

# Peopling of the Northeast

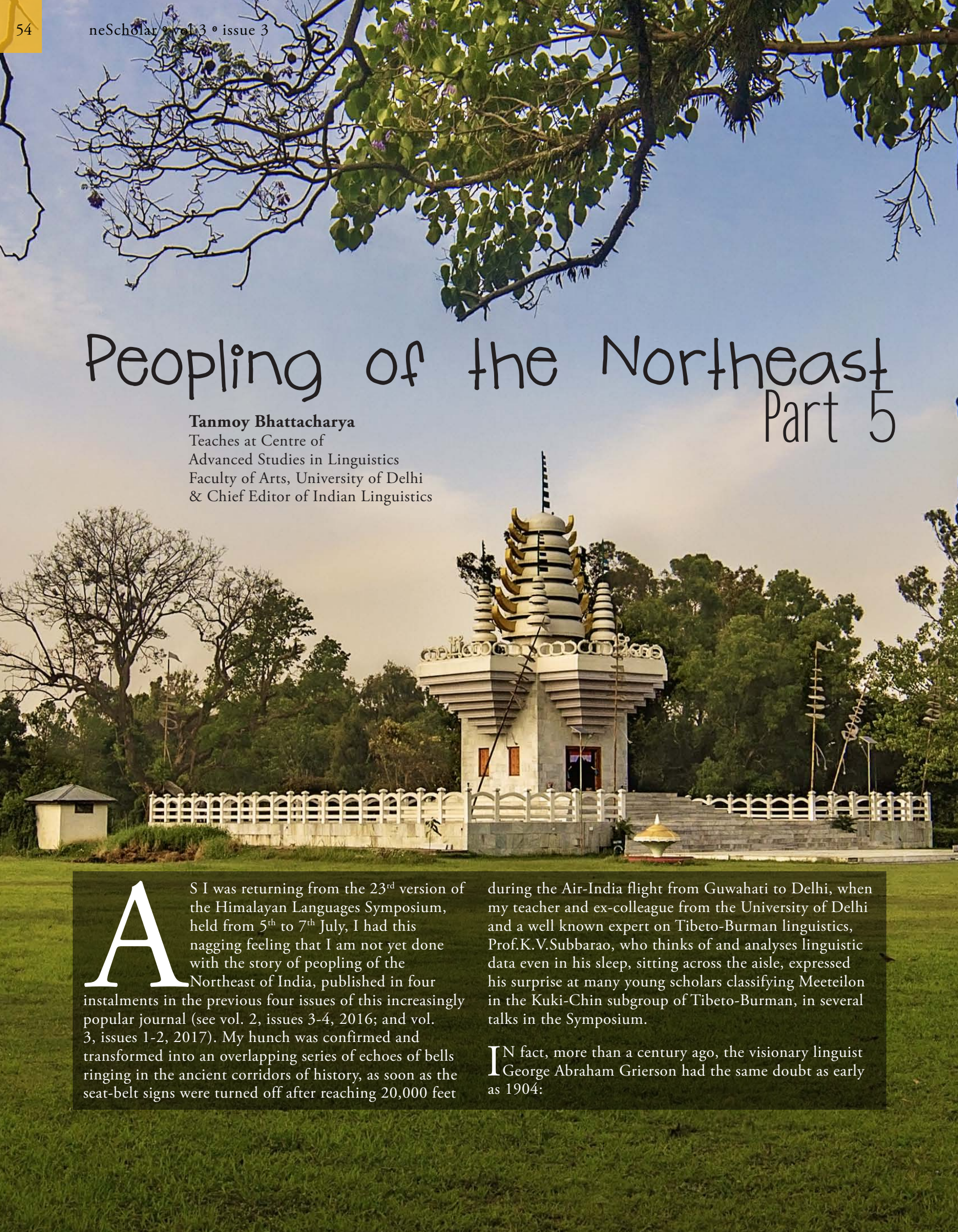
## Part 5

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**A**S I was returning from the 23<sup>rd</sup> version of the Himalayan Languages Symposium, held from 5<sup>th</sup> to 7<sup>th</sup> July, I had this nagging feeling that I am not yet done with the story of peopling of the Northeast of India, published in four instalments in the previous four issues of this increasingly popular journal (see vol. 2, issues 3-4, 2016; and vol. 3, issues 1-2, 2017). My hunch was confirmed and transformed into an overlapping series of echoes of bells ringing in the ancient corridors of history, as soon as the seat-belt signs were turned off after reaching 20,000 feet

during the Air-India flight from Guwahati to Delhi, when my teacher and ex-colleague from the University of Delhi and a well known expert on Tibeto-Burman linguistics, Prof.K.V.Subbarao, who thinks of and analyses linguistic data even in his sleep, sitting across the aisle, expressed his surprise at many young scholars classifying Meeteilon in the Kuki-Chin subgroup of Tibeto-Burman, in several talks in the Symposium.

**I**N fact, more than a century ago, the visionary linguist George Abraham Grierson had the same doubt as early as 1904:



“The Kuki-Chin languages must be subdivided in two branches, Meithei and Kuki-Chin languages proper (p7); it will be seen that Meithei has more points of agreement with Kachin than the other languages. ... The close connection between Kachin and Kuki-Chin languages, especially Meithei, cannot be doubted, and Meithei must be considered as the link between the two groups. The comparative vocabulary also shows that Meithei, in some instances, agrees, with the southernmost dialects, as against the rest.” (p14)

**E**VEN before this, there has been some doubt in including Meiteilon in the Kuki-Chin group; Grierson, in this connection, reports about Major McCulloch’s observations that ‘the vocabularies published by Major McCulloch show that they cannot belong to the Kuki-Chin group’. Major W. McCulloch, Political Agent of Manipur, published a book entitled *An Account of the Valley of Munnipore and of the Hill Tribes*, with a subtitle, ‘with a Comparative Vocabulary of the Munnipore and Other Languages’, in 1859. The word ‘Munnipore’ in the subtitle part of the title seems to be an error, because the author clearly identifies the language as ‘Munniporee’ in the Appendix at the beginning of the Vocabulary list.

**T**HE bigger question lurking behind this apparent innocuous classificatory issue is of course the question of identity and nature of Meiteis and Manipur in general, notwithstanding the precariousness of the tenuous link between language and ethnicity. I will come back to both the issues of classification and this bigger question at the end, after having considered other intricately related themes that will help understand the

issue better.

## THE QUESTION OF DIVERSITY

**A**S a prequel to the Himalayan Symposium, a one-day event on Cultural Genetics was planned at IIT, Guwahati on 4<sup>th</sup> June, 2017, organised by the Centre for the Environment, where I was to share the dais with the well known linguist/ cultural genetic expert, George van Driem. In that talk, I started with my personal experience of diversity in the northeast. Every summer, for the last 8-9 years, I have been coming to the Northeast, and pass through Assam, sometimes twice a year. The thing that strikes me most about these visits, and leaves a lasting impression is the sense of community-hood that I sense and witness. I witness this in various rituals and in peoples’ interactions, in their sense of caring for another human being. And what comes out as civility, gentility, and I would say even grace, are intimately connected to this sense of caring.

**F**URTHERMORE, as I noted, this community-feeling gives rise to a kind of moral cosmopolitanism. Martha Nussbaum in her book *Cultivating Humanity* appeals to a new moral imagination, that is, of including the ‘other’ within one’s own moral fabric; it is not only about being a good neighbour but also about taking that neighbour within the concerns of one’s own morality. But where does it come from? And why does it strike me as different?

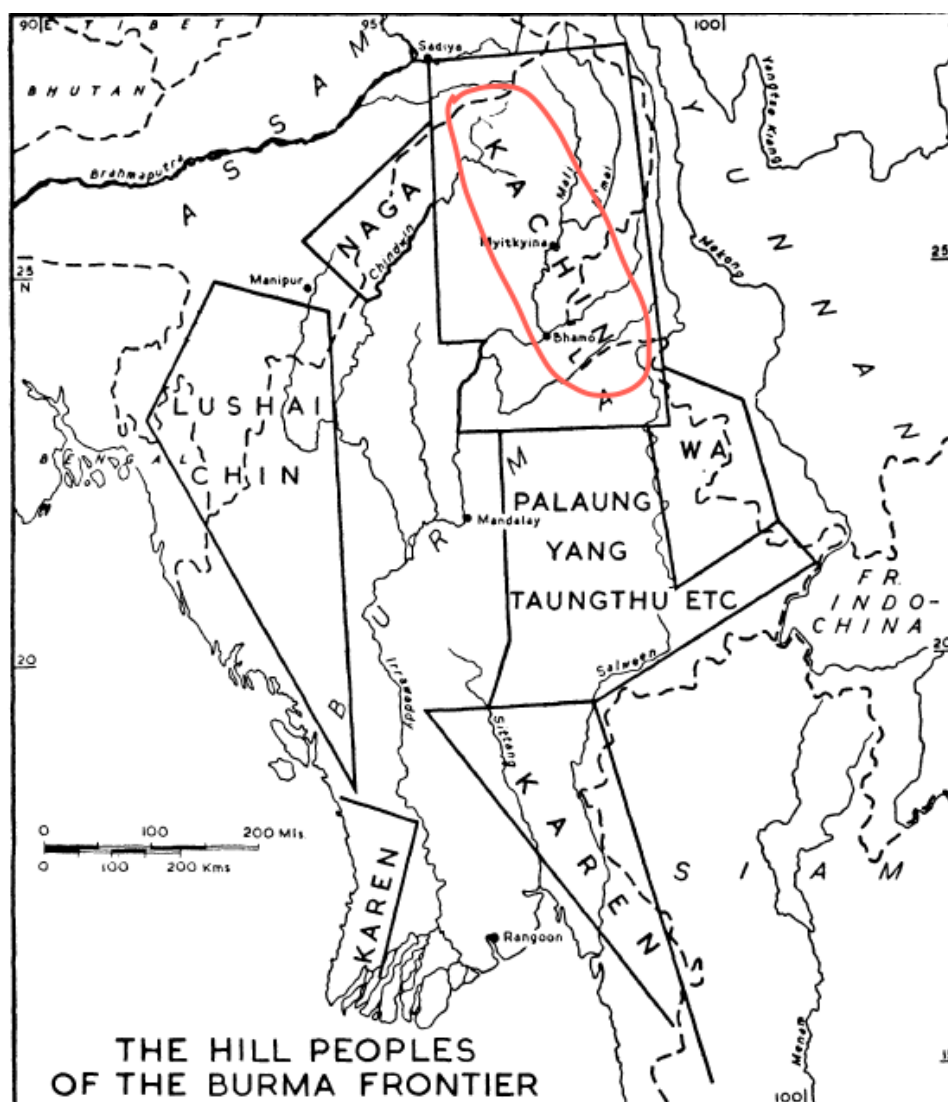


Fig. 1: Kachin speaking area of Myanmar (from Leach (1964:19))

I believe this sense of community-hood and the associated virtues are a result of the need to live cohesively over millennia. I would say that the so-called genetic “purity” of the Northeast is therefore a myth that needs to be debunked. As argued in Part 4 of this series (see vol. 3, issue 2, pp. 62-65), the East India is the gateway to the most diverse region of India, namely, the Northeast, that stretches all the way to the Southeast Asian corridor and Southwest China. Diversity therefore, is an “old” game in the Northeast. During my research for the series of articles on peopling of the Northeast, I came to the conclusion that true diversity is always located at the periphery, so much so that it *defines* the periphery. The northeast of India is in fact doubly peripheral in being at the northeast periphery of one country (India) and at western periphery of another region (SEA). The reason why we find diversity in the periphery is that more homogenous cultures and races have tended to push them down to the periphery in their zeal to occupy the centre. In the regions I am concerned with, it was the Han Chinese and Indo-Aryan tribes – both arriving from the north, pushed the other linguistic groups to the periphery.

YET, at least as far as the ‘Indian’ ethos is concerned, it is those homogenous occupiers of the centre; that is most vociferous about the so-called Indian diversity. All the artefacts of diversity have therefore been put in place in governmental policies and discourses. Yet, more and more, what we find is the engine of homogeneity bulldozing and tearing through our social fabric. It is no surprise therefore that multilingualism in the sphere of school education and multiculturalism in the sphere of our cultural life remain as mere noises. The over-publicised multidimensionality of Indianness is therefore a false multidimensionality; as long as we continue to define Indianness by the dominant, central Indian.

## DIVERSITY BY DICHOTOMY

HOWEVER, here in this article I would like to develop the concept of diversity of the northeast further by pointing out that in fact diversity everywhere, and especially in the northeast of India, has a pattern; in the case of Manipur, I will argue that multiplicity or diversity is established through several strands of dichotomies. Whether or not these different strands are but mere variations on a singular theme, I hope we will discover as we go along.

## DICHOTOMY 1: MEETEILON-VERSUS- THE-REST

THE first clue that heightened my suspicion about the existence of a dichotomy is the above quotation from Grierson, of Meeteilon to be treated as somehow standing out

among all the surrounding languages in the region; the statement that “... Meithei has more points of agreement with Kachin than the other languages,” supports a ‘Meeteilon-versus-the-rest’ kind of dyad. Grierson’s further comment that “Meithei must be considered as the link between the two groups,” is admittedly vaguer but I take it to mean that the major language of the valley, namely Meeteilon, stands as a link between the Kachin languages of northern hills and the Chin languages of the southwest of Myanmar. Let me expound on this more clearly.

The rough area of where Kachin languages are spoken in Myanmar is shown in Fig. 1.

If we compare the map in Fig. 1 with the map showing the different districts of Myanmar as in Fig. 2, we get a clearer idea of the Kachin speaking districts of the country which includes the Kachin state and the northern part of the Shan state as well. We can also see the area where Chin languages are spoken by comparing both the maps, namely, in southern Manipur and south-western Myanmar; and it is a fact that the Imphal valley does indeed fall within these two broad linguistic areas.

**Burma Population Data**

Country Population: 57,504,000 million  
 Eligible Voters: 27,369,957 million\*\*  
 Total Townships: 325

**States and Divisions Population**

**Arakan (Rakhine) State**  
 Population: 3,183,000  
 Percentage: 5.53%  
 Total Townships: 17

**Chin State**  
 Population: 533,000  
 Percentage: 0.92%  
 Total Townships: 9

**Irrawaddy (Ayeyarwady) Division**  
 Population: 7,863,000  
 Percentage: 13.67%  
 Total Townships: 26

**Kachin State**  
 Population: 1,511,000  
 Percentage: 2.62%  
 Total Townships: 18

**Karen (Kayin) State**  
 Population: 1,740,000  
 Percentage: 3.02%  
 Total Townships: 7

**Kayah State**  
 Population: 336,000  
 Percentage: 0.58%  
 Total Townships: 7

**Magwe (Magway) Division**  
 Population: 5,392,000  
 Percentage: 9.37%  
 Total Townships: 25

**Mandalay Division**  
 Population: 8,062,000  
 Percentage: 14.01%  
 Total Townships: 31

**Mon State**  
 Population: 2,997,000  
 Percentage: 5.21%  
 Total Townships: 10

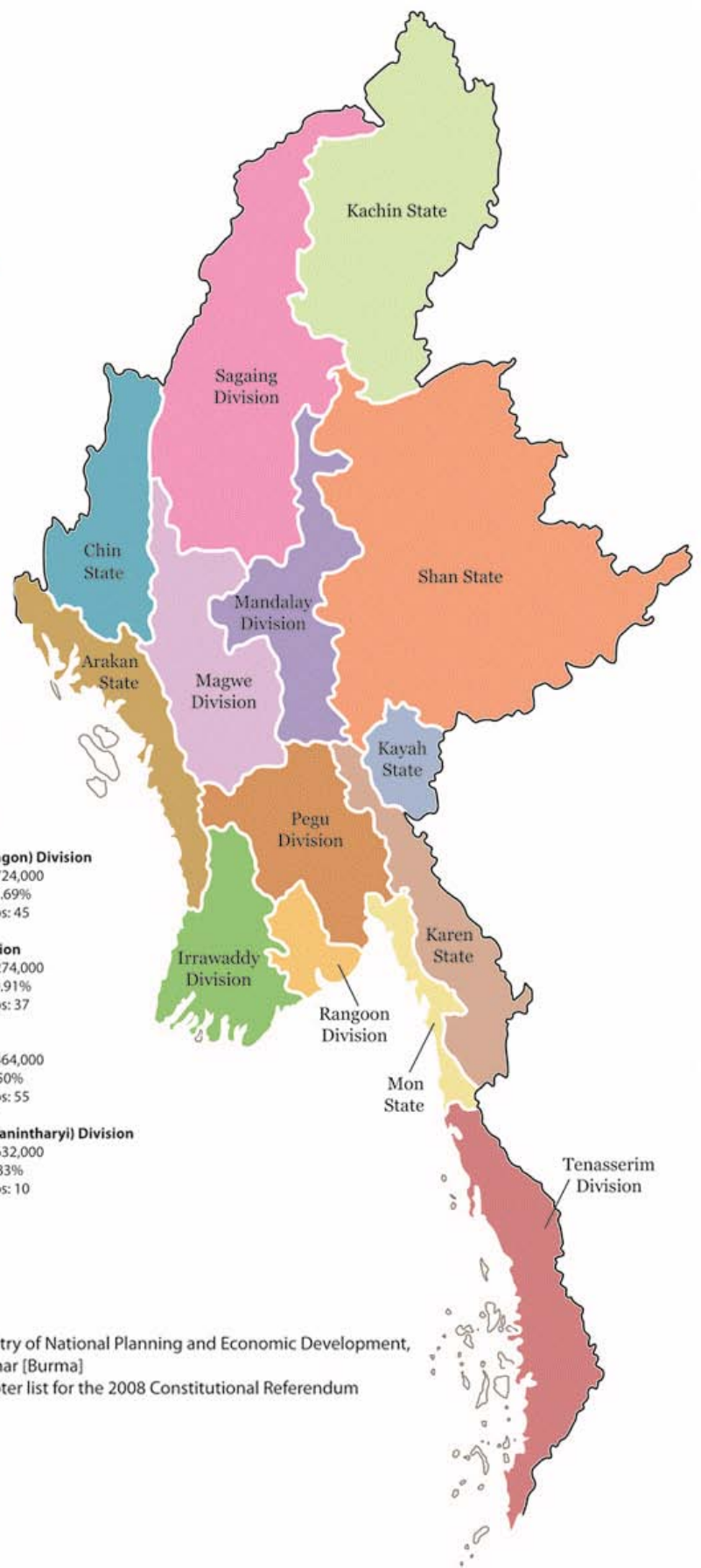
**Pegu (Bago) Division**  
 Population: 5,793,000  
 Percentage: 10.07%  
 Total Townships: 28

**Rangoon (Yangon) Division**  
 Population: 6,724,000  
 Percentage: 11.69%  
 Total Townships: 45

**Sagaing Division**  
 Population: 6,274,000  
 Percentage: 10.91%  
 Total Townships: 37

**Shan State**  
 Population: 5,464,000  
 Percentage: 9.50%  
 Total Townships: 55

**Tenasserim (Tanintharyi) Division**  
 Population: 1,632,000  
 Percentage: 2.83%  
 Total Townships: 10



**Source:** Statistical Yearbook 2008, Ministry of National Planning and Economic Development, the Government of the Union of Myanmar [Burma]  
 \*\*The eligible voter figure is from the voter list for the 2008 Constitutional Referendum

Fig 2: Myanmar ethnicity  
 (<http://login.stream.aljazeera.com/story/myanmars-political-opening-0022027>)

HOWEVER, a mere location in a geographically intermediate position cannot be the basis of a Meeteilon-versus-the-rest dichotomy. In fact, linguists have more to add to this connection between Meeteilon (and other languages) and Kachin. Kachin languages consist of Jinghpaw/ Jingpho (Singpho in India), Zaiwa, Lhavo, Lashi, Pola, etc. – all spoken in mostly Myanmar (except Singpho in Assam, as noted). Benedict (1972:6) presented a family tree, where, except Karenic, all other branches seem to derive from Kachin (or more precisely, Jingpho, which is an autonym for the group). This is shown in Fig. 3.

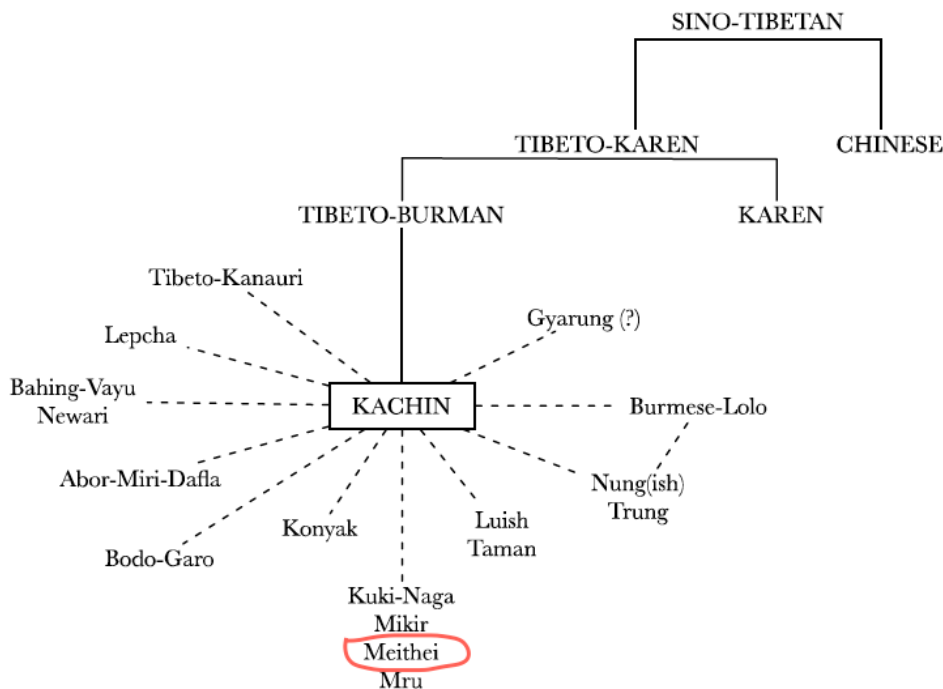


Fig. 3: Benedict's family-tree for Sino-Tibetan languages

NOTE, however, that this family tree neutralizes Grierson's conjecture that Meeteilon is a link between Kachin and Kuki/ Chin languages since here, they belong to the same sub-group. However, the 'Meeteilon-versus-the-rest' dichotomy that emerged from a reading of Grierson, can still be maintained in this classification since Meeteilon here clearly is shown as separate from Kuki or Naga languages, the other major language groups of Manipur.

HOWEVER, Benedict's further classification based on 7 larger units (nuclei) as in Table 1 muddies the picture to some extent:

1	Tibetan-Kanauri (Bodish-Himalayish); perhaps also Dzorgai, Lepcha, and Magari
2	Bahing-Vayu (Kiranti); perhaps also Newari
3	Abor-Miri-Dafla (Mirish); perhaps also Aka, Digaro, Miju, and Dhimal
4	Kachin; perhaps also Kadu-Andro-Sengmai (Luish) and Taman
5	Burmese-Lolo (Burmish); perhaps also Nung
6	Bodo-Garo (Barish); perhaps also Konyak and Chairel
7	Kuki-Naga (Kukish); perhaps also Mikir, Meithei, and Mru

Table 1: Benedict's nuclei classification

HERE, although Meeteilon is wrongly though hesitatingly (as clear from the use of the adverb 'perhaps') included in the Kuki-Naga group, belying his own family tree as in Fig. 3, interestingly, he also identifies Andro and Sekmai – two varieties of Meeteilon spoken in the valley -- as perhaps included in the Kachin group of languages. Kachin is considered by Benedict to be standing at the linguistic 'crossroads', since (i) it has lexical and morphological similarity with both northern languages like Tibetan, Bahing, and others, and with Burmese, Bodi, Lushei, and other southern languages, and (ii) it is geographically placed at northern Myanmar as an interface between Tibeto-Burman and Mon-Khmer languages. Thus the language of the valley standing out can still be read off from these classifications.

THERE is yet another way to demonstrate the validity of this dichotomy linguistically. Since at least Grierson, it is known that Bodo/ Garo-Naga-Kachin form one sub-group of Tibeto-Burman languages (Vol. III, Part 2: *Bodo-Naga-Kachin Groups*, Grierson, 1903). Benedict (1972) took this further and showed the striking lexical similarity between these 3 groups for the words for fire and water, as shown in Table 2.

NOTE that the words for these two words in Meeteilon are quite different, *numit* and *məi*, respectively, establishing yet again that Meeteilon is different from at least the surrounding languages.

ALTHOUGH I have discussed the 'Meeteilon-versus-the-rest' dichotomy here, the careful reader would have noticed that I have also hinted at two other possible dichotomies, I will now discuss them in turn.

	Jingpho (Kachin)	Namsang (North Naga)	Garo
SUN	džān	san	sal
FIRE	ʔwàn	van	waʔl

Table 2: Bodo/Garo-Naga-Kachin

## DICHOTOMY 2: KACHIN-VERSUS-SHAN

AS has been so often the case in the course of writing this series of articles on peopling of the northeast, the real explanation of a linguistic or genetic fact of a geographic region usually lies outside that area, and in the language groups that I have been interested, mostly in the southeast of Asia. ‘Meeteilon-versus-the-rest’ dichotomy therefore is foreshadowed by an even larger dichotomy played out in the southeast and in fact in Myanmar, a country that Manipur historically had a love-hate relationship with.

QUITE apart from this, a cursory glance at the different districts in Myanmar in Fig. 2, reveals that Kachin and Shans are the biggest two states in the country, perhaps, along with Sagaing. British interest in these regions vis-à-vis Manipur developed in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, the following excerpt from (p.85) Capt. R. Boileau Pemberton’s *Report on the Eastern Frontier of British India*, published in 1835 makes this clear:

In the preceding paragraphs, sufficient information will, I hope, be found, to enable the Government to form an accurate estimate of the resources of Muneepoor, and of the nature of the several passes by which it is connected withour territories, and those of Ava.

HOWEVER, with regards to at least Sagiang (and bordering Naga areas now within the Indian territory), Pemberton seems to reflect the general feeling of the administration in considering these as uncharted territories: “from the 25<sup>th</sup> to the 27<sup>th</sup> degree of latitude, and between the 94<sup>th</sup> and 96<sup>th</sup> degrees of longitude, is an extensive tract of mountainous

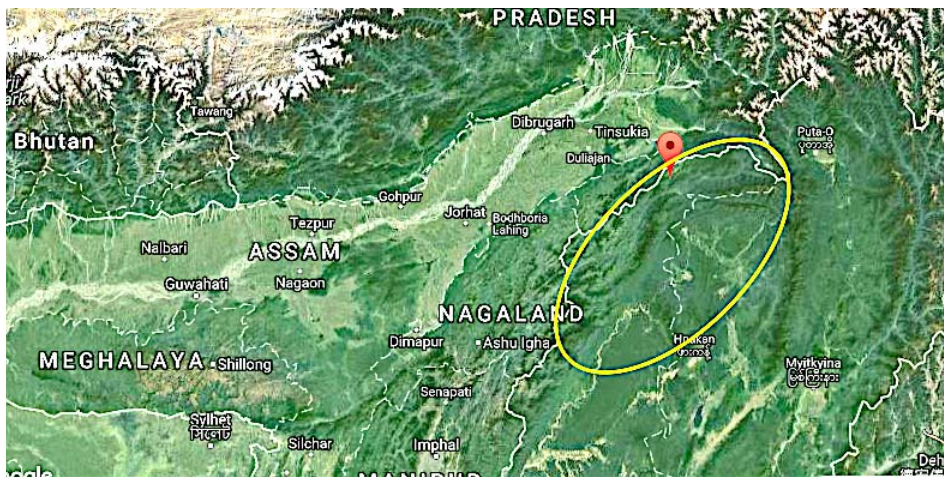
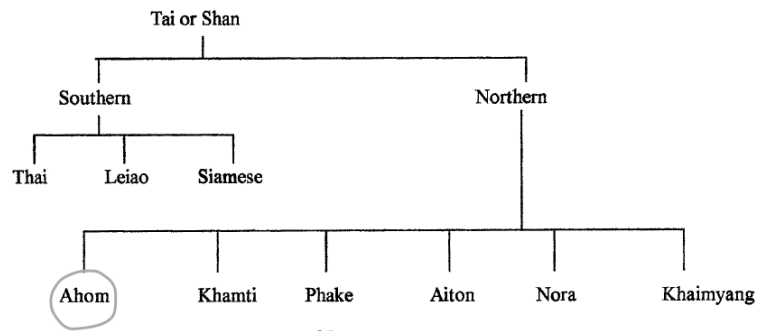


Fig 4: Sagaing division of Myanmar (created from <http://www.latlong.net>)

country, inhabited by tribes” which had no communication with Assam or Manipur, and nothing much was known except its mountainous character. If we look at these coordinates now, it clearly falls within the general region marked by Sagaing, part of Kachin and present Nagaland:

THIS region was clearly considered to be within the greater Shan territory of Myanmar by Pemberton, as he remarks that communication is indeed found between the eastern side of this unexplored (Shan) region and inhabitants of Assam, the latter appears to him to be the originally invaded by its first conquerors. In this connection, he also considers the different Singpho tribes to have also entered Assam through this pass.



Tai Phake

Fig. 5: Classification of Tai (Shan) languages

WE must remember that Singpho is a Tibeto-Burman, Kachin/ Jingpho group of languages, whereas Shan languages are from an entirely different language family called Tai-Kadai, several languages of which were also found in Assam at different times. Although, the exact place of Ahom in the northern group is debatable, the rough family tree is given in Fig. 5.

BOTH speakers of these two families are found in Assam and Arunachal Pradesh, whereas Singphos are concentrated in northern Tinsukia, with a few minor pockets in Sivasagar, Jorhat, Golaghat and Karbi

Anglong districts of Assam, and Changlang and Lohit district of Arunachal Pradesh, Tai speakers reside in various pockets in Assam (Dibrugarh, Jorhat, Golaghat, Karbi Anglong, Tinsukia, North Lakhimpur) and Arunachal Pradesh. The pictures in Fig. 6 and Fig. 7 show representative dresses of Singpho and Tai (Khamti) tribes.



Fig. 6: Singpho dress  
(By Ah Seng, Own work, CC BY-SA 3.0,  
<https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=20535890>)



Fig. 7: Khamti dress  
<http://taikhamtinamsai.blogspot.in/2016/06/the-khamtis-and-their-kinsmen.html>)

THUS, we see that the Kachin-versus-Shan dichotomy of greater Myanmar is played out in Assam, even though the dichotomy itself does not unduly determine shaping of what Assam has come to stand for. However, it has always been operative in the country of its origin, namely Myanmar, and as I would claim, in the formation of what Manipur comes to stand for.

## THE SHANS IN MYANMAR

BEFORE we trace the Shan presence in Myanmar, it is necessary that we understand the migration from the north (Yunnan) of one of the first Tibeto-Burman tribes into Myanmar, the Pyus. By 1500 BCE, people in the region were already domesticating animals, making bronze, and of course growing rice. In fact, 3 caves located near Taunggyi at the foothills of the Shan state of Myanmar have yielded Neolithic artefacts dated 10-6000 B.C.E. (Cooler, R. 2002, [http://www.seasite.niu.edu/burmese/cooler/BurmaArt\\_TOC.htm](http://www.seasite.niu.edu/burmese/cooler/BurmaArt_TOC.htm)). The original home of the Pyus is conjectured to be around the Qinghai Lake (Moore, E. H., 2007, *Early Landscapes of Myanmar*. Bangkok: River Books) – the northernmost region of the “ethnic corridor” of China (see Part 1 in vol.2, issue 3 of this journal) in the northeastern part of the Tibetan Autonomous Council claimed to be the original homeland for all Tibeto-Burman groups. The Pyu ‘realm’ is shown in Fig. 8.

VERY interestingly, excavations at 3 Pyu city-states of Beikthano, Maingmaw, and Binnaka have yielded lots of pre-Buddhist artefacts including gold necklaces, precious stone images of elephants, turtles, lions,



Fig. 8: The Pyu ‘realm’  
(By Hybernator - Own work, CC BY-SA 3.0,  
<https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=17324638>)

terracotta tablets resembling Pyu script (claimed to be a Brahmi script) and beads of onyx, jade, and amber (Aung-Thwin, Michael, 2005, *The Mists of Rāmañña: The Legend that was Lower Burma*, Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, referred to in [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pyu\\_city-states](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pyu_city-states)). The Pyu civilisation formally ended by the 9<sup>th</sup> century, when Bamar people (ancestors of the current majority Burmese population) from Nanzhao in China arrived in the same region. However much before that, in fact, at the turn of the century around 1<sup>st</sup> CE, there was another Kingdom which established itself in roughly the same area that has a strong connection with our story.

## THE KINGDOM OF PONG

ACCORDING to Captain A.E.W.Dunn, *Gazetteer of Manipur* (1886:188), the Pong Kingdom extended from Naga Patkai Hills in the north to Khambat in the south, and Yunnan in the east to Chin Hills in the west. According to the Meeteilon chronicle, *Cheitharol Kumbaba* (henceforth, CK), a grand alliance existed between the Pong and the Manipuri Kingdoms, from 698 CE onwards. According to Arambam-Parratt, S.N. 2005 (*The court chronicle of the kings of Manipur: The Cheitharon Kumpapa: Original text, translation and notes Vol. 1, 33–1763 CE*, Routledge): In 663 CE, Naothingkhong became king and in 698 CE Samlung, the younger brother of Sukanpha, the king of Pong, after having annexed to his kingdom all the lands up to Pasa (Bengal), returned by way of the land of the Meeteis. He stayed in the Apong compound (in Kangla) for ten years.

ACCORDING to the Shan Chronicles, which Pemberton got hold of a copy of during his stay in Manipur and got it translated into Meeteilon, the western bound of the Kingdom was known as inhabited by the Kasi Shans, or Ka-says, or Cassays, the term used by the Shans for Manipur/ Manipuris, the appellation itself indicating a greater Shan presence in ancient Manipur. According to the same Shan Chronicles, Samlung proceeded to Assam from Manipur and established a Shan settlement there, the supposed progenitors of Ahoms. The Tai-Shan people were founders of many great kingdoms throughout their history. Thus, apart from the Ahom Kingdom of 1228-1822, they also set up the Pegu State in lower Myanmar in 1287-1539 (see Part 4, vol. 3, issue 2, on the role of Pegus in our story), and the first Siamese kingdom of

Sukhothai in 1238-1448, among others.

ACCORDING to CK, the Manipur Kingdom continued to have close contact with the Pong Kingdom, as various visits from either side and exchange of gifts continued till 1740 as noted in the Chronicle. In 1475, during the reign of Kyamba, the Kubaw valley in the western Sagaing division of Myanmar was jointly won and annexed to Manipur, a region that was a part of Manipur on and off until the 1<sup>st</sup> prime minister of India, Jawaharlal Nehru, gifted it to Myanmar in 1952 as a peace treaty.

ACCORDING to Ray, 2000 (*The sacred alphabet and the divine body: the case of Meitei mayek in North-eastern India*, Ph.D. diss. UCLA), importantly during Kyamba's reign, the first Hindu temple in Manipur was constructed when the king of Pong gifted him a statue of Lord Vishnu. He invited Brahmins from Bengal and Assam to worship this new god, thereby paving the way for the beginning of Hindu proselytization of Manipur. Although Pong kings were Shans, and therefore Buddhists, the pre-Buddhist Hindu presence of the Pyu civilization, discussed in the previous section, perhaps contributed to this initiation.

THIS acceptance of a new order, I believe, defines accurately the Meitei psyche of even the present day, which is sometimes wrongly identified as too religious, but religion in Manipur has a different place and role and unlike in many other parts of the country, it is not all pervasive. This is perhaps also the reason why the long Shan contact did not leave a Buddhist imprint on Manipur, this

is both due to the Shans not being strongly religious and the Meitei psyche hinted to above. Although, in a strange turn of events, I venture to add, the non-Brahmin, non-Muslim Meiteis, who are considered to be *Nongpok-haram*, or settlers from the east (Ray, 2000:89), or the 'Meeteis', are in the forefront of a revivalist movement of a pre-Hindu order.

The long association with a Shan state like the Pong Kingdom left many other marks on Manipur in various forms if not in religion. Thus the introduction of the system of appointing a *Cheithapa* was introduced during this association, where a period was identified as year of the appointed cheithapa, as mentioned in the entry for 1485 CE in CK. Also in the entry for the 1359 CE during the reign of Tapungpa, it is mentioned that hill people from the north were attacked when they failed to pay the tribute of '*phipong chami*', *phipong* literally meaning cloth of the Pong people (Arambam-Parratt, 2005: 39). Furthermore, ordinary cow pea known as *Pong Hawaii* (shown in Fig. 9) and *Pungdon* (Corruption of Pong, *hei* 'fruit', *ton* 'youngest' or 'the last fruit from the Pong' or 'Guava') are also remnants of the Pong heritage of Manipur.



Fig. 9: *Pong Hawaii*  
(<http://medicinalplants.co.in/pong-hawaii>)



## THE IMPORTANCE OF THE EAST

I have already mentioned about the Meiteis tracing their direction of origin to the east in terms of the label *Nongpok-haram* as opposed to *Nongchup-haram*, a label associated with Meitei Brahmins and Meitei Muslims, having arrived from the west. That the east refers to Thailand or near about, is captured in the etymology of the term Shan, having derived from 'Hsyam', which in turn is derived from 'Siam', the old term for Thailand.

THERE are further indications of the importance of the easterly direction, for example, a conventional house in Manipur faces the east. In addition, among the list of days and directions considered unlucky for travelling, the first day of the week, that is, Monday, is matched with the easterly direction that is to be considered unlucky. As for dates, on which travelling is considered unlucky, again the first day of the month, is considered unlucky for traveling to the east (these are noted in Hodson 1908:120).

YET another expression which captures the importance of the east involves the names of the deity/ deities for a certain *salai/ yek* or clan. Meitei society is divided into 7 *salais*, out of which the Ningthouja clan became the most powerful. According to Hodson (1908:99) deities for the the different clans are named according to the clan with *pokpa* added; thus, Luang Pokpa is the deity for the Luang clan. However for the Ningthouja clan the deity is called *Nongpok Ningthou*, or the 'King of the east', which denotes Pakhangba.

## WHERE DID THE KACHINS GO?

HAVING traced the existence of the Shan people in greater Myanmar and their involvement in greater

Manipur, the above question arises with respect to the other member of dichotomy, namely the Kachins. Barring the mention of Singpho in Assam and Arunachal Pradesh earlier, Kachins seem to have disappeared from the story.

IF we go back to the main region where the theatre of this dichotomy is most strongly operative, that is Myanmar, we obtain an understanding of the somewhat less than comfortable co-habitation of the two groups, best captured in Leach, E.R., 1964 (*The Political Systems of Highland Burma: A study of Kachin social structures*, The Athlone Press). Leach points out that there is a marked difference between the high and low land of Myanmar. The low land is generally the Shan area and is the valley, whereas the highland is mountainous and occupied by Kachins. Kachins have shifting cultivation whereas the Shans have wet-rice cultivation, which produces a surplus that the Kachins cannot afford to.

THE following passage from Leach (1964:20) in this connection is highly illustrative for situating a shadow of another dichotomy in Manipur:

“... the mountaineers are sometimes regarded as the political overlords of the valley, so that the valley people pay a feudal rent to the hill chieftains; sometimes the hill peoples merely exploit the fact that they control the cross-country communications between the valleys and levy a toll on passing caravans;”

THIS prevails from the 19<sup>th</sup> century as Butler (1946) and Hamilton (1912) too report this ancient equivalent of modern blockade; nothing much, it seems, has changed.

THE distribution of Kachin versus Shan speakers in Myanmar around 1825 is shown in Fig. 10, where the dark pockets are the Shan areas.

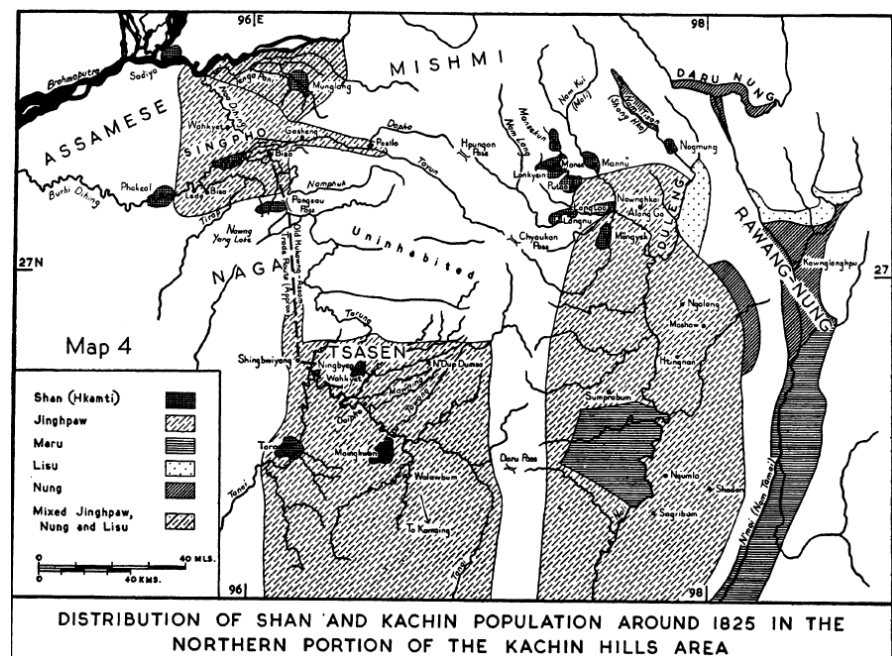


Fig. 10: Kachin-Shan distribution in Myanmar (Leach, 1964:33)

LEACH notes (p36) that the scattered distribution of the Tai speakers has been a matter of speculation, and the most common view advanced is that the general tendency of north to south movement of Tibeto-Burman speaking tribes was arrested between 8<sup>th</sup>-12<sup>th</sup> century CE by westward moving Shan tribes as a result of the extension of their empire in Nazhao in China. Later with the decline of the Shan power, the southward movement of Tibeto-Burman speakers resumed; thus Jingpho-speaking Kachins are the last ones to arrive in this area around 18<sup>th</sup>-19<sup>th</sup> century. The fact that the distribution of Shan settlements is not very different from what they were further proves that they did not find it necessary to let go of their prized possession of the valleys.

THIS last point nicely brings me to the last dichotomy with which I want to end this discussion.

### DICHOTOMY 3: VALLEY VERSUS MOUNTAIN

Why give up a good thing, that is what the Shans thought and, I believe, that is what the Meiteis/Meeteis thought. There are only a handful of valleys in the northeast, and Imphal is one of them, where the Meiteis have lived for millennia. Unlike the surrounding mountain populations of broadly Nagas in the north and Kukis in the south of Manipur, the Meiteis of the valley are not known to have been migratory. This dichotomy though is initiated right at the beginning of the Chronicle *Cheitharol Kumbaba*, when *Laisna* (the golden goddess), the wife of the first king *Pakhangba*, who was a divine being (*lai*) by the day and a human by the night, demanded of him that she should also be a *lai*, the King replied that she since came with Poireiton, she could not be a *lai*, whereas he himself came down from the heavens and can therefore be both a *lai* and a human at the same time.

IT is conjectured in the manuscript *Poireiton Khunthok* that Poireiton is one person or group that came to settle in the valleys and is the progenitor of the Chakpas of Andro, Sekmai, etc. Since in *Ningthourol Lambuba* he is also known as *Chingkhong Poireiton* (Poireiton of the foot-hill), indicating his settlement in the plains (mentioned in the English translation of CK in Arambam-Parratt, 2005:24). According to Arambam-Parratt, the texts here suggest that Poireitons were prior residents of the foothills, whereas the Pakhangba's group perhaps came down from the surrounding mountains ('he came down from the heavens above') as the 'other people', hence the name *Meetingu Pakhangba*, where *Meetingu* is a combination of mee 'people' + atai 'other' + Yingu 'Lord'.

However, by 264 BCE during the time of Taothingmang, the land was referred to as *Poirei Meetei*, indicating the coming together of the two groups Poireitons of the valley and Pakhangbas of the mountains. This then strongly establishes our third dichotomy right from the beginning.

THIS narrative also indicates to us something else very clearly, the Meiteis and Kuki-Chin or Naga groups cannot share a common origin as in both the latter groups, we invariably find the notion of the 'cave' as the common cultural artefact in their origin myths. Having scanned 17 communities, I have found that all of them have something to do with the idea of a cave -- they all seem to have originated from a cave. The location of the cave is not fixed, it is either in Yunnan district of South China or some place in North Burma. A glimpse of some of the words for the word 'cave' is given in Table 3, which also shows the reconstructed for *\*khuL*, based on all the forms; nothing like this obtains in Meeteilon.

CHOTHE	<i>khul</i>	<i>*khuL</i> 'cave'
KABUI	<i>khoh</i>	
KOIRENG	<i>khurpee</i>	
KOM	<i>khurpui</i>	
LAMKANG	<i>khoh</i>	
MOYON	<i>khur</i>	
TARAO	<i>tukleikhur</i>	
VAIPHEI	<i>khul</i>	

*Table 3: the word for 'cave' in the origin myths of Naga-Kuki languages*

TO this, one can also add the fact that though both the Meiteis and the Shans had the system chronicles, and much of the mores in at least the Manipuri society is a result of that codification process undertaken centuries earlier, Kachins never had any tradition of codifying in the form of chronicles. This too then, clearly shows that the two groups, Meiteis and Kachins, have very different cultural lineages.

ALTHOUGH, I have stated before that the long contact between the Shan empires and the Manipur Kingdom did not leave any discernable mark on either their religion or the nature of the Meeteilon language (for example, Meeteilon, has no classifiers whereas that is a distinctive feature of Tai languages), there is but one slim line of thought that may be entertained with respect to the latter, in this connection. McCulloch (1859:88) noted that Shan languages are also spoken by some *Loi* (ones who escaped the Hindu proselytization) villages, who were brought from the Kubaw valley. One such community

In the vocabulary list of McCulloch is Khurkhul, the language of which is identified by him as 'Khooreekool Shan'. An excerpt from the comparative vocabulary is given in Table 4, which shows considerable points of difference between Meeteilon and this variety.

English	Meeteilon	Khurkhul
water	ising	phei
fire	mei	num
earth	leipak	lung nin
air	nungsit	pha room
sky	nongthauleipak	pha
cloud	leichil	phachau
smoke	meikhu	koonphei

Table 4: Comparative Vocabulary from McCulloch (1859:94)

THERE is an interesting study by Singh & Singh, 2008 ('Genetic Polymorphisms at three Loci in two Populations of Manipur, India', *Anthropologischer Anzeiger*), on genetic polymorphism across three groups

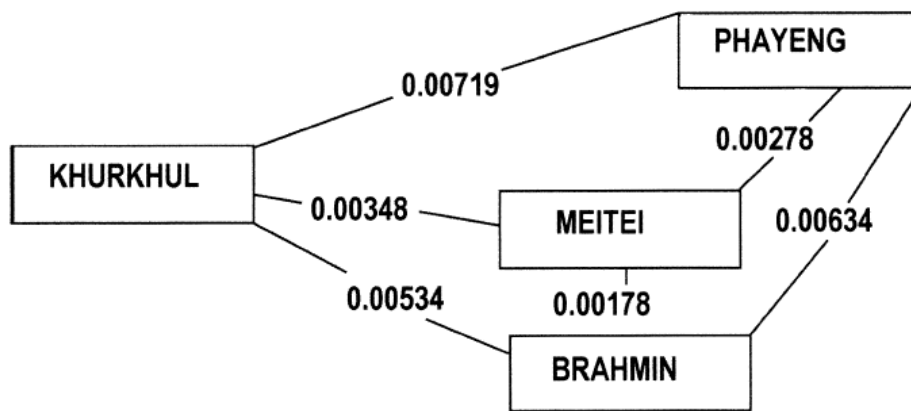


Fig. 11: The Genetic distance (from Singh & Singh, 2008: 196)

who are claimed to be the oldest settlers in the valley, namely, Meiteis (including the Brahmins), Phayengs, and Khurkhuls, where the last two are supposed to be descendent of Chakpas and Shans, respectively. The genetic distance among these groups is depicted in Fig. 11.

WHAT we observe in Fig. 11 is of great interest to the story that I have been trying to tell; the greatest genetic distance is found between the Phayengs and Khurkhuls, and if we leave the Meitei Brahmin group for the moment, the smallest genetic distance is found between Meiteis and Phayengs. This, in short, is a corroboration of the concept of *Poirei Meetei* in the great Manipuri Chronicle of *Cheitharol Kumbaba*. And once we add the Meitei Brahmins to this equation, we find them to be in fact the closest to the Meiteis/ Meeteis.

I am now gladly driven to the conclusion that what keeps the people of the valley, Meiteis, is their deep-rooted belief in the value of what they are, their cultural sense of rootedness is a direct collective reflection of their sense of belongingness and oneness to the land they are and have been so much a part of for millennia.

