream. That is a miracle. There are also miracle Buddha images in Bandarban so it is a very important place. Bandarban is loved not only by the men, it is also loved by the gods.” Guru Bhante, head monk of the royal temple in Bandarban.

I heard stories of statues found in the lake in Chingmoran or sitting on a high branch of a tree at Rowangchowri. As a result of these dreams, the temples that house the statues are thought to hold a special power as well as enhance the power of the communities that own them. Geertz (1980) also sees the power of sacred objects held in temples, as symbolizing a connection with the divine:

“Royal regalia, priestly ritual objects, sacred heirlooms, and holy places are all *sekti* in the same sense: they display the power the divine takes on when it falls into particular shapes. *Sekti* is "supernatural" power...which grows out of imaging the truth, not out of believing, obeying, possessing, organizing, utilizing, or even understanding it.” (Geertz 1980: 106).

Similarly, the Marma sacred objects and relics provide a connection with the divine whilst also connecting Bandarban district to the spiritual centres in Myanmar.

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<sup>209</sup> Ching Moran Kyang (on Kaptai) Buddha statue story. My informant in the compound, Koghri, tells me that the Buddha statue was found by a Lusai who did not understand its power – his crops did well. Then a monk found it and a built a temple around it. The statue was stolen many times. Once it was discovered in the Karnafuli river – the boat did not go anywhere, only round and round in circles. They dropped the statue into the water and fled. The statues came to a monk in his dream – they found it again.

Another type of centre-periphery relationship can be seen in the layout of Buddhist temples that have planetary posts. Planetary posts – locally known as *Gro Daing* - are a recent import that came with Bandarban monks who had received their spiritual training in Myanmar. In Marma temples, they are positioned on the outer layer of the temple that houses the Buddha relic or statue at its centre. The planetary posts symbolize the cosmos in a Myanmar-inherited astrology practice, which in turn originates from Hindu Brahmanism. They enable Buddhists to worship the day of their birth.<sup>210</sup> Each planetary post has the associated animal and a Buddha image, and devotees offer flowers, prayer flags and pour water on their representative animal.<sup>211</sup> The basic belief of Myanmar astrology is that the planetary post of a person's birth day will be the main guardian of his or her fate, and that each period of a person's life is subject to a particular planet and its baneful or its beneficial influence. The moment (or day) a person is born situates them in a constellation which becomes their entry point (post) at the temple to worship the Buddha statue. The pilgrimage sites listed above have planetary posts located outside the temple grounds. Therefore, the temples appear to architecturally incarnate the galactic cosmos as they establish channels of continuity with the planets that comprise the cosmos.

There are also 3 additional temples that sit alongside the Marma pilgrimage sites, which were built by the influential monk called Guru Bhante. The three temples were built around relics recently acquired from Myanmar. For example, in the Golden Pagoda, the Buddha's relic enshrined in the temple was gifted to Guru Bhante in 1994 by the State Sangha Maha Nayaka Committee of Myanmar. There is a hope that the relics would increase the spiritual power of the three temples. Moreover, Guru Bhante's Golden Pagoda is the most intriguing of all the three temples because of its physical layout and shininess. The dome and Buddha sit at the centre – the “manda” – whilst the enclosing element of “la” is the cosmological ring of planetary posts which are positioned within the temples' boundaries. In Figure 29, the images show how the Buddha sits radiantly at the centre of the cosmos whilst his power seeps outwards to the animals of the planetary posts

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<sup>210</sup> Planetary posts that recognizes eight days in a week - Wednesday is divided into two days - and the days are marked by animals that represent each day. Galon (garuda - bird) represents Sunday; tiger for Monday; lion for Tuesday; tusked elephant for Wednesday before 6 pm; black tuskless elephant for Wednesday after 6 p.m.; mouse for Thursday; guinea pig for Friday; and mythical dragon/serpent for Saturday.

<sup>211</sup> “Thus, the ebb and flow of a man's fortune depends on the paths in the sky of the planets.” Guru Bhante.

who in turn transmit this power even further outwards. This layout reinforces the idea that Buddha sits gilded and shiny at the centre of the symbolized universe, itself symbolized by the temple and dome. Significant to this thesis is that the style of temple building is imported from Myanmar but has undergone some adjustments in the Marma setting, as the 'la' lies within the temple boundaries.

**Figure 29: Planetary posts at the Golden Pagoda**



These sections have illustrated some of the common and unique features of Marma Buddhism. The elements that make Marma Buddhism unique are the spiritual relics at the centre which come from Pegu or Arakan. There are visions and dreams around these objects as they are lost or stolen over time and when retold, the narratives continue to link the Marma people to these centres. Moreover, the relics hold a special power that seems to have protected the whole of Bandarban district from civil war, giving the relics the role of a “centre” from which peace radiates. In contrast to the other Buddhist temples in the region which have planetary posts as shrines that reside outside of the boundaries of the temple, there is a Marma temple where the planetary posts are not in orbit, as they would be in Galilean Western conceptions of the universe, but instead act as nodal points through which the power of the Buddhist centre passes as it radiates outwards. All of these features, both practices and structures, point to an inflection of Buddhism that is uniquely Marma.

The next section will highlight a shift in power in the Marma community from the temporal to the spiritual realms, that again contributes to the distinctiveness of Marma Buddhism in the CHT.

### 8.2.3 Buddhist Power in Bohmong Circle

An important element of the galactic polity is the figure of Ashoka, the Indian emperor of the Maurya Dynasty who, on becoming Buddhist, took on the paradoxically complementary roles of world conqueror on the battlefield and because of his spiritual journey, world renouncer.<sup>212</sup> Ashoka modelled the concept of “Buddhist kingship” where kingly duty was combined with righteous behaviour and significantly, the right to rule did not come from a divine source, but by supporting and earning the approval of the Buddhist *sangha*. Kings were expected from then on to rule in accordance with the teachings of the Buddha, ensure social harmony and material prosperity for their subjects, and act as primary patrons of the *sangha*. Following Ashoka's example, later kings established monasteries, funded the construction of stupas, and supported the ordination of monks in their kingdom. Many rulers also took an active role in resolving disputes over the status and regulation of the *sangha*.<sup>213</sup>

This symbiotic relationship of king and monks also has an important foothold in the Marma Buddhist landscape. There is a King - the Bohmong - and the religious order or *sangha* community that works closely with the king. One of the chief tasks of the Bohmong is to select the senior monk called the *raj guru* who heads the royal *kyang* or temple. The Bohmong visits the *kyang* regularly as it is within walking distance from his abode, and he interacts with monks during Buddhist festivals and funerals. The structure of rulers and the *sanghas* is therefore in keeping with Tambiah's description of a traditional galactic polity whereby the head monk of the royal *sangha* is chosen by the secular king.

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<sup>212</sup> While the early part of Ashoka's reign was apparently quite bloodthirsty, he became a follower of the Buddha's teachings after his conquest of Kalinga on the east coast of India. When he was walking through the grounds of Kalinga after his conquest, rejoicing in his victory, he was moved by the number of bodies there and the wails of the bereaved. This transformed the vengeful Emperor Ashoka into a stable and peaceful emperor, as he became a patron of Buddhism.

<sup>213</sup> This development ultimately led to a close association in many Southeast Asian societies between the monarchy and the religious hierarchy, an association that can still be seen today in the state-supported Buddhism of Thailand and the traditional role of the Thai king as both a religious and secular leader.

There are two Buddhist temples (see map of Bandarban in Appendix D) that dominate Bandarban. The royal *kyang* is the most influential temple as it normally has direct access to the Bohmong, the royal family and the descendants of the original followers of the Bohmong. However, this temple's reach tends to be limited to the town only. The second *kyang* is the *Ujanipara kyang*, which is a more traditional temple with adherents from the commoners (non-royal) and with influence reaching beyond the town. The senior monks in both *kyangs* receive training from *sanghas* in Myanmar and sometimes from Sri Lanka. The two *kyangs* have their own leaders, hierarchies, and followers and the monks come, on the whole, from the male Buddhist population of the Bohmong circle but also from the other circles. Whilst the monks do not mix or take food together across the temples, intermarriage between the lay groups from both *sanghas* is permitted, and the laity can attend any ceremony at any temple. Therefore, despite the exclusive nature of the *kyangs*, the laity can choose and change allegiances at any time in their lifetimes.

The king is at the apex of the State but works alongside the Buddhist *sangha* which is also at the centre of the Marma world. The king rules in a this-worldly way, whilst at the other centre, the monks who have renounced the world,<sup>214</sup> work with the king symbiotically in religious festivals and most importantly, in the field of merit. It is because of their merit during the current and past lives that kings are kings. Similarly, it is because of their merit that monks are monks. In this-worldly space, the king leads the lay people, whilst, in the other space, the king looks for sanctification from monks whose power lies in the Buddhist renunciation of the world. Although the temporal and spiritual appear to be distinct and separate, in the Buddhist cosmology, power is fluid, moving between the *sangha* and a king.

During fieldwork, I was told that the sharing of power at the apex can also lead to tensions between powerful monks and political leaders. Responding to this tension, temporal rulers will attempt to regulate the *sangha* to ensure that they are regime supporters and because the king needs a sizeable *sangha* to demonstrate

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<sup>214</sup> The religious authority of the *sangha* is based on the renunciation of worldly gains in pursuit of spiritual activities that uphold the Buddha's teachings (*dhamma*)<sup>214</sup> (see Lehman 1987: 574-80).

his power. Meanwhile, monks need the patronage of the king because kings (and even military governments in Myanmar)<sup>215</sup> are big donors to the *sangha*.

As already noted, Schober (1995) updates Tambiah's galactic polity by examining the influence of colonial powers and the effects of modernization on the traditional galactic polity. In a galactic polity, Schober claims that a king's role is to unify a weak *sangha* which is inherently inclined to factionalize. However, an ineffectual, or a weak king could bring about diverse ways of contesting royal legitimacy both at the centre and in the periphery. In the nineteenth century, both Burmese and Thai religious authorities responded to their encounters with British influences by reforming Buddhism to reassert spiritual power within the galactic polities (Schober 1995: 313). This was in part a response to British indirect rule and partly as a result of the colonial power's failure to appoint a leader of the *sangha* - a responsibility incumbent upon any new ruler. As a result, the Buddhist *sangha* became more powerful within the galactic polity. These societies had therefore responded to the lack of a temporal leader by centralizing the monastic infrastructure, rationalizing the traditional cosmology, and fostering the gradual laicization of Buddhism to strengthen religiosity within the communities.

Is there a similar reaction and process in the Bohmong Circle? When we examine the effects of colonization in the Chittagong Hill Tracts and therefore on the galactic polity of the Marma community, we see that the colonial era was a period of isolation for the Marma community as it became a self-governing protectorate.<sup>216</sup> With post-colonization and the governance of West Pakistan and then the new nation state of Bangladesh, the CHT became a militarized zone and since the 1970s, has continued to operate in isolation. In this period, it appears that the Bohmong rulers had strong control over the *sanghas*, appointing monks to the royal *kyang* and the centre-periphery relationship remained stable. In the last decade, however, the nation state of Bangladesh has started to assert itself in the region by establishing a parallel hierarchy of power. The new leaders of Bandarban district are a Major General of the Bangladeshi army and the Deputy

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<sup>215</sup> The biggest embarrassment for the Myanmar military junta was when the *sangha* refused to accept any donations from the government after the bloody suppression of Saffron revolution in 2007. To refuse any alms means refusing the opportunity to make merit (and atone for the bloodshed). Little merit means little power and thus the government looked weak.

<sup>216</sup> As we have already seen, it was during this period however, that coins with British kings – the universal monarch (*cakkavatti*) - were amassed as bride wealth and collectables. The coin garland became an important object of value outside the galactic polity and as part of the economy of marriage (see section on coin garland in Chapter 7).

High Commissioner – an ambassador and representative of the Government in the region. This period has therefore seen a weakening in the temporal powers of the galactic polity - the Bohmong king - since there are now several temporal powers at the centre and these powers, since they are Muslim not Buddhist, have not taken up the responsibilities of the temporal power in a galactic polity, resulting in a re-centring of the mandala, pulling CHT away from Myanmar and locking the region in between several galactic polities. In parallel, the *sanghas* - unlike in Tambiah's case study of Thai religious society – have engaged in local factionalism that has resulted in a uniquely Marma phenomenon.

The weakening of power at the Marma centre also came from within the centre itself. In Part 3 of the thesis, we learnt that a recent royal succession battle for the Bohmong position had a huge impact on Marma society as the Marma community became divided over the demotion of the traditional royal *kyang*. The background to this was the 3-year High Court and Supreme Court battle to be the 15<sup>th</sup> Bohmong which had split the royal family into two camps – those who supported Aung Shwe Prue and those who supported K.S. Prue. During the Supreme court battle for the Bohmong position, there was a political interregnum with no clear leader of the Bohmong circle.

The royal *kyang* at the time was headed by a charismatic leader called Guru Bhante (“teacher monk”). Guru Bhante is a controversial ex-prince, ex-barrister turned Buddhist monk, who is pro-Myanmar but also adamant that the Marma fight for their right to stay in the CHT. He is the eldest son of Hla Tun Prue, and grandson of the most popular and powerful Bohmong – the 13<sup>th</sup> Bohmong. Guru Bhante is seen by many as a political player as his first political act was at the beginning of the 3-year dispute over succession. The royal *kyang*'s head monk had died of old age. It was at this time that Guru Bhante took advantage of the vacuum in temporal power since there was no Bohmong to appoint the next royal monk. He carried out instead a religious coup, pushing out the most senior monk of the royal *kyang* to make himself the new head monk. Guru Bhante then went on to back K.S. Prue who was his stepbrother - they both share the 13<sup>th</sup> Bohmong as their grandfather. The Supreme court ultimately chose Aung Shwe Prue as the 15<sup>th</sup> Bohmong so when K.S. Prue and Guru Bhante lost their bid for power, the relationship between the new 15<sup>th</sup> Bohmong and the royal *kyang* was broken and

remains so to this day. The coup in the royal *kyang* meant that members of the 15<sup>th</sup> Bohmong family now claim allegiance to the commoner's *kyang* to avoid the former royal *kyang* altogether and this lesser alliance also implies less shininess for the Bohmong family. Other members of the Marma royal family were free to align themselves with whichever *kyang* they preferred. The royal family has since 1998 consequently remained divided and the current 17<sup>th</sup> Bohmong patronizes both *kyangs* but has a strong preference for the commoner's *kyang*.

During fieldwork, I came to learn how much insecurity and anxiety the weakening of temporal power was causing for the Marma community. The split also created divisions in the Buddhist laity and within families, as the laity following their loyalties, often had to change their allegiances to a different temple. For example, during fieldwork, whilst waiting for a friend on the main market street of Bandarban, I heard music and chanting coming from opposite directions. There were two processions in single file headed by monks with musical instruments, moving towards each other. The procession was led by the monks of the two *kyangs* in Bandarban – the royal *kyang* and the commoner *kyang*. In both processions, the Buddhist laity were dressed up in their best clothes and walking in silence between the monks. The processions crossed each other at the point at which I was standing. What was remarkable was that friends and members of the same family who were split across the two processions, moved to accommodate each other on the narrow bazaar road and greeted each other warmly. It appeared that even though the town had recently adjusted their allegiances to a *kyang*, there was still a peaceful coexistence between the two religious camps within the laity.

### **8.3 Conclusion**

This chapter presents an overview of Buddhism in the region and an account of the various waves of imported Theravada Buddhism at various junctures of the region's history. Marma Buddhism came to follow a different and unique path compared to the Buddhism practised in the other royal circles. The chapter also



illuminates the elements that sit together in harmony as part of a galactic polity. In the Bohmong circle and the other two circles, being Buddhist distinguishes the CHT ethnic groups from the Bangladeshi Muslims in the lower-lying lands. Whilst Buddhism is a central part of the ritual world across all three circles, what distinguishes Marma Buddhism from their neighbours is the “power” at the centre, which are relics that have been transported from Myanmar – either from Pegu or Arakan. This centre is therefore in Myanmar which anchors Marma practice in an historical past. Moreover, temple designs in Marma Buddhism are imported from Myanmar but one temple has undergone some significant adjustments as the planetary posts – the *Gro Daing* - lie within the temple boundaries of the Golden Pagoda. Perhaps the most significant characteristic of Marma Buddhism is the shift of power from the temporal centre to the spiritual centre due to the internal factionalism within the royal family. Whilst a weakening of temporal power of the local chiefs is prevalent in all 3 circles due to a stronger presence from the Bangladeshi government in the CHT, only in the Bohmong circle are the laity divided across *kyang* alignments, resulting from the rise of an alternative power from the centre of the galactic polity.

To conclude, the lens of the galactic polity is a useful tool to examine the relationship between the centre and the periphery, and to be able to recognize the transformations that have happened at the centre. This chapter explored Marma Buddhism and the specific synthesis and emergence of new elements. Guru Bhante, who became the head of the royal *kyang*, represents a power shift from the Bohmong - the appointed protector of the realm - to the royal monk. The next chapter will analyse the impact of these changes at the centre that have prompted an adjustment to Marma Buddhism and ultimately the hybrid make-up of the Buddhist community of the Bohmong circle, which continues to give the impression of distinctiveness in the CHT.

## Chapter 9: The Transformation of Marma Buddhism

“. . . there are contradictory tendencies always at work - on the one hand towards homogenization and on the other towards new distinctions.” (Lévi-Strauss 1978: 20)

In Chapter 8, we came to understand the elements that make the Marma Buddhism in the Bohmong circle unique compared to the other royal circles. For example, Buddhism was imported to the Bohmong circle during the waves of migration from the East and that it has become Marma-rized over time. The Marma community go on pilgrimages to the 3 *kyangs* to worship relics transported there during the original waves of migration to the CHT, allowing them to invest continuously in their spirituality but also significantly, to remember their roots. From Chapter 8, we also learned how changes at the centre - a weakening of temporal power - prompted the rise of a new kind of charismatic leadership in the form of a royal monk called Guru Bhante.

This chapter will continue to examine the rise in power of Guru Bhante and at the same time, detail the recent transformations in Marma Buddhism that have occurred as a result of the “imported” ways of building merit. There are relatively new practices around fund-raising, and the Buddhist practice of pouring water together has been recently adapted to meet the needs of a community undergoing stress because of the changes in the environment. Whilst Buddhist practice is being reframed, the hybridity of the Marma group has been expanded as it is slowly transformed into an “imagined communitas” (Schober 1995: 308). This chapter will argue that despite the significant changes to Marma Buddhism, the re-fashioning has strengthened Buddhism, contributing not just to the power of Buddhism in the Marma realm but also to the vigour of Marma identity.

The journeying to and settlement in the CHT brought to the region a Theravada Buddhism from the East. The entrenchment of Buddhism in the CHT borderlands has been subject to external influences. The first part of this chapter will examine

the history of Buddhist power on the margins of the nation state and how the process of entrenchment continues to this day.

## 9.1 Buddhism as Power on the Margins

Barua (2019) claims that Buddhism came to the CHT region as part of an interplay between Buddhism and the various regional political powers of the mid-nineteenth century. He studies three medals or seals of honour,<sup>217</sup> with a decade apart, from three distinct powers - the British, the Chakma Queen and the Burmese King. The three honours were bestowed on one monk, Sangharaja Samedha who was an Arakan refugee<sup>218</sup> with royal origins, who at the time had briefly settled in the CHT. Sangharaja Samedha became the focus of Buddhist entrenchment policies by the regional powers as each power supported Buddhism in the CHT to extend its own colonial or counter-colonial agenda.

The first seal of honour was bestowed by the British colonial power in order to secure Buddhist loyalty in the CHT. According to Charney (2002) and Barua (2019), British colonial administrators elevated Muslims above others in the wider plains of the region as they were seen to be more efficient and compliant than other groups. Within these political and economic unfavourable circumstances, Buddhist monks provided an alternative leadership to non-Muslims, solving disputes and heading up resistance movements against the same colonial rule. For example, in the 1830s, Buddhists in British-ruled Arakan revolted against colonial rule because of the economic favouritism shown towards Muslims in an arable land settlement. The British representatives in the region responded to the uprising by assuming the role of the great king of the *sangha* and by appointing monks to the monastic office in order to manage the rival factions within the *sangha*. Secondly, the British wanted to keep the *sangha* in colonial Lower Burma (Arakan) distant from the influence of its Upper Burma counterpart and that of the Burmese royal court (Barua 2019: 48). To this end, the colonial office bestowed

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<sup>217</sup> The seals are kept at Sangharaja Vihara in Sittwe, the capital town of Myanmar's Rakhine (Arakan) State.

"Upon my enquiry about the temple's origin and its name, the young abbot of the temple, Bhadanta Chandavara, proudly showed me three iron seals of distinctions awarded to his well-known patriarch Sangharaja Samedha (1801–1882)." (Barua 2019: 37).

<sup>218</sup> 1785 Burmese invasion of Arakan made a lot of Arakanese flee to CHT (Barua 2019: 41). From the perspective of Chittagong Buddhists, who have claimed the Arakanese monk as one of their own on the basis of his "Chittagong" birthplace. Sangharaja Samedha made more than one visit to Chittagong to propagate a "purer form of Buddhism."

the highest monastic title possible on an Arakanese monk of lower Burma - Samedha – as he received the title of “the Superior Royal Teacher”. After the recognition, the honoured monk came to Chittagong in 1856 and according to Charney (2002: 221), “to prevent competition with and harness the energy of rival Buddhist revivalist movements.” Sangharaja Samedha could not win over all Buddhists,<sup>219</sup> particularly the revivalists inspired by the earlier Chittagong Buddhists. He initiated instead a new Buddhist monastic order differentiating it from the existing reformed movement.

The second seal, a decade later, came from the Chakma Queen. Barua’s paper examines the motivations that underlay the Chakma queen’s decision to honour Sangharaja Samedha and connects that particular honour to the British one that preceded it and the Burmese one that followed it. There was at the time a colonial perception of her court as ethnically Bengali and religiously Hindu that ruled over a non-Bengali Chakma Buddhist population (Barua 2019: 38-39). Lewin himself had observed:

“The [CHT] district itself was divided into three parts: (1) the southern division, subject to the Bohmong, a chief of Burmese extraction; (2) a central tract inhabited chiefly by the Chakma tribe, under the regency of their chief’s widow, the Rani Kalindi, the heir, her grandson, being still a minor; and (3) the northern portion, inhabited by Burmese-speaking clans, with a sprinkling of immigrants from the Tipera [Tripura] district, who paid annual tribute to our Government through a Burmese chief known as the Mong Raja. (emphasis added).” (Lewin 1885: 189)

The above description confirms that the British considered the rulers in the north and south of the CHT as Burmese or Arakanese, but that was not the case with the Chakma rulers in the central region of the CHT. As the British started to intervene in the rule of the Chittagong Hills, they persistently perceived the Chakma rulers as non-Burmese who somehow managed to rule the Burmese Chakmas of the central Chittagong Hills (Baura 2019: 64). The Chakma queen’s seal helped to counter this perception by honouring the Buddhist monk in her circle.

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<sup>219</sup> This divisive outcome even within a smaller Buddhist community in Chittagong made the British realize that the monastic office could not manage the diverse voices within the Sangha.

The final seal was bestowed by King Mindon who was ruler of Myanmar from 1853 to 1878. His reign was notable for both for its reforms and cultural flowering in a period before the imposition of complete British colonial rule. During his reign, his benevolent galactic polity promoted an alternate political strategy to avert the British colonial power's encroachment into Upper Burma. King Mindon's seal gave power to the Buddhist monk but was also a way for the King to contribute to Buddhism and gain merit.

The three seals illustrate how the regional powers played the part of temporal rulers that supported the *sangha* in the galactic polities on the margins. These regional powers in different ways also benefitted from the honour that they had bestowed on the monk. Notably, however, the cumulative honours gave power to the Buddhist monk and Buddhism, perhaps even at times altering the balance of power between temporal and religious leadership. This section has shown power in the margins through the honours bestowed on one royal monk in the Chakma circle. The next section will explore how another contemporary royal monk - Guru Bhante - was able to continue this Buddhist power, but this time emanating from the Bohmong circle. By exerting his Buddhist authority and by introducing innovations to Marma religious life, Guru Bhante further strengthened local Buddhist practice and influence from the margins.

## **9.2 The Ashoka Monk: 'I want to see Power, I want Taka'**

The modernization of Marma society started during a political "interregnum" in the late 1990s that saw a period with no temporal leadership. This period also saw the demise of the Bohmong and the further reopening of the Bohmong circle to an encroaching nation state. This absence of leadership paved the way for a new movement headed by the charismatic leader described by some as the modern-day Ashoka.

“If I’m a lay man I can claim the kingdom. I can become also a king but I’m not now a lay man. I’m a monk so I have no intention to become a king. I don’t like also because king means trouble. King means fighting, king means you must tell lie. In Bangladesh to be a leader means you must tell lie. Without telling a lie you cannot become a king or leader. But a monk can live without lying. A monk can live a pure life.” Interview with Guru Bhante.

An important theme in a Buddhist society with divine kingship is the charisma or shininess that accompanies a person who is gifted the royal sword, has gone through a special initiation or ascetic practice, or even come into the world through an auspicious birth. All these elements are recognized as signs of merit and power. In the Marma case, it seems that the ability to radiate shininess can also upstage hereditary claims to kingship.<sup>220</sup> Guru Bhante seems to have achieved this when he positioned himself as the Ashoka monk. He is a member of the royal family who renounced worldly pleasures to become a monk and then took on the role of dutiful leader because of the political impasse in the royal family. As a senior monk of one of the two temples in Bandarban, the laity bow to him including every new Bohmong ruler.

Guru Bhante is no stranger to respect and reverence. As a former district judge, he made decisions over life and death. As an ex-prince and royal, he had taken sides in the Bohmong succession battle but had backed the wrong candidate. When his candidate did not win, he worked on securing his influence in other ways.

When interviewing people in Bandarban, opinions are markedly divided over Guru Bhante. Some people claim that Guru Bhante is a great human being as he had sacrificed his position as a district judge and the possibility of having a family, to dedicate his life to being a spiritual leader. Others feel that Guru Bhante looks like a Burmese king as he is light-skinned and carries himself as a ruler and is therefore an acceptable alternative power. Because of his legal education, Guru Bhante is an engaging and eloquent speaker and can often be seen walking around the town with a microphone in his hand, animated like a preacher and creating a memorable spectacle and religious experience for his followers.

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<sup>220</sup> In Southeast Asian history, heritage was not the primary reason for being the king – whoever had power was understood to be able to become a king. Even if that required a coup, the fact that someone was able to claim the throne and rule the country meant that he had eclipsed the power of the previous king and was thus worthy to rule.

Additionally, his followers respect him because of his apparent wealth and his commitment to spending this wealth for the good of the Marma community. In contrast to the royals who had sold their lands to Bangladeshi investors, Guru Bhante contributed to religious life in Bandarban by donating his royal lands to the building of temples. He invests in the region because he wants to stay in Bangladesh.

“You know Barak Obama, his father came from Africa, now he is American. He will never think about Africa. It’s a good thing for America only two generations. You know we have come from Burma to here about 500 years before so we don’t think about Burma, we don’t think about Burma. Burma is now another country. Our culture, our heritage, our everything is now based on Bangladesh...My Bandarban is loved not only by the men, it is also loved by the gods.” Interview with Guru Bhante. <sup>221</sup>

Significantly, Guru Bhante, whilst claiming his right to be in Bangladesh, also emphasizes his links with the ‘motherland’ - Myanmar - by receiving diplomats from Myanmar at his temple. Due to his wealth, influence, and links with Myanmar, Guru Bhante is perceived as having greater power than the Bohmong and the local power structures. As a result, even the Deputy High Commissioner and local MPs show their respect to him when visiting the town.

An important aspect of Guru Bhante’s appeal is his belief that in order for Buddhism to have a strong foothold in a Muslim country, the Buddhist community should raise funds to build monuments that reflect the strength and wealth of the Marma people. He reminds the devotees of what happened in the nearby town of Ramu in 2012, when their sacred Buddhist temples were burned down by Muslims. They are a minority in a Muslim country, and they must work together to raise money for their future. Guru Bhante had spent considerable time in Myanmar as a novice monk and brought back to Bandarban an enthusiastic fundraising style that was common in Myanmar. He advocates that people should donate above and beyond their earnings, and there are donation boxes throughout the temples. <sup>222</sup>

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<sup>221</sup> Before becoming a monk, he had written many freedom songs, the lyrics of which make both Marma young and old break down and cry.

<sup>222</sup> Donating and sponsoring ceremonies is a social statement in the Marma community and often made by headmen or new emerging powers in the community who want to improve their social standing.

Guru Bhante often recounts his achievements as a result of his generosity and the community's fund-raising:

“Later in 1995 I start to build the golden pagoda and it was opened in 2000. Now everybody knows it and visits from various places, also dignitaries from various countries visit my temple. Then after I have built another big pagoda it's called Rama pagoda east of Bandarban. Only three kilometres from this pagoda. That is bigger than the golden pagoda. This small pagoda and another pagoda. So, in total I've built 6. I have monasteries in Yangon, in Dhaka also. In Bandarban I have 4 monasteries.”

However, as a result of the intense fund-raising practices, some of his followers in Bandarban town claim that Guru Bhante is not a monk but a very astute businessman. Recently, Guru Bhante has alienated his local devotees when he claimed that he could cure AIDS and cancer with his holy water. Sadly, he was not able to save his sister who died of cancer shortly afterwards. Moreover, at the height of his influence, Guru Bhante dreamt that a dragon came to visit him in a local pond to show respect to him. The whole town gathered at the king's pond only to find a small green snake – perhaps a green pit viper - curled up on a lily pad. They started to worship the snake, leaving wads of cash on the banks of the pond. The story of the dragon was reported in national newspapers but the next day, the snake was found dead in the pond. When people recount the story, they admit that they had believed in the power of Guru Bhante's dreams but on balance, they felt that it was a rather far-fetched story.

Guru Bhante is often criticized for being more interested in money and power, and for fuelling the anxieties of his followers with regards to the rise of Bangladeshis in the region. Significantly and contrary to Buddhist principles, as a monk, he does not eat food offerings but has food especially prepared for him. For some of his followers, this rejection of food offerings shows a lack of trust in his devotees. I also heard some scandals in Guru Bhante's youth from other royal family members and since the royal family and people of Bandarban know Guru Bhante well, few at the time of fieldwork took him seriously. Guru Bhante's diminishing influence in Bandarban town amongst the people who know him well, as well as the relegation of his temple from royal to common, may explain why Guru Bhante has looked outside of the area to nurture a new kind of following.



## 9.3 A New Buddhist Movement and the Transformation of the Economy of Merit

This chapter has so far described ways in which Marma Buddhism has become gradually distinguished from the Buddhism of other ethnic groups in the region. This section will explore how Guru Bhante, as a leader in Marma Buddhist society, was able to stimulate a new more inclusive imagined community with a common focus on Buddhist merit-making. As the leader of the *sangha* assumes elements of temporal leadership, further changes are introduced as Guru Bhante brings with him new Buddhist practices from outside of the CHT.

According to Schober (1995: 319), new movements can emerge in a galactic polity as a response to modernization or change and they quite often position themselves in direct opposition to the social-religious paradigms of the traditional galactic polity. To illustrate this, Schober describes the emergence of a Buddhist revival movement in Thailand called *The Thammakai* (Schober 1995). This movement came about in response to a dual process of a weakening of temporal power and the modernization of Thai society. The group embraced modernization by envisioning an orderly community of individual religious consumers. Through effective use of social media, marketing, fund-raising strategies, and the mass appeal of religious consumerism, it offers its followers practical ways to attain spiritual enlightenment and to participate in a pristine Buddhist community that promises to restore the nation's moral life, individual peace, and material success *in this life*. Schober describes this movement as “an imagined nation of religious consumers” (Schober 1995: 324)<sup>223</sup> and those who contributed were named and honoured in social media and Thai government newspapers (Schober 1995: 317-318).

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<sup>223</sup> In direct contrast to this, the Santi Asok movement advocates a rejection of modern materialism and consumerism and promotes instead moral discipline, and to lead a modest life informed by self-reliance and vegetarianism (Schober 1995: 321).

In Marma Buddhism, there is also a process of change from religious worshippers to religious consumers, bound together in a new kind of community. For example, the Golden Temple<sup>224</sup> is an important tourist spot for the whole of Bangladesh, as many Bengali Muslims come and visit as well as Buddhists. The revenue generated from gate collections is huge. However, during community festivals, the doors are closed to Muslims. Instead, busloads of Bengali Buddhists<sup>225</sup> come from all corners of the Chittagong region, but mostly from Khagrachari district of the CHT, which also has a large Buddhist community.

The new movement is in response to the worsening situation for Buddhists in Bangladesh:

“We are a minority, it is always troublesome for us. We are being oppressed. Especially here because we are economically poor. Our education keeps us behind, backward even, so there are a lot of problems. But we must overcome them. With unity and purity of mind, with loving kindness, we can come over these struggles. But we cannot fight. We have no arms, we have no men power (soldiers), we have no money power. That is why I told you I have only the loving of my people. They love me. This is my power. I have nothing else.” Interview with Guru Bhante.

At the Golden temple, I observed a 3-day festival during the full moon, which was a celebration around the ordination of over 180 male and female monks.<sup>226</sup> Typically, the pilgrim, travelling up the steps of the pagoda, buys flowers, candles, coloured flags, and streamers. These purchases are part of *dana* or giving which is an important aspect of Buddhist teaching. There are many donation boxes around the pagoda to encourage more giving. On the first day of the festival, lay people come laden with food offerings and in return receive a *sila* (a moral teaching) from Guru Bhante. A group devotional worship or *puja* is carried out in the evenings in front of the planetary posts, with large numbers of candles being lit. After the *puja*, Guru Bhante encourages the followers to circle the pagoda as

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<sup>224</sup> I observed a 3 Day festival at the Golden Temple in 2014. Guru Bhante had built the Golden Temple (Buddha Dhatu Jadi) which enshrines relics belonging to Buddha that was a gift from the State Sangha Maha Nayaka Committee of Myanmar. The temple is located just outside of Bandarban in the Yangon style – golden pagoda, 4 doorways (North, South, East, West) and 8 planetary posts.

<sup>225</sup> As described in Chapter 8, the Bengali Buddhists are also known as Baruas who are descendants of Buddhists (and Hindus) who originally came from Magdhada (now known as Bihar state in India) and settled in the Chittagong area and married into Arakan Buddhist families from Burma (Myanmar).

<sup>226</sup> Female ordination is not allowed in Myanmar. Women can become *thilashin*, which is a status much lower than that of the monks.

many times as possible to show respect. Whoever completes the most rounds in 30 minutes also receives a cash prize of 1000 taka. When I was there, walking around the pagoda turned into a race with people's hands clasped in prayer. It felt quite frenetic with people tumbling over each other and some injuries were sustained. In the evening, the pagoda was lit up and taped Buddhist chanting was broadcast from a loudspeaker.

**Figure 30: Photo of Guru Bhante (sunglasses) at 3-day festival and food offerings**



Guru Bhante then uses social media to promote his work and to show pictures of his many followers. He reminds people that they need to be lavish with financial contributions to gain the highest merit in the next life. Guru Bhante encourages fund raising for temple building projects by naming large financial contributors on his Facebook page or by making announcements at large gatherings. The practices at the 3-day festival are not new, including the circumambulation of

temples. However, the intense monetarisation and social media coverage around the festival is an additional practice introduced by Guru Bhante.

As with Schober's *The Thammakai*, Guru Bhante's movement also came about in response to a weakening of temporal power and the group has transformed itself from a community of religious worshippers to religious fundraisers focussed on Buddhist temple building in a majority Muslim country. Spiro (1967) writes about a similar fundraising phenomenon in Burma. In Spiro's Burma, it was common practice for the Buddhist laity to make an investment in their next life by making lavish donations in this life and at a point when they were most financially comfortable. Savings were perceived as having little value for this life. Guru Bhante has managed to inspire the same generous behaviour in the CHT. However, the difference with Spiro's Burma is that people in the CHT are less wealthy, and the donors come mostly from the rich laity who had aligned themselves with Guru Bhante's temple, and other wealthy contributors from outside of Bandarban and the Burmese government. Significantly, donations outside of Bandarban came mostly from Bengali Buddhists who live throughout Bangladesh and one Bengali Buddhist in particular, who is a cement factory tycoon. Therefore, this widening of the group's boundaries has enabled Guru Bhante to increase his reach and influence beyond the CHT and to raise funds from the entrepreneurial and financially successful Bengali Buddhists.

In the Marma Buddhist society, Bengali Buddhists have traditionally been on the lowest rung of the ladder (but just above Bengali Muslims) and a Marma girl's marriage to a Bengali Buddhist would result in the expulsion of that girl from the community. Yet in opposition to traditional Marma beliefs, Guru Bhante believes that all people are equal - *akyang shee* - and that therefore Bengali Buddhists are also equal to Marma Buddhists. Guru Bhante's following therefore goes beyond the ambit of Bandarban town and ethnic restrictions as even Bengali Buddhists have joined the imagined community of Buddhists under Guru Bhante. As more Buddhists have been absorbed, Buddhist numbers have increased, perhaps to counter the growing influx of Bengali migrants into the region. However, the overall impression is that this movement has strengthened the Buddhist pole in the CHT. Whilst the Marma community is divided over which *kyang* to worship at, and marriage rules are closed and festivals exclude Muslims, Guru Bhante has

created a community that welcomes Buddhists from all over the country.<sup>227</sup> Based on conversations with Guru Bhante, by opening up the group to all Buddhists, he appears to be explicitly conducting a mission that is specifically a Marma venture, working on behalf of the Marma to entrench the community in the region by any means he can.

Through donations there is merit accumulation, and this in turn gives legitimacy as well as authority to Guru Bhante, which he needs since his *kyang* is no longer patronized by the Bohmong. Guru Bhante can gain instead prestige and legitimacy by building temples. This resonates with Ortner's monograph in which building monasteries can furnish great merit but also imitate legendary scenarios, in this case for example, when Emperor Ashoka similarly built temples - over 80,000 - to commemorate the events and relics of Buddha's life. Tensions are mediated by establishing new monastic domains, which Guru Bhante has achieved by constructing monasteries in Myanmar, Thailand and India<sup>228</sup> to link the Bohmong circle with other Buddhist centres in the wider region. However, alongside these activities and contributions, Guru Bhante has also been accused of land-grabbing beyond the royal lands, to acquire more land to build his temples: from both Christian lands and from the Buddhist poor.<sup>229</sup> Arguing against this, Guru Bhante claims that to build beautiful, inspiring temples is important for the Marma landscape and culture, which all members of his community can enjoy again in their next life.

To sum up, these sections have illustrated that an important structural transformation has taken place in the Marma society. The competition to be the new Bohmong resulted in an impasse, causing a rift between temporal and religious power that triggered a reconfiguring of social relations. As with Ortner's *High Religion* (1989), the structural contradictions and competitions for power that are mytho-historical in nature, create conflicting discourses and patterns of practice which present a problem for actors. As actor in the Marma Buddhist

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<sup>227</sup> According to Handler and Linnekin, the Quebecois share enough traits, traditions, and values to bind them socially in to a unified collective and employ these to distinguish them culturally from outsiders. Thus, as the French speaking Quebecois living in Canada differentiate the group from other francophones, the Marma Buddhists differentiate themselves from other tribal Buddhists. (Handler and Linnekin 1984: 277-279).

<sup>228</sup> Bangladesh Buddhist Monastery in Myanmar, and Buddha Gaya Temple, which is under construction in Bodh Gaya, India.

<sup>229</sup> He is accused of grabbing land from a Catholic church in Roangchaari and a total of 100 acres of land from Barua Buddhists. <https://www.ucanews.com/news/church-fights-to-reclaim-land-grabbed-by-bangladesh-monk/82492#>

society, Guru Bhante responded to this contradiction and competition by working on received cultural schemas of a protective kingship and an otherworldly *sangha*. As former prince and head monk of the royal *kyang*, Guru Bhante was able to synthesize the two roles of royal leader and monk into one role and thereby provide an alternative cultural schema which in fact was an adaptation of a pre-existing and enduring Marma scenario. In effect, he enacted a symbolic reproduction of precedents with some adaptation. Moreover, the shift at the centre in the galactic polity from the king to the royal monk is unique to the Bohmong circle. Guru Bhante's rise is a specific feature of Marma modernization from within, and this feature strongly differentiates this royal circle from other circles in the region.

When Buddhism becomes more embedded and 'Marmarized', the economy of merit also indigenises as people invest in Marma Buddhism rather than in other ventures. With the ritualized practices of giving and large investments in a common future, the sense of a group working towards a common goal is strengthened. Moreover, Guru Bhante's version of a new Buddhist community is inclusive of all Buddhists that share a common resolve. The next section will detail this common resolve, which is to build merit and pour water together as part of a new and more inclusive Marma community.

## **9.4 Water is Thicker than Blood**

This next section will examine how the new Buddhist imagined community headed by Guru Bhante adjusted a Buddhist ritual to help transform anxieties around the future of the CHT. It will look at how a ritual in Theravada Buddhism is adapted to play a part in the rebirth of a community and the concepts that drive Buddhist merit-building to achieve a successful rebirth. It will then explore the significance of the Buddhist ritual of pouring water together as part of Buddhist beliefs, and how this is translated into a new schema on relatedness and rebirth.

### 9.4.1 Suffering and Building Merit

We have seen in previous chapters how supernatural - demonic - intervention in Marma life is one of the sources of suffering. There is a way of managing these evil forces: they can be appeased or kept at bay through ritual. Without appeasement, members of the community are in constant danger of misfortune and suffering. For example, it was believed that the reason why Princess Lily's younger brother tragically drowned in a lake in Dhaka was because he had not first appeased the water spirits in the foreign lands outside of the Bohmong circle. Failure to appease the appropriate *nat* spirits brings suffering upon the families. The psychological efficacy of pre-Buddhist rituals (i.e., appeasing the *nat* spirits) as a specific combination and synthesis of Buddhism with local beliefs<sup>230</sup> no longer appears to be working. The 4 shrines that circle the town of Bandarban have not protected this isolated minority from losing their boundaries to an encroaching Bangladeshi settler population. The appeasement of spirits in this life and the regular Buddhist merit-building for the next life does not seem to be enough to help people manage their *in this life* anxieties. The future still appears to be uncertain. Some informants communicated their intention to either return to Burma or migrate to another country or assimilate with the majority population as the other large tribal community in the CHT - the Chakma - have done. However, the majority of the community have no choice but to stay in the CHT. Moreover, being Buddhist means that there is an overriding explanation for this suffering: it is because of one's past de-merits that one suffers today. The only way to remove de-merits in the next life is to build merit in this life.

“I want to say that human life is very short, everybody will go to the graveyard one day. So in this life, they must think about what happens after the death. I want to advise the people to please try and learn to think where we will go after this death. Think about this life but also, the days after life. Everything you have in this building or on your properties, you will leave behind, you will go alone to the graveyard. Please try to clean your mind and you will have a good day today and tomorrow and in the next life. This is my advice.” Interview with Guru Bhante.

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<sup>230</sup> For practitioners, there is no division/tension between the two – both are part of their worldview. Stricter Buddhist monks would not approve of spirit worship but, given that Buddhist teachings claim that all the social world is meaningless, spirit propitiation fills a void in Buddhist practice.

Whilst Buddhist merit-building addresses the next life, the ritual of pouring water witnessed by the new imagined community invokes the concept of rebirth that gives hope of a communal rebirth. It demonstrates one of the key ways in which Buddhism in the area supports a specifically Marma Buddhist preoccupation. However, before understanding the ritual of pouring water, the next section will foreground how relatedness and rebirth can encompass non-family members and even strangers in Guru Bhante's new imagined community.

### 9.4.2 Towards a Communal Rebirth

“In wombs we are germinating, in other worlds we are germinating, in the changing circle we are returning now and then.” (Mahmud 1998: 91).

This section will explore how ideas around relatedness are important in understanding the Marma concept of rebirth for a newly imagined community. For Burmese Buddhists, one's position in this life is where the genealogical grid and rebirth intersect as they return to this world. The physical manifestation of a sentient being is a temporary phase in this process and each sentient being continues this endless cycle,<sup>231</sup> unless the being attains the goal of *nirvana*. In *nirvana*, saint (ordained renouncer) and layman (worldly householder), divided here and now, are united in a Buddhist hierarchy of beings (Tambiah 1984: 23-24).

In Marma Buddhism, it is believed that the accumulation of family and individual merit will help towards a better rebirth for individuals. In contrast, the accumulation of community merit goes towards investing in temples and pagodas that will endure into their next lifetimes as stable structures in a galactic polity. Linking the concept of rebirth of individuals with the rebirth of a community of loosely related people appears to be a new and not fully articulated process in the Marma society.

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<sup>231</sup> All 'living beings' (thatdawa) in the 31 abodes of the Buddhist existence—which includes animals, ghosts, and celestial beings—are related in the cycle of rebirth.



Tannenbaum's work on communal karma provides some insights into this new process when he studies the Shan communities in North-western Thailand (2015). She explores the concept of communal rebirth by examining local ideas about attachment and its consequences. An example of this would be the ongoing relationship between the living and the dead, reborn or not, through the transfer of merit. At funerals, the family of each person who has died prepares an offering and presents it to a monk who then pours water from a kettle into a bowl to transfer the merit to the spirit of the dead person (Tannenbaum 1995: 151).<sup>232</sup> Moreover, the rebirth stories<sup>233</sup> in the Shan community link people through time and, to some degree, through space. Transgenerational relations are reproduced as grandparents, parents, and children who die, are reborn again into this world.

Similarly, Marma informants claimed that they cannot take things such as jewellery, cars, and houses to one's next life. They cannot take their children either. However, if they renounce and give away their worldly possessions, they will acquire merit, which will accompany them to his or her next life and if they die, they are likely later to be reborn as relatives. My main informant, Sai Sing, recounts his own rebirth story: his uncle died young but visited his mother in a dream just before Sai Sing's birth. The uncle asked if he could visit her and whether she would put out a clean cotton bed for him. His family believe his uncle had come back to the family as Sai Sing and that is why Sai Sing is doubly loved by the family and is often called "uncle". This appears to be widespread and often special names are selected at birth according to these visitations. It seems that Buddhist beliefs in rebirth have been mapped onto analogous beliefs of reincarnation at the heart of the Marma system of birth and descent.

Tannebaum also advocates that a religious community of different people from different backgrounds who are nonetheless Buddhists, can come together to witness merit-building activities and may be able to be reborn together in the future. His exploration of the idea that ancestors that are reborn back into the community of the living makes it possible to talk in terms of communal rebirth. In

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<sup>232</sup> Those who die bad deaths are said not to be able to go into the temple so the monk and the family go outside the temple boundaries to make the offering and pour the water that transfers the merit.

<sup>233</sup> Tannenbaum describes the Buddhist belief around rebirth as five rebirth possibilities: as an animal, a hell being, a human, a heavenly being, or a hungry ghost. For the Shan, however, there is an expectation that most people will be reborn as humans, not that much better or worse off than they were in their previous lives.

the Shan community, a village will hold a single communal merit-making ceremony for the dead of the same status. A merit-making ceremony is performed called *khotsa* to help the ancestors to be reborn. Tannebaum then explains how in 1988, a thief was killed at the same time as another man deemed good. The good man's family chose to prepare his *khotsa* separately from the thief as they did not want their son to be reborn with him.

“The communal *khotsa* reinforces the idea that people who make merit together (or who have merit made for them together) are likely to be reborn together.” (Tannenbaum 1995: 114)

Walters (2003) also makes a strong argument for what he calls group karma or sociokarma, that ‘karma has social dimensions and society has karmic dimensions.’ Walters argues that sociokarma and the ‘cotransmigration of social units’ is where ‘society is seen as an explicitly karma constituted entity, while the social dimensions of karma are explicitly emphasized.’ (Walters 2003: 17–26). Walters’ work suggests that local understandings of merit and the sharing and transferring of merit can contribute to not only an individual but also a group’s merit reserve. The idea that a community that makes merit together will be reborn together is also strengthened by the Buddha’s own biography and the cluster of people around him that share a long history of being reborn together (Walters 2003: 15, 21–22). The ideas of Tannenbaum and Walters point to the possibility of transgenerational rebirth as well as the inclusion of non-family members as part of communal rebirth. This set of beliefs appear to also exist in the Marma community as there are stories of deceased family members who are reborn into the family. At the same time, community members donate funds to temple structures so that they can come back together as a Buddhist community and worship at these temples. The next section will explore the ritual practice that underpins this concept of communal rebirth – the pouring of water and witnessing this ritual together.

### **9.4.3 Pouring Water Together**

In Guru Bhante’s Buddhism, I observed a ritual in which Guru Bhante explained the importance of pouring water. A grandmother and her grandson asked for a

blessing. The young man's mother had died, and his father was always drinking. The grandson poured water into a bowl from a gold teapot. They chanted with Guru Bhante's help until the bowl was overflowing with water. Guru Bhante then explained that this ritual represented a sharing of material merits with all those who witnessed it. Guru Bhante believes that if you can give to everyone, you have achieved a selflessness that increases your merit as an individual and as a collective. It appears that the medium of water spreads karma or sacredness or blessings from one point to another and the overflowing nature of the water conveys a sense of bounteousness. As a result, through the process of pouring water, the grandson received merit through the sharing of merit. At the end of the ritual, when the gold teapot was empty, he experienced the ritual process as a blessing.

**Figure 31: Gold tea pot for Buddhist ritual of pouring water**



According to Kumada (2015) and her study of the Nyaungbin community, the Burmese Buddhist version of pouring water together is called *yezset cha* (Kumada 2015: 87) and there is a similar explanation that the ritual is the same as doing a good deed together. Whilst *yezset cha* literally means 'drop of water', *yezset* also

refers to a past meritorious deed done together that leads to a present or future encounter. According to Kumada, pouring water in the Burmese context is to call upon the earth goddess to witness and 'register' the good deed. The goddess will remember the good deed in future existences of the ritual sponsors. This explanation is different to the various ones recounted in the Bohmong circle. In Chapter 8, during the pilgrimage ritual, pouring water on a Buddha statue helped to purify it and thereby build merit. Guru Bhante's explanation of pouring water was to witness selflessness and to share in material merits.

However, in all three explanations, water appears to be a substance that embodies the good deed, as well as a medium for the sharing of the good deed. By the simple act of pouring water, the good deed is encoded as information that can be taken to one's next life and material embodiment is only a temporary phase in that process. Like genes, water becomes stored and at the same time, re-distributable (Helmreich 2001: 135). Water dissolves forms, karma and elements of existence in ways that can be transferred to a different and later context where a new form can be re-materialised. Just as a river carries formlessness from one point to another over time, water from the river can be taken out of the river and poured onto the earth to partake in the production of a new life. Based on these symbolic functions of water, the pouring of water together seems to be collectively joining the transition from form to the formlessness of merit, creating a tangibly embodied unity in this life out of the disembodied formless unity that mediates the cycles of creation.

Kumada posits that pouring water together can make kin of a non-kinsperson (friends, neighbours) as they may become family in the next life. Nyaungbin residents often said that it was because they poured water together in their previous lives that families, husband and wife, relatives, neighbours, and friends met again in this life (Kumada 2015: 90). Similarly, for the Marma, good deeds can serve as a means of creating and strengthening bonds among family members, relatives, neighbours, and even strangers. The sharing of good deeds in a common community space creates bonds which span beyond this life. In fact, Guru Bhante advocates that by pouring water and building merit together, this will

increase the likelihood that the community will be reborn and return to the Bohmong circle. Whenever there is a merit-making opportunity - at a funeral, Buddhist initiation ceremony, or at another donation ceremony - the imagined community pour water together. The belief that the act of pouring water together will increase the chances of being reborn near to each other adds another level of meaning to group merit-making activities. This belief appears to make friends or familiar strangers conform to a network of 'fictive kinship' in *this life* with the expectation that they will be reborn as closer kin in the next life.

The inclusion of all Buddhists in the ritual of pouring water seems to signify that Guru Bhante is making the Marma a dominant ethnic group in the region, swelling its numbers with new Buddhist members, and strengthening the Buddhist pole on the margins of Bangladesh.

## 9.5 Conclusion

James Scott (2009) claims that *Zomians* have a strong inclination to follow charismatic figures who arise among them and that these leaders are capable of inspiring instantaneous social change and forming a new community. Guru Bhante's charisma has built a specific cultural relationship with his following. He is a local cosmopolitan who has travelled widely, he has contacts and alliances elsewhere, and is a skilled speaker and mediator. This chapter has therefore examined the shift of power from the royal family to this new charismatic leader. Significantly, it has also outlined the shift from a closed Marma group to a more inclusive Buddhist community led by Guru Bhante. The expanding of ethnic blood ties to include a new kind of kinship that is witnessed during the ritual of pouring water.

The structural contradictions and competitions for power in Marma Buddhist community are similar to those faced by Ortner's Sherpa community (1989). Guru Bhante has adapted the pre-existing Marma scenario on power by synthesising his role as member of the royal family and head monk. And despite this change, there is continuity of practice.

Relatedness is expanded as it covers different ethnic Buddhists who pour water together, in the hope that they will be reborn and return to the landscape of golden temples that will endure, and which they call home. The Buddhists headed by Guru Bhante appear to be dealing with the *in this life* anxieties in a way that is novel in Marma Buddhist history. Marma Buddhism has therefore been refashioned to strengthen its influence on the margins of the nation. Moreover, this local inflection of Buddhism continues to differentiate Marma Buddhism from its neighbours.

The shifts outlined in Part 4 reveal the distinctive traits of contemporary Marma Buddhism that have not been replicated in the other royal circles. The adaptations and changes seem to culminate in a significant transformation of structure, and they represent a specific feature of Marma modernization from within. Finally, this transformation of structure continues to radiate the cultural distinctiveness of the Marma people in the region.

## Chapter 10: Thesis Conclusions

This thesis embarks upon a study of a remarkable group of people who inhabit the borderlands between Bangladesh and surrounding states. My first impression of the Marma people was that they were an eternal clan that had survived various waves of change, unchanged. However, during the process of writing up the thesis, I came to appreciate much more about Marma society, history, and identity. I learnt that the Marma ethnic group is plurally constituted as it is composed of different subgroups that share the same religion and history of migration. Despite this fluidity from within the ethnic group, Marma identity is a relatively stable feature of the CHT landscape. Whilst the Marma community is constantly responding to changing conditions, various processes distil a set of core practices and beliefs which continue the group's connection with their Burmese/Arakanese origins. This set of core practices represent a strong ideology of ethnic uniqueness among the Marma royals that is maintained in response to the many changes that have occurred and are still occurring. Accordingly, Marma identity embodies a sense of continuity amidst change, and continuity despite change, in the fluid borderlands of the CHT.

In sum, the thesis details five different ways in which the continuity of practice and identity survives processes of change.

Firstly, the thesis explores how, despite significant challenges, the Marma people experience its incorporation of new and disparate forms as delivering a distinctly Marma synthesis. During the recurrent themes of exile, migration, settlement, conflict and travelling through unfamiliar terrain, the leading noble class encountered diversity, difference, and entanglement. This royal layer incorporated the many cultural shards and influences to become ethnically plural. Over time, these elements merged into one ethnic whole as the group came to identify as Marma. The journey on the migration path triggered processes of selecting the cultural traits in three main ways. Firstly syncretically, as the migrating community moved away from Burma to new lands and then back in the direction of Burma as

they settled in the CHT. Secondly, through incorporating foreign artefacts of material culture that ultimately became Marma. And thirdly, through the rituals that protected the new settlement in the CHT. In all three processes, the selection or ordering of key characteristics of the ethnically hybrid group, pushed its members to not only regularly define itself in terms of a singular identity with links to Burma, but also demonstrated the community's ability to respond to new environments and encounters with new peoples. As a result, no matter how far from Burma the migrating group that became Marma travelled, it retained a sense of a Burmese origin.

Secondly, even with this history of significant ethnic hybridity, the thesis has illuminated some of the processes which continuously reproduce a core of relations and practices that are unique to the Marma and which have survived change. In various chapters, the thesis details the core practices and relations that continue to reiterate and emphasise the original link with Burma. From naming practices, marriage rituals, elopement, inheritance laws that include Marma women, and the *oeingsa* household. To golden temples, planetary posts and Buddhist relics as well as the shiny swords of state, coin garlands and royal palaces. In fact, it appears that the persistent staging of 'traditional' Marma customs, structures, rituals and material culture reflect the Marma senses of a "substantive content" (Shils 1981: 263), and unchanging essence, as Marma culture responds to changes in the external environment. Moreover, the thesis illustrates that Marma material culture and ceremony is organized and assembled in relation to its history and synthesized to stress a coherent and continuous connection with Burmese and Arakanese times, again building on core practices.

Thirdly, the continued encounters with forces outside the community have pushed the Marma to differentiate themselves through inventions and inversions of tradition, and material culture. Indeed, whether in relation to the royal chart or the tax collection ceremony - the *raj punya* - the Marma people have made use of entanglement and material culture to strengthen the ethnic group's cultural essence and at the heart of these inventions is the distillation of "shininess". At the beginning, before migration, we learn about the shininess of swords and white elephants and gold. At the end, on arriving in the CHT, the Marma as a settled community display the shininess of the kingly blade, coin garlands and golden temples, all of which



signifying that a continuity is achieved through a core of “shininess”. Thus, the processes of discontinuity and continuity through cultural invention and inversion add to the impression of a distinct culture responding to various kinds of imposed and voluntary change.

Fourthly, alongside discontinuities of tradition, the thesis also demonstrates continuity within change over the historical *longue durée*. Central to this approach is the idea that structures reproduce over time but may at different moments reach a point of collapse. When this point is reached, unstable structures can offer choices to people. In this thesis, Guru Bhante’s expansion of Marma Buddhism is an example of a contemporaneous crisis in the overarching structures of the Marma Buddhist system. This resulted in actors exerting agency to interpret the crisis and initiating creative ways of transforming structure, with new inventions that supersede old structures. Significantly, despite this relatively recent transformation of structure, the hierarchy and the relational aspects of Marma Buddhist society are maintained. As the Bohmong power is diverted to Guru Bhante, the shininess is transferred from swords to Golden temples, and continuity is achieved. Moreover, and in the process, Bengali Buddhists and Marma Buddhists come together to create a cosmologically informed kinship as a new form of distillation. Whilst the transformations in Marma Buddhism has meant the inclusion of the ethnically Bengali Buddhists in the religious fold, the core practices of Marma Buddhism remain essentially the same.

Finally, an important insight in the thesis is how Marma people work towards protecting Marma identity from blending and mixing with Bengali outsiders which otherwise could result in the loss of Marma lands to outsiders and therefore potentially halt the cultural reproduction of Marma identity. Interestingly, whereas the Burmese reaction to intermarriage focusses mostly on the fears around the dilution of Buddhist culture, in Chapters 4 and 5, I show that Marma fears revolve around the loss of land through marriage. Scott’s theories help to makes sense of the Marma conundrum of out-marriage to non-Buddhists. Through this lens, it can be shown that out-marriage would not only mean the loss of the gift of land to a non-Buddhist but also a potential future blending of identities through the children. Moreover, the Buddhist eternal energy would be blocked from being reborn in a purely Buddhist womb since the future generations would be “mixed-up”.

Therefore, Marma girls are the potential point of weakness for maintaining ethnic endogamy, and consequently, steps are taken through strict marriage rules, taboos, customary law and the threat of ostracization, to block Marma women's marriage with Bengalis. This has also informed recent moves towards suppressing the ethnic diversity of the group whilst allowing some flexibility in practice, for example, by including Bengali dowries in Marma marriage customs to encourage traditional Marma marriages to take place. Even with the flexibility in customs and practice, the overall endogamy rules on the boundaries of culture are adhered to. However, despite living in close symbiosis with the State, intermarriage with the majority population remains to this day a huge anxiety for the Marma community and this is heightened by the continuing changes in the demographics of the CHT in favour of Bengalis and the growing impact this has on land ownership.

These key points postulate that the Marma group, operating from its hybridity, undergoes internal reconfigurations that help move the community towards a singular identity and at the same time, a core set of practices are continuously adapted to change in order to be reproduced. Whilst the process of restricted hybridization through marriage rules reduces the force of socio-cultural differences that build up within the Marma realm, there is an immanent drive to define its core characteristics in terms of a connection with Burma and Buddhism. Thus, whilst the subgroups within the Marma community are mixed and culturally borrowing from each other, it is possible to see a structural core of cultural memory, practice and identity being reproduced as an active ordering force in Marma lives. The thesis has therefore demonstrated that Marma identity is multi-layered, able to adapt and transform structures at the point of collapse. But is also essentially stable amidst manifest flux and change.

How does the thesis contribute to existing debates in anthropology on ethnic identity on the borderlands? The thesis underlies the importance of applying different perspectives on identity on borderlands. The approaches of hybridity, creolization and syncretism alone do not adequately address how identity processes respond to change over time. By analysing cultural hybridity in the historical long durée - a combination of theories with an historical perspective - we

can see entanglement and syncretism at work overtime, and an essential Marma cultural core in action.

The thesis also reveals the limitations of some of the theories. Scott's case studies on cultural entanglement and hybridity as "the universal condition of chaos" (Scott 2005: 213) are initially relevant to the Marma setting. As with Barth's seminal concept of group boundary-making when in contact with "the other", Scott reinforces the idea that boundaries are drawn up to intensify senses of ethnic singularity in a cosmopolitan context. As the fluid borderlands stimulate the reorganization of the membership characteristics of the Marma group, in Scott's examples, we also see an oscillation between differentiation and integration. The leaders of the Marma migrating group, in a semantically empty land, build boundaries through shrines. Through this process, the group become less of an amalgam of cultures and more singular, especially when deciding who would be protected within the shrine boundaries.

The findings of this study also shows that theories can become quickly irrelevant as the conditions change. For example, Scott's theory does not help navigate situations where geographic boundary-making is eroded with the influx of new populations. The maintenance of the shrine boundaries through the Bandarban edict makes it a taboo for Marma individuals to die outside the boundaries. However, this edict has put the Marma population at risk: for example, there has been an increase in maternal mortality. In this recent context, the Marma ethnic group has shifted from boundary-making to openly articulating their identity through objects and rituals, and constructing new Buddhist temples, to convince others in the region of Marma rootedness to the land. Thus, first boundaries and the creation of sacred sites was a response to empty land. The encroachment of this land has triggered new ways of maintaining the singularity of Marma identity and shown the usefulness of employing a different set of theories to help examine this process.

With hybridity theories, there is little insight into who or which group of people make the selections of characteristics that move it to a singular identity. To illuminate these processes, this research has contributed to the anthropological studies of *agency* in the context of processes of cultural continuity and change.

The thesis explored the agency of the members of the royal family as they mediate between the changing states and 'society', vernacularizing ideals and adapting them to the local, as in the case of the tax collection ceremony. The thesis surveyed the historical narratives that provide a shared sense of history to the society, also as a form of agency. Whether as written accounts by royal historians such as U Tan Pru or visualized in the royal chart by Maung Nue Sein, the director of the Tribal Cultural Institute. Or the published accounts of colonial visitors to the region for example, Hutchinson (1906) and Mills (1926), who are often cited by recent Marma historians. The agency of Guru Bhante, who crossed and built-up boundaries as leader of a controlled group hybridity, has merged a modernist Buddhist identity with the Marma ethnic identity to reinforce the hills vs. plains identity, whilst at the same time bringing into existence new ways of life. And finally, the analysis highlighted agency of marriage ritual experts in transmitting their knowledge of the rituals from one generation to another, as well as the role of the *medechar* in practising and interpreting the rituals during marriage, thereby upholding at the core a unique ethnic identity. In short, the analysis has shown how agency has helped to bolster Marma claims to land, legitimate their existence in the area, as well to manufacture a mythical nature to Marma-ness.

Do the Marma people experience or understand their history in the same way as outlined in the thesis? The answer to this question would require further research! The ritual marriage experts and *medechar* who have an age-long task and responsibility to reproduce cultural processes, would agree with the findings in this thesis. The royal family, who are actively inventing and reinventing tradition and making adaptations to culture to continue its practice. And those who work closely with the Tribal Cultural Institute with the remit to conserve and promote culture, maybe cognizant of these processes but whether the actors are aware that they are the agents of a Marma identity process, is not clear. To get to the bottom of this, being an observer during the regular meetings of the counsel of princes would deepen the understanding of the workings of the royal family but also establish whether there is an awareness of a maintenance of a core set of practices and "shininess."

There is one important limitation of the thesis that needs to be acknowledged. If a lineage has become influential, one would expect that it in turn inspires commoner lineages to rewrite their own genealogies in order to stress, to their advantage, their closeness to the powerful lineage. Since, for reasons outside my (the ethnographer's) control, the research data was mainly focused on interviews of the Bandarban royal family, the study therefore lacks the narratives from the non-royals or the "faithful followers" of the royal family who could have contributed alternative insights into the community's diversity. I managed to conduct a brief interview with Mong U Ching Marma, the winner of the national song contest called *Bangladeshi idol* in 2014. From Mong, I learnt that his celebrity had placed him momentarily at the same level as the Bohming *raja* and Guru Bhante within the Marma community, and that with this fame and power, he became an ambassador of Marma culture throughout Bangladesh. Including more non-royals in the research, such as Mong, would have provided more insights into how non-royals view the shaping of their Marma identity through narratives around origins and material culture, and whether they accept these narratives as their own or have alternative ones that contribute to the core of being Marma.

Another further area of study would be to examine the norms and practices outlined in *The Book of Manu*<sup>234</sup> and its application to day-to-day cases. This book of customary law came from Pegu in Burma, has survived to this day in the Bandarban district and is consulted during customary law cases by the Bohmong and his staff. An examination of this aspect of Marma culture would help in the understanding of how endogamy rules are upheld as well as shed light on the court processes and decisions around the breakdown of marriage, inheritance laws, and land disputes. Essentially, such a study could reveal how Marma society deals with contradictions and challenges to its customs and norms. It would also provide insights into rulings on out-marriages and together with interviews on contemporary out-marriages of Marma women with other non-Marma Buddhists or Muslims from the CHT, we could gain a deeper knowledge of how the core of being Marma is adjusted and maintained.

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<sup>234</sup> According to the school teacher informant, the British translated the *Book of Manu* from Burmese into English (in the mid1800s).

This thesis has not explored the rural aspect of Marma identity. The Marma are originally from the rice-cultivating lowlands of Burma and Arakan but no longer engage in this type of cultivation in the hills. Instead, the leading lineage are an educated royal elite that have settled in Bandarban town. However, the royal lineage still oversees and collect produce as well as taxes from the *jhum* cultivators of the Bohmong circle via the headmen and village leaders known as the *karbari*. An increasingly important area that needs to be explored is how the Marma rural community contribute to the overall Marma identity, particularly at a time when climate change-related issues are impacting rural populations. As climate change affects seasons, this in turn could affect agricultural practices and rituals, and these changes to rituals, for example, could potentially provide insights into how Marma rural identity responds to change. A further study would examine perceived changes to seasons, the adaptations of agricultural practice and food production, and the Buddhist rituals that are often linked to the seasons. As well as the preparation of food, not just in day-to-day life but also as part of the abundant ritual food offerings in Buddhist life. Furthermore, a study of the social and economic effects of the in-migration of climate migrants and refugees from the plains, particularly on land ownership, would provide valuable insights into the extent to which land is entangled with Marma identity.

Even though cultural standardization is hard-wired into the architecture of the modern state (Scott 2009: 4), the Marma cultural journey has not resulted in assimilation. On the contrary, the creation and maintenance of a unique Marma identity has largely been a political project that welds together diverse peoples under one banner, in an effort to safeguard the community's existence in a fast-moving and challenging environment.

The Marma are an ethnically heterogenous migrating group that evolved during migration (and after) into an ethnically homogenous community. Subsequently, parts of this community's rituals change or are re-invented, but their immanent order is persistent over time and this persistence forms the basis for an equally persistent sense of Marma-ness. This results in a unitary ethnic identity in spite of – or even because of – the various forms of hybridity and the more recent religious inflections which are becoming embedded in Marma life. As the cultural reproduction of Marma-ness is adapted to a new inflection of Buddhism and there

is an expansion of Marma relatedness, the newly imagined Marma community work together towards a communal rebirth after death, to return to a landscape of golden temples in the CHT.

The thesis has exemplified the importance of examining everyday rituals and systems in historical context to understand the resilience and creativity of an ethnic group like the Marma, as well as the importance of bringing to bear an array of anthropological theories – rather than a single theory - to understand the various processes at work in the creation of Marma identity. Moreover, the research in this thesis has shown that an interpretation of cultural life on the peripheries of a State cannot be deduced from traditional state classifications of hilly peoples. On the contrary, the CHT borderlands are highly complex and therefore needs to be studied from the bottom up, considering multiple perspectives, the agency of actors on the ground, and narratives surrounding the origin and purposing of iconic material culture. Finally, the thesis has added an in-depth study of a single ethnic society in the CHT and in *Zomia*, in a way not studied before.

For much of its history, the Chittagong Hill Tracts are unique in being the only non-Islamic, non-Bengali, non-wet-rice-growing and low-population-density district in an overwhelmingly Muslim Bengali nation state. With the liberation of Bangladesh from East Pakistan in 1971, sweeping and unwelcome changes to the CHT were set into motion. It heralded an era in which the CHT region became increasingly administered by the State. Even in name the new 'Bangla Desh', translating loosely as 'land of the Bangla', was an openly mono-ethnic nation that would not easily tolerate multi-ethnicity and any resistance to Bengali norms in the CHT. For some time, there has been a government sponsored Bengali immigration into the CHT but significantly, for the next census of 2021, the ethnic categories of the CHT have been removed altogether. Whereas before assimilation was a choice, now cultural homogenisation seems to be an inevitability. This is particularly relevant at a time when on the other side of the border – in Myanmar – the nation state is making a similar stand on ethno-religious differences. In 2017, fears around hybridity, entanglement and the mixing

of cultures saw a period of unprecedented violence which resulted in the expulsion of the Muslim Rohingya community from Myanmar. On the CHT side, something in reverse seems to be happening. As the thesis has illustrated, one Buddhist minority under pressure to assimilate is instead increasing its numbers and sharpening its identity. There are stricter marriage rules to maintain access to land, there is an acceleration of the building of Buddhist temples, more males are becoming Buddhist monks and there is an intensification of ritual life. In view of these fascinating and diverse reactions to change on the borderlands, a study of one very distinct ethnic group in this region serves not only as an important marker of ethnic determinism, but also hopefully a celebration of difference within Bangladesh and beyond.

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## Glossary of Terms

| Term   | Language      | Translation   | Topic               |
|--|---------------|---|---------------------|
| Akugri   | Burmese/Marma | Mother's sister daughter  | Kinship             |
| Ame  | Burmese/Marma | Sister  | Kinship             |
| Am waing   | Burmese/Marma | Inheritance   | Kinship             |
| Ang ley ma   | Burmese/Marma | English lady  |                     |
| Arakan   | Old term      | Rakhaing or Rakhine   | Geographical        |
| Ava  | Old term      | Inwa  | Geographical        |
| Barista  | Burmese/Marma | Collarless jacket   | Clothing            |
| Bedai ungi   | Burmese/Marma | Blouse  | Clothing            |
| Birgato  | Bengali       | Brightness/candles/lights. Transition in states.  | Marriage            |
| Boh  | Burmese       | Captain/warrior   | Kinship             |
| Chaing   | Burmese/Marma | Live in peace   | Naming              |
| Chameng Than Pwe or Mengla Tun Pwe                   | Burmese/Marma | 'To be put on the path together'  | Marriage            |
| Chug-mong-Le and gong-u-nai                          | Burmese/Marma | Ancestor worship  | Marriage            |
| Chungmale  | Burmese/Marma | Chicken   | Marriage            |
| Damathat /dhammasat                                  | Burmese/Marma | Burmese Law   | Law                 |
| Dao  | Burmese/Marma | Sword: symbol of power  | Marriage            |
| Daw  | Burmese/Marma | Oldest sister   | Kinship             |
| Deyah  | Burmese/Marma | Male loincloth  | Clothing            |
| Duck egg   | Burmese/Marma | Symbolizes river spirit   | Marriage            |
| Ga   | Burmese/Marma | Protection  | Wedding gift        |
| Gobong   | Burmese/Marma | Turban  | Clothing            |
| Gong-u-nai-u   | Burmese/Marma | Pig offering to nat spirits   | Marriage            |
| Goun   | Burmese/Marma | Shininess with power/ brightness. Shininess also signifies education, spirituality, and money | Marriage            |
| Goungphoung  | Burmese/Marma | White cloth/hat on the head.  | Marriage            |
| Hingsha  | Bengali       | Jealousy  | Emotion             |
| Hnaang Rey   | Burmese/Marma | I am giving gold as a gift to take you as my wife   | Marriage            |
| Hpaga  | Leach Kachin  | Wealth items  | Marriage            |
| Iokia waing  | Burmese/Marma | Male goods  | Marriage            |
| Min ma waing   | Burmese/Marma | Female goods  | Marriage            |
| Ing Mak  | Burmese/Marma | Dreams  | Marriage            |
| Ing Mak Praing                                       | Burmese/Marma | Dreams tell   | Marriage            |
| Ing Thang Cho  | Burmese/Marma | Marriage speaks   | Marriage            |
| Ink Mak (dream) Thui Thunk (interpret) Kyaing (book) | Burmese/Marma | Book to interpret dreams  | Marriage            |
| Irrawaddy  | Old term      | Ayeyarwady  | Geographical        |
| Jam patha  | Burmese/Marma | Blackberry leaves   | Marriage            |
| Jhum   | South Asian   | Slash and Burn or shifting cultivation.   | Agricultural method |

|                                    |               |  |                    |
|------------------------------------|---------------|--|--------------------|
| Ju                                 | Burmese/Marma | Spikes   | Wedding gift       |
| Kachanglaprye                      | Burmese/Marma | Buddha Purnima - Buddha birthday   | Religion           |
| Khaduttiang                        | Burmese/Marma | Book   | Religion           |
| Kheerohnejecho                     | Burmese/Marma | Love marriage  | Marriage           |
| Khogri                             | Burmese/Marma | Brother-in-law   | Kinship            |
| Khre mhyang/Cremyang               | Burmese/Marma | White thread/White thread before rings. Oath bracelet/thread in our life from birth to death.                  | Marriage           |
| Khyong                             | Burmese/Marma | River  | Religion           |
| Khyong (river) shang (queen) ma    | Burmese/Marma | Water spirit   | Religion           |
| Kracsa Lakso                       | Burmese/Marma | Chicken salad  | Marriage           |
| Kyang                              | Burmese/Marma | Temple   | Religion           |
| Kyang Pwe Cha                      | Burmese/Marma | River worship  | Religion           |
| Kyauw                              | Burmese/Marma | Youngest   | Kinship            |
| Kyaw-chauw                         | Burmese/Marma | Brightness/candles/lights. Transition in states. Showing off wealth/display.                                   | Marriage           |
| La                                 | Burmese/Marma | Two hands  | Marriage           |
| Laarey                             | Burmese/Marma | Going  | Marriage           |
| Labray                             | Burmese/Marma | Full moon  | Religion           |
| Lachung                            | Burmese/Marma | 2 hands (la) and something (chung) + bride wealth  | Marriage           |
| Lachung Pwe                        | Burmese/Marma | Exchange of gifts day or wedding day. Also means holding hands ceremony.                                       | Marriage           |
| Lachung Pwe dong                   | Burmese/Marma | Eating at table  | Marriage           |
| Laphwe                             | Burmese/Marma | Bride price  | Marriage           |
| Lak thei poi                       | Burmese/Marma | Medechar sprinkles sacred water on fingers of couple   | Marriage           |
| Lakaprecgchuai                     | Burmese/Marma | Feast after death  | Social festivities |
| Lak-Chang-Cha-Cha                  | Burmese/Marma | Eating from same plate   | Marriage           |
| Lako                               | Burmese/Marma | Bracelet   | Wedding gift       |
| Lan or langa?                      | Burmese/Marma | Husband  | Wedding gift       |
| Langajulako                        | Burmese/Marma | Bracelet   | Wedding gift       |
| Ley Chang Tamey or La Chung Sa Rey | Burmese/Marma | Eating from the same dish  | Marriage           |
| Ley Tha hit or Lou Chani           | Burmese/Marma | Marriage Ceremony/holding hands  | Marriage           |
| Ma                                 | Burmese/Marma | Spirit   | Religion           |
| Malaing chainga                    | Burmese/Marma | Two pronged chicken tongue: if it falls to the left, it is auspicious. If it falls to the right it is unlucky  | Marriage           |
| Maline                             | Burmese/Marma | Chicken chutney  | Marriage           |
| Mangla Tangrey                     | Burmese/Marma | Chanting for wedding couple  | Marriage           |
| Maramagyi                          | Burmese/Marma | Marma in Myanmar   | Geography          |
| May                                | Burmese/Marma | Wife   | Marriage           |
| mayu-dama                          | Leach Kachin  | Marriage rules   | Marriage           |
| Medechar                           | Burmese/Marma | The medechar meaning prime person is a man who is neither a widower nor a divorcee and who lives with one wife | Marriage           |
| Megri                              | Burmese/Marma | Sister-in-law  | Kinship            |
| Meri                               | Burmese/Marma | Mother brother's son   | Kinship            |

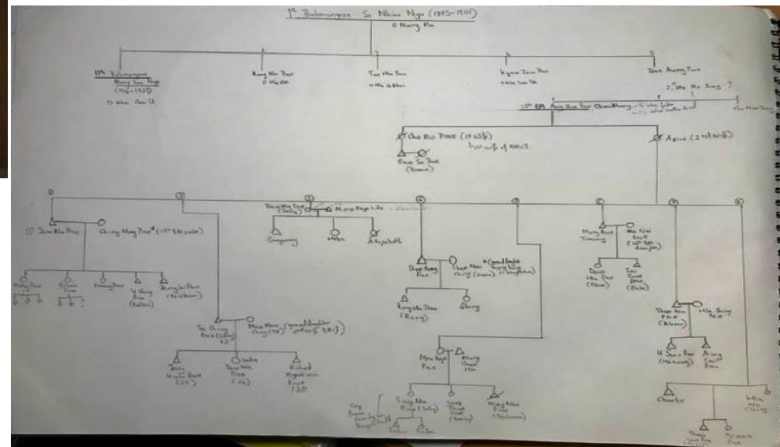
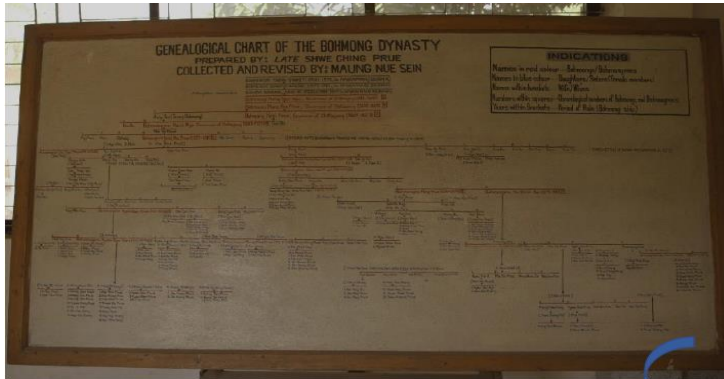
|  |               |   |                    |
|--|---------------|---|--------------------|
| Modetongpuya                                       | Burmese/Marma | Feast after baby is born 7 days after   | Social festivities |
| Mong   | Burmese       | King  | Kinship            |
| Mui (wife) Jaung (ask for) Laarey (going)          | Burmese/Marma | "I want the daughter for my son"  | Marriage           |
| Mya  | Burmese/Marma | Wife  | Kinship            |
| Na kho criti                                       | Burmese/Marma | Love marriage   | Kinship            |
| Nue  | Burmese/Marma | Soft  | Naming             |
| Oingh  | Burmese/Marma | Gift of wine  | Marriage           |
| Palang Makey Dong                                  | Burmese/Marma | Fireshots fall into river   | Religion           |
| Pareit or Paritran Suttas (Mangala Sutra)          | Burmese/Marma | Ward off evil   | Marriage           |
| Pegu   | Old term      | Bago  | Geographical       |
| Phongyee   | Burmese/Marma | Buddhist monk   | Religion           |
| Pong   | Burmese/Marma | Transformation from dull to shininess   | Wedding gift       |
| Praing   | Burmese/Marma | Tell  | Marriage           |
| Prekha engyi                                       | Burmese/Marma | Silk lunghi   | Marriage           |
| Prue   | Burmese/Marma | White   | Naming             |
| Pui dong or Pui Dang?                              | Burmese/Marma | Bamboo table  | Marriage           |
| Rangoon  | Old term      | Yangon  | Geographical       |
| Rey  | Burmese/Marma | Become  | Marriage           |
| Rijangoh or Rijang-ow                              | Burmese/Marma | 2 Earthenware jar filled with water tied with white threads. p. 828/ or is it Two ceremonial lucky water pots) are filled with water and mango leaves | Marriage           |
| Roa  | Burmese/Marma | Village   | Geography          |
| Roa Yoenkhan                                       | Burmese/Marma | Village entry fee   | Marriage           |
| Roma   | Burmese/Marma | Aunt  | Kinship            |
| Rowa Shang ma                                      | Burmese/Marma | Tree spirit   | Religion           |
| San  | Burmese/Marma | Luck  | Naming             |
| Shang  | Burmese/Marma | Queen   | Religion           |
| Shang Prue Pwe                                     | Burmese/Marma | Ceremony of Buddhist initiation   | Religion           |
| Shifhaikoli  | Burmese/Marma | Traditional wine made with sticky rice kept between two banana trees  | Marriage           |
| Shotobi  | Burmese/Marma | House spirit (male)   | Religion           |
| Shotobi Pung ia                                    | Burmese/Marma | House spirit offering to bring blessing to the family.  | Religion           |
| Shwe   | Burmese/Marma | Gold  | Naming             |
| Sing   | Burmese/Marma | Luck  | Naming             |
| Somohada.  | Burmese/Marma | Inheritance Laws  | Law                |
| Sword  | Burmese/Marma | Symbol of power   | Marriage           |
| Tan  | Burmese/Marma | exceptional   | Naming             |
| Thami  | Burmese/Marma | Skirt   | Clothing           |
| Thamuhaddha Vicchedani                             | Pali          | Combined interpretation   | Law                |
| Thee Thak (drinks again) Haaing Thak (food again)" | Burmese/Marma | Drinks and food again   | Marriage           |
| Theman Pungnah                                     | Burmese/Marma | Decider of auspicious day for blessing.   | Religion           |
| Thui   | Burmese/Marma | Star + last born  | Naming             |
| U  | Burmese/Marma | Oldest son  | Kinship            |
| Wachtoo  | Burmese/Marma | Ashari Purnima  | Religion           |
| Wagoai   | Burmese/Marma | Probaroan Purnima   | Religion           |
| Yofa   | Burmese/Marma | Mother's brother daughter   | Kinship            |
|  |               |   |                    |



|              |             |   |          |
|--------------|-------------|---|----------|
| Dowry        | South Asian | This is a loan not a gift, with an expectation that it would be paid back if divorced. From wife's family to husband. Often it is property or money brought by a bride to her husband on their marriage | Marriage |
| Dower        | South Asian | This is a gift not a loan, to protect women when widowed or divorced. Traditionally it is gifted by a husband or his family, to a future wife   | Marriage |
| Bride Wealth | South Asian | These are marriage payments from the husband and his kin to the bride's family in order to officialise a marriage   | Marriage |

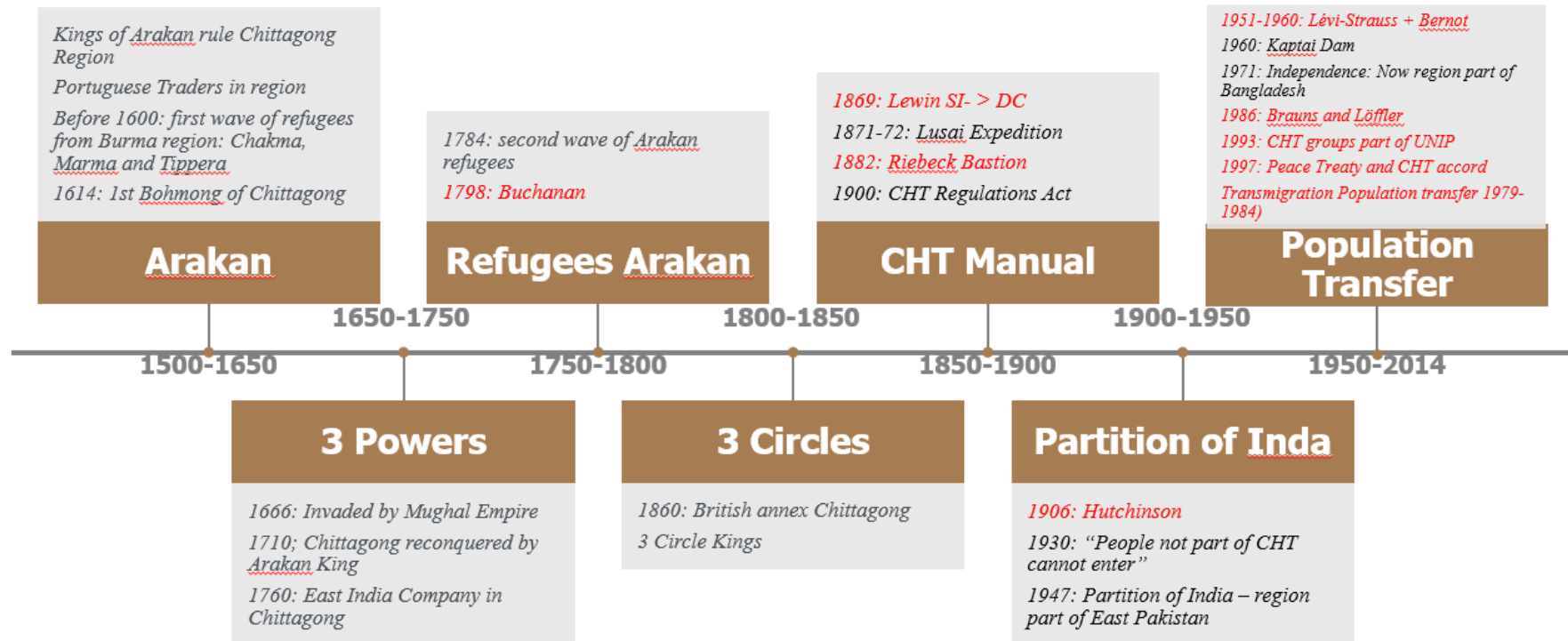


## Appendix A: Royal Chart and New Genogram:



**Legend: Royal Chart up until 1997 with genogram addition from 9<sup>th</sup> Bohmong and his descendants until 2014.** For the preparation of genogram work, I made sure that materials were on hand. Pencils, rulers, markers and a large sheet of paper were used to create new genograms: 2 in total. These served as discussion points with my informants and also family secrets, taboos were captured.

## Appendix B: Historical Timeline



## Appendix C: Population Statistics Bandarban District

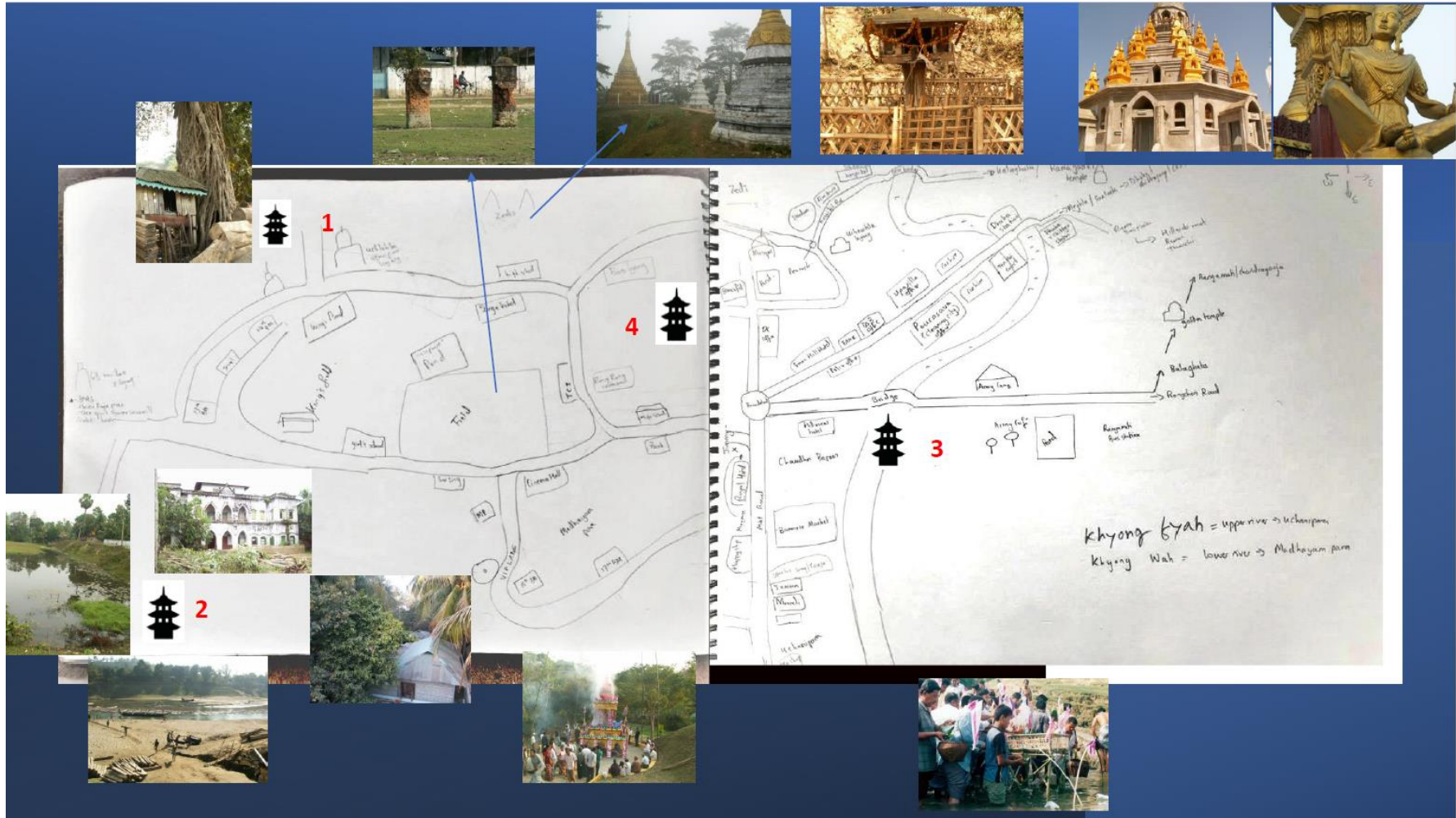
Population Census Report 2011: Source: Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics

Statistics: population, gender (imbalance), marriage.

| <b>Population Census Bandarban District (Zila)</b> |                  |                  | <b>Gender (388,335 in 2011)</b>  |         |
|--|------------------|------------------|----------------------------------|---------|
| <b>3/13/199</b>                                    | <b>1/22/2001</b> | <b>3/15/2011</b> | males                            | 203,350 |
| 230,569  | 298,120          | 388,335          | females                          | 184,985 |
|  |                  |                  |                                  |         |
| <b>Age Distribution (C 2011)</b>                   |                  |                  | <b>Marital Status (C 2011)</b>   |         |
| 0-9 years  | 109,163          |                  | unmarried                        | 204,153 |
| 10-19 years  | 79,036           |                  | married                          | 172,078 |
| 20-29 years  | 70,601           |                  | widowed                          | 10,618  |
| 30-39 years  | 51,619           |                  | divorced/separated               | 1,486   |
| 40-49 years  | 35,107           |                  |                                  |         |
| 50-59 years  | 22,033           |                  | <b>Employment Field (C 2011)</b> |         |
| 60-69 years  | 12,560           |                  | agriculture                      | 96,107  |
| 70-79 years  | 5,767            |                  | industry                         | 8,813   |
| 80+ years  | 2,449            |                  | service                          | 32,230  |



# Appendix D: Map of Bandarban with Shrines



**Legend to Map:** According to 2001 statistics for Bandarban town, there are three wards in Bandarban *puroshava* (district). Ward One is constituted of the Uzani and Madyam *para* (village) with substantial ethnic populations, among which the Marma predominate by about 80%, while other ethnic groups, such as the Tanchangya, Bawm, Chakma and a few Mru families altogether form 10% and the remaining 10% are Bengali. Ward Two consists of the bazaar, bus station and court building areas and is the Bengali majority area, constituting of 85% Bengali, with the rest of the population made up of different ethnic groups. Ward Three is relatively small in size. It consists of the hospital area and the *kyang* (temple) area and Bengalis constitute about 73% of the population and the rest is composed of different ethnic groups.

#### **Map of Bandarban with numbered shrines:**

1. **Champa and bodha tree near sawmill – North Chengabaan:** This is the home of the tree spirit. The 5<sup>th</sup> Bohmong was worried that the original champa tree would die so he allowed a bodha tree to grow there as well and both trees are now intertwined. This place is also close to the old cremation ground, between the edge of the town and the beginning of the forest.
2. **Water shrine on Sangu (West) - Ujani Ghat:** This comprises of 2 shrine structures built from bamboo which mark a point in the bend of the river for *kyang pwe cha* (river worship). This point is where spears and *Palang Makey Dong* (gun shots) from the other side of the river resulted in bullets falling into the waters within a specific range. The point marks the safe boundary in the river from gun shots and spears.
3. **Below bridge and to the left of Upper Ghat:** This is the point where the Marma village ends, and foreign lands begin. Again, a bamboo structure in the river is built for worship.
4. **Bodha tree:** On the way to the tennis courts, to the left of the police station. Here, there is also a Bodha tree, signifying the edge of town and overlooking the valley.



## **Appendix E: Full Interview Transcript with 17<sup>th</sup> Bohmong**

The 17<sup>th</sup> Bohmong was formerly an agricultural engineer and expert on ground water and had worked for the Bangladeshi government as a consultant engineer. There were six members in his family – a wife, a son and a daughter, a grand-daughter and his mother. At the time of field work, the Bohmong was the most senior of the 3 circles of chiefs. The Bohmong felt that his work in agricultural development both at home and abroad complemented the other circle chief's talents.

**Image shows 17<sup>th</sup> Bohmong king (centre) surrounded by his headmen (2014).**



| <b>17<sup>th</sup> Bohmong: Interview Transcript from Film “To Be A Marma”</b> |   |
|--|---|
| <b>Video Timecode</b>  | <b>(King brings out his sword)</b>  |
| 00:00:30   | This is the sword, made by the British. I think.  |
| 00:00:47   | This is a sword from the British government, a sword of honour. Presented to our king. This is very old. An old one. But it’s very sharp. |

|          |  |
|----------|--|
| 00:02:22 | I am sick that's why, anyway. It's a long one.   |
| 00:03:28 | No I want to show you the sword that we have long ago. We have this sword from one to another. I think this is during British time. The British offer this sword to the <i>Raja</i> . I'm the 17 chief, still carrying this regalia and hand over to the next. When I die, this will go to the 18 <sup>th</sup> king of Bandarban. |
| 00:04:39 | Yes, this has history this sword. You see it is a very old one. It was used many years ago. You see there, the architect of the sword.   |
| 00:05:16 | See the head, dragon head. Same thing here. Something written here, I cannot read because it's not clear to me.  |
| 00:06:07 | This is very valuable sword, this is a very honourable sword. Only the king who can carry the sword. It's very long for me, that time may be the king was very a good size...a big one. Now I'm very small. So anyway this is a fighting sword.  |
| 00:06:47 | This is only the king who can carry the sword who can hold the sword. Nobody can carry this sword. This sword should not be touched by ladies. This is very important.   |
| 00:07:12 | That is our old heritage, ladies are not allowed to touch the sword.   |
| 00:07:29 | Marma culture means Marma king. This sword is handed over to another. I am the 18 <sup>th</sup> from which British period we got this sword. It is now handing over one by one.  |
| 00:08:05 | From British this is offered to our king. This is when he conquered the world, he won the war, so British happy so they offered this sword to the <i>Raja</i> .  |
| 00:08:32 | This is our inheritance property.  |
|          | <b>Tour of photos hanging on the wall in King's residence</b>  |
| 00:08:49 | We have you see the second man, third man, with the king and those who follow the king and this is you see old design. Some flowers see here and here if you know where this comes from you can detect where it comes from.  |
| 00:09:49 | And this is another type of sword for another type of guard, a body guard. It's very old. These are all for those who guard the king's soldiers. And this is another spear, I don't know how many people died with this spear. Very old one.   |
| 00:10:36 | This is very important fighting see. It's very old.  |

|          |  |
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| 00:11:14 | I'll show you one weapon that I have. It's a musket. It's also from the British emperor. They gave to our soldiers.  |
| 00:11:40 | We really are the dynasty from Pegu, we come through our king. We lost fighting and see this very old weapon you see [musket]. You put the bullet here and fire. Ok. This is still working. You can fire no problem.   |
| 00:12:27 | But it's not clean. I have to clean it. You see this here, you can start firing here, oh sorry, here. Press this leaver to stop firing.  |
| 00:13:08 | This is very old but used during British time. British government has offered us for our protection.   |
| 00:13:32 | Before that, we fight with cannon. I have small cannon, big cannon not here inside my house. We have all given to the museum. For remembrance. And some are left and still we are using. I have all 19. So my soldiers, who live with me, they have musket firing arms. These men will come with me and we will go to ceremonies carrying these weapons.   |
| 00:14:31 | This is my first <i>raj puna</i> .   |
| 00:14:46 | This is first year because we have to have it yearly. My uncle died in the year 2013, because of fever, and that year, he did <i>raj puna</i> on January 3 <sup>rd</sup> . So I'm not allowed to do it again in that year. So now it is 2014 and normally we do <i>raj puna</i> in the month of December, so I'm going to have it so that all the people will come to me with tax during the <i>raj puna</i> . They will have tax plus they will bring chicken, wine and so many things and they will enjoy with me. They will have dinner, lunch they will have a variety programme. They will have lunch with the headman. |
| 00:16:19 | With family members, for almost three days, we will enjoy only once in the year. My headmen are 109 headmen and each headmen have village cavalry. Each village leader, he maintains peace and everything. So if the people are not happy with the cavalry, they go to headmen. Headman has 10-12 villages. He look after all these 10-12 villages. If they are not happy with the headman again, they come up to me. So I have to give them the social justice and this way, we keep our peace and quality of time.   |
| 00:17:55 | Our system to become <i>Raja</i> is eldest and fittest within the family members. He cannot be the descendants of <i>Raja's</i> daughter's son, there will never become <i>Raja</i> that is female side. We have to have male side, they will become <i>Raja</i> , son and son. But what happened is once upon a time, the fourth <i>Raja</i> out of 17, the fourth king had no son or daughter, nothing. So there were  |

|          |  |
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|          | five brothers, this one brother died, the other four brothers start collecting taxes during British time. The British government says no, this is not the way. One should collect and give the tax, not all four. So from that day, they had a meeting and discussion and with the British government, they gave the king role to eldest and fittest.  |
| 00:19:35 | Among the four brothers, only two became <i>Raja</i> , and other died and their son's became <i>Raja</i> like that. Slowly we have turned to eldest and fittest. That means fittest is the main criteria - if you are mad cap you cannot become, if you are convicted you cannot become, you must be fit in all sides. Like financial side, you must be financially fit, you must be educationally fit, you must be fit within the family.   |
| 00:20:28 | I have before no expectation because, before me, I had twenty members already above me. So this is what I should say. This is my luck or my bad luck or whatever you say. People have three stages, the stage of getting education. And the working stage - working for the government. I studied to be a civil engineer. I work for the government 29 years. This is the second stage in my life.   |
| 00:21:37 | The third stage, I'm retired from the service at the age of 57 - that is the Bangladesh rule. Now still I'm engaged with my family duty, I became king. Ok I'm happy. My father, he didn't become anything, he died. My father had fourteen brothers, out of them only one brother became king. King only for five and a half months. Then I became king so I crossed over so many members. I'm lucky. I think.  |
| 00:22:36 | Really what I enjoy, yes, I love to help people. I always enjoyed this with my job, you see. From dawn to dusk, people used to come to me to get something, maybe for education, admission fees, maybe for some disease, maybe for some journey. So many things, people used to come to me to help them and whatever I have, this is very interesting. I feel happy. Whatever I have, by helping them, I feel happy. And there are some things. Some social justice they are getting from me so I feel very happy and peaceful because I could give them with good justice. And people are also happy that they get quick justice. |
| 00:24:15 | We really have to build palace. First with bamboo big house and then great grandfather started a house 200 hundred years. That was broken down due to old age and secondly my grandfather, he also had a building - a big one - that is now broken.  |

|          |  |
|----------|--|
| 00:25:09 | It was demolished. If we keep something, you need to maintain it if you keep it. The water is leaking from the roof, getting worse day by day, so suddenly if it falls, it will hurt people.   |
| 00:25:44 | I feel that it is supposed to keep its heritage, but what happened to the present institution now days. That king had fourteen sons, seven daughters, he left one house you see, how? Everybody is not solvent, so everybody want some space to build their own homes. I could not provide everybody now. Soil is very important. Very costly. So everybody decided lets demolish and lets have our own house.   |
| 00:26:37 | So due to scarcity of space. Also so many things happened during the war, it has meant that nobody maintain or repair and keep the heritage. I asked my uncle [16 <sup>th</sup> Bohmong] to keep the house and keep this for heritage. He did not agree. Before he died, he had broken the house. These are the things involved.   |
| 00:28:00 | Survival, we are still fighting yes. I became the 17 <sup>th</sup> king. What I feel is I should build one palace as I saw in England. On top of the hill. We will have a palace, I will try to build actually I saw in England, so many palaces on top of hills and they can see the sea like that. I've kept a spot for my ... if I'm alive, if I get there, in time and money is important, I think I will try to keep this for heritage. We have everything at present but we haven't got money. We will be at this stage always, I have to work for solvency. |
| 00:29:17 | Last my grandfather he was so rich, he was one of the richest persons in Chittagong, the region. He had everything. After his death his brother had inherited the gift of land and my uncle became owner of that gift but he was also not solvent.   |
| 00:29:58 | Money is divided to all family people - my great grandfather had six wives, 14 sons and nine daughters. Nothing now. Money is nothing, he had money and it was divided. Nobody could increase the money or do something. So this is the problem.   |
| 00:30:25 | I have only one son and one daughter, that's why I didn't take more than one wife and my grandfather was the last king, my uncle had one wife, before him he had two wives and before him, he had three wives - my grandfather. My great grandfather had six wives, that all depends on the economy you see.   |
| 00:31:23 | Yes, now I think democracy in the world, it is spreading out. That system is working but still I think we hope to survive a few more years, that is 100 or I don't know. My grandfather said I'm   |

|          |   |
|----------|---|
|          | the last king.. my grandfather there will be a king but he'll be nothing. My grandfather he died in 1959, he said I want to die because now the days are coming very bad. That time he could kill any people no problem that power he had. Now the world is changing, developing, everything is changing.   |
| 00:32:35 | He says I'm the last king and you'll someday be a king but like a weak one. A few weak ones after me. He was taught they would be all weak.   |
| 00:33:06 | We have no power; we are still given some duty to look after our people that means social power. Social power means inhabited where we stay here. What types of caste and creed live in my district? My boundary, they are permanent, otherwise they cannot buy a piece of land. Otherwise they can do nothing. This is my first power.   |
| 00:34:05 | This is unusual because from British time we had 1900 act written by British to save these young people. They've written they should be kept in a dark area untouched and not polluted with other people so if they come in, they have to go out again. That idea is still belonging here. Now anybody, if he comes here asking to give him a certain bit of land, he is told I cannot give. So like that we are still trying to give our heritage everything until we have to. We are collecting tax, also we are sharing with the government. |
| 00:35:22 | Direct tax money we can use.  |
| 00:35:31 | This is Bandarban, and mostly Marma people are populated here, it is a Marma dominated area. Mostly there are three districts, and of those is also headed by my cousin's brother who is another Marma (Mong) king there.   |
| 00:36:30 | There are about 12-13 tribes in our area.   |
| 00:37:00 | Let me show you picture of the 13th chief - he's my grandfather. He is my direct grandfather and his younger brother, he became king after him and he who is next to him, he is also my uncle, he's the son in law of my grandfather but he's grandson of the previous <i>Raja</i> . And after him, through here my uncle there you see...  |
| 00:38:00 | He is the sixteen chief, there is my father just in the middle. This is the old building, my grandfather's building in front of that is my uncles, and my father in the middle, the second one. The third one. And he became <i>Raja</i> my uncle and he's the youngest   |

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| 00:38:44 | My uncle's son, my father's younger brother's son [Guru Bhante]. He built a temple. He is my brother. He would become king, but due to being a monk he cannot.  |
| 00:39:32 | Luck, everybody cannot become king due to eldest and fittest, so before me 20 candidates died. I crossed 20 members. But I came here.   |
| 00:39:58 | I wish certainly but what happened is, before what happened was, we had all bamboo palaces that could not be kept. Not possibly. We had two buildings only. 12 <sup>th</sup> Chief, he built one building which is here. It was almost broken, it came down automatically that's why because of its age (200 years), we dismantled it to get rid of accident. And second one we could have kept that but due to space scarcity we had to divide due to so many sons and daughters here. |
| 0041:02  | The one who becomes king can come with a palace. But I'm ashamed, I have no palace I have to build one. This is my house, and I live for myself as other people do.   |
| 00:41:37 | Yes I have servants, man servants mainly. Just like a small king.   |
| 00:41:54 | We are known as king but no king in the world. You see, your Queen she's honoured ok. Same thing here, people are honouring us but we're no financially well off. This is the difference we have, we need to work for the income. And then we can enjoy. In British kingdom, it's different, they have subjects.  |
| 00:42:58 | The investiture was on 24 <sup>th</sup> April 2013. I became officially the king. This is the sword from the divisional commissioner from the government. You see the picture. He offered me the sword.   |



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| 00:43:33 | I felt normal, this is just our duty you see. I'm glad there was no problem. Everybody wants to become king that is correct but the one who is lucky, he becomes king. See here, this is how my solders use this. Have you seen the soldiers' spear? I'm sitting in the investiture on the throne. Here my spearmen. And the sword they are handing over. Umbrella man means wherever I go, umbrella will be with me so not to get too hot. Heat. Umbrella man. Here they are my men. |
| 00:44:47 | They are all my soldiers.   |
| 00:45:42 | Destiny, yes. It depends on luck yes.   |
| 00:46:09 | To worship the senior monk, is like worshipping the pope. In the big temple, the highest priest, you see once a year, we have to go and worship him. Every year people go to him to take some money to put on the money tree, whatever they can.  |
| 00:46:50 | The priest was telling me last time, I know that you are sick but I feel very bad. Because this year, I'm lucky you have me, if you don't come this year you may miss me. God has given me an opportunity again to worship you. So I have to come. Just bless me, I told him, bless me that I can come every year. My uncle, the last king, he survived up to five months and then he died. He was 86 years. Now I'm 71, if you pray for me, I can visit longer.                      |
| 00:48:16 | He is 15 years elder to me. I said I'm 71 now and I'm going to complete 71 by March 5 <sup>th</sup> so if you think that I have a hope of seeing them if I'm lucky I may survive up to his initial king age 86. Also I've got 15 years.   |

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| 00:49:00 | I don't want to die. I want to be alive up to 100 years. To serve my people as much as I can. I'm enjoying and I want to survive. I think if after me, if anybody comes, I'm worried the next one if he don't give any real justice to the people, he will suffer. So I feel that I'm giving the good justice and service to the people.                           |
| 00:50:24 | Many many thanks because I was in England once upon a time in the year 1986 and the year 1987. I was at Newcastle upon Tyne. It is a very nice city. I want to say my feelings that your people are very good and very nice and I enjoy it and you have come here in my country and I'm happy to see English people and many people come across to meet my people. |
| 00:51:27 | We had a British gold chain when we won war, we have it still, what the British people offered us. So we are very close to your people and happy and thank you very much.  |

**Appendix F: Documentary - To Be A Marma (15 minutes):**  
**<https://www.postcodefilms.com/projects/to-be-a-marma>**