Recently, a Garo friend of mine became a high-profile adivasi representative. He’s considered by (non-Garo) donors, politicians, academics and media to be an important spokesperson for indigenous people(s) and is frequently consulted on a variety of ‘indigenous’ issues. When I visited Bangladesh last year, my friend and his wife asked me to stay with them. As a result of their generous offer, I gained unexpected insights into current changes concerning indigenous people’s politics in Bangladesh, not least, how drastically the recently introduced international discourse on indigenous peoples has impacted identity formation amongst the Garos.

Ellen Bal

SIXTEEN YEARS OF EXPERIENCE among the Garos of Bangladesh have revealed to me how the worldwide debate on indigenous peoples has enabled not only the Garos but other ethnic minorities to take their place on the stage as more equal and respected citizens. However, my time with the Garos has taught me that indigenous identity representations do not quite concur with my findings as a historian, who wants to unravel the historical complexities of identity building by the Garo people. An incident which occurred in my friend’s house so clearly illuminated the profound impact of ‘indigenous peoples discourse’ on notions of self and public representations of Garo history and traditions, amongst a new generation of educated urban Garos.

Young urban traditions? Once, I had interviewed a young staff member of my friend’s small NGO. Most of them were Garo, two of them Chakma. Among the many things we discussed, we also talked about the photographs decorating one of the office walls. These portrayed a festive celebration of wongola (originally a Garo harvest festival) in a way I had never seen before. With the disappearance of the traditional=ense bengal, ceremonial rituals had lost much of their relevance and appeal. Only in the 1990s, the Christian churches had revived the celebration of wongola in ‘a Christian way’, in order to bring Garos from different denominational backgrounds together, and to emphasise their distinct Garo cultural and religious (read: Christian) identity.

The photographs in the office, however, showed no overt signs of Christianity. I saw young women dressed in beautiful, recently designed Garo costumes, cheering at the launch of a sky lantern (a newly introduced element clearly inspired by Buddhist festiv- ities). Some of the women wore jewellery, which I later learned had been collected by my friend during his trips to Thailand, India and the Philippines. Exquisitely designed (representative of the European Commission and various European embassies) cheer- fully participated in dances and rituals, wearing curious hats and colourful ‘tribal’ make-up, as well as their ever present camera. Yet, when I commented teasingly that these snapshots presented a wonderful example of the invention of tradition, one of the young staff members became extremely sensitive to the fact that I was looking at true Garo cultural tradition. Missionaries had spoilt wongola, but their boss (my friend) had reintroduced original Garo culture. He had purified it of recent Christian influences, and thereby also reduced the influence of church leaders, who had spoilt the festival in the first place. I realised at that moment how quickly and strongly the recent introduction of indigenous peoples discourse (in spite of an emphasis on authentic indigenous culture) has influenced notions of Garo identity, culture and history. This young woman needed no explanation of 19th and 20th century Christian in- fluence on the Garos as a case-study. At the time, Northeast India was off limits for foreigners, and a war was going on in the Chittagong Hill Tracts between the army and local minority communities. The Christian Garos seemed a ‘suitable’ community for my studies. My historical perspective allowed me to scrutinise how they had come to constitute the distinct ethnic community they are today. Available sources (unpublished and published

The government of Bangladesh did not recognise their minorities as indigenous peoples and in 1993, the international year for the world’s Indigenous People, the term ‘indigenous’ was still fairly unknown in Bangladesh.

Indigenous people and the state of Bangladesh For a long time the international discourse on indigenous people only marginally influenced minority issues in Bangladesh. At present however, ‘indigenous peoples’ or adivasi issues not only figure prominently on the agendas and in the policies of donor agencies and NGOs, but have also become part of government policies in Bangladesh. Even the national Planning Commission has now included a separate section on ‘tribal people’ (TP) and ‘tribal’ issues in its report on poverty reduction (2005). The report states, for example, that ‘[o]ver the years the tribal people have been made to experience a strong sense of social, political and economic exclusion, lack of recognition, fear and insecurity, loss of cultural identity, and social oppression (…) TP are losing their own heritage, which threatens their sustainability’. Although the government of Bangladesh has not officially recognised its minorities as indigenous peoples, the Planning Commission does state that ‘[a] lesson can be learnt from the experiences of other nations that accommodate ethnic nationalities, for example China, India, Denmark, Norway, New Zealand, and Australia’ (p. 137).

The acknowledgement that ‘tribal’ minorities are in need of special attention on the basis of their distinctive cultures, experiences, socio-political circumstances, etc. is – unlike in India – a new development in Bangladesh. Despite some odd exceptions, the successive states of East Pakistan and Bangladesh have generally ignored, neglected, or (violently) excluded local ‘tribal’ minorities. The Partition of 1947 and the subsequent birth of Pakistan and India also marked the beginning of distinct political approaches on either side of the Indo-Pakistan border vis-à-vis ‘tribal’ minorities. In postcolonial India, special national and state policies were formalised in the Constitution to ‘uplift’ the backward tribes. Cultural and ethnic diversity were understood as prime features of the newly established Indian nation. The postcolonial state showed the same systematising urge that its colonial precursor had displayed. Although the Commissioner for Scheduled Castes and Tribes already admitted in 1952 that no uniform test to classify the ‘Scheduled Tribes’ had been developed, an extensive list was prepared of all ‘tribes’. The Garos of Meghalaya, India, are among these so-called Scheduled Tribes (ST).

Similar notions of diversity and multi-ethnicity have not developed in East Pakistan and Bangladesh. The citizens of these successive states were either conceived as Muslim or as Bengali. The successive states of Pakistan and Bangladesh never bothered to collect systematic in- formation on the ‘tribal’ population. Nor did they develop formalised policies regarding ‘backward’ groups. The government of Bangladesh did not recognise their minorities as indigenous peoples and in 1993, the international year for the world’s Indigenous People, the term ‘indigenous peoples’, was still fairly unknown in Bangladesh.

States, minorities and diversity My first acquaintance with the Garos from Bangladesh dates back to November 1993. I had just commenced my project on the ethnosocialisation of community relations in Bangladesh and focused on the Garos as a case-study. At the time, Northeast India was off limits for foreigners, and a war was going on in the Chittagong Hill Tracts between the army and local minority communities. The Christian Garos seemed a ‘suitable’ community for my studies. My historical perspective allowed me to scrutinise how they had come to constitute the distinct ethnic community they are today. Available sources (unpublished and published

Below: Garo girl wearing a ‘traditional’ dress at the Wangala celebrations in Chittagong, Bangladesh. Photograph by IDPS, Indigenous Peoples Development Services.

Right: Garo girls performing a ‘traditional’ dance at the Wangala celebrations in Chittagong, Bangladesh. Photograph by IDPS, Indigenous Peoples Development Services.
States, minorities, and discourses of citizenship

The Newsletter

Development Services.

Photograph by IDPS, Achkipara, Bangladesh.

Wangala celebrations in a flood of people from the plains…’5 During a visit to Rangamati the Hill Tracts. Mujib simply refused to accept any of the demands. Their demands included autonomy and a special legislature for ethnic Bengali identity, and had no intentions of turning and to a new country that held the promise of a better future. Nevertheless, it soon became clear that Sheikh Mujib favoured and to a new country that held the promise of a better future. Nevertheless, it soon became clear that Sheikh Mujib favoured their distinct identity as Garos and adivasis. In order to assert their indigenous identity, Garos are carefully turning to the Garo Hills in India, the cradle of ‘authentic Garo culture’. They brush aside the fact that they never formed a homogenous community with a single culture and language, and rather emphasise the simultaneous, and sometimes indistinguishable, layers of the language, culture, and history of hill Garos. In their process to unite with other adivasis, they stress their common (historical) experiences with human rights violation, land grabbing by Bengali settlers, and forceful expulsion from their lands, and discard the many differences they faced and are still facing. It can be argued that the experiences of the Garos of East Pakistan/Bangladesh are marked by at least three different, albeit somewhat overlapping phases, during which the Garos from the Bengal delta adopted and/or emphasised different identity markers setting them apart from the dominant Muslim/Bengali population of the country. Of late, the Garos of Bangladesh have embraced the label of indigenous Garos, uniting them inside and across borders, with Garos and other ‘tribal’ minorities, and encouraging them to invent themselves as authentic, indigenous (hence culturally distinct), people of Bangladesh. This process in which they assert (and invent) their indigenous and Bangladesh identity may not exactly coincide with the historian’s ambition to reveal ‘historical complexities and fragmentations’, but at this very moment it seems to offer new roads to becoming full-fledged citizens on terms that have already entered state policies.

Notes

2. Unlike in India, where the local term adivasi is synonymous with one another. The Garos have firmly embraced the discourse of indigenous Peoples and inter-connectedness of national identity formation processes in Bangladesh. This process in which they assert (and invent) their indigenous and Bangladeshi identity may not exactly coincide with the historian’s ambition to reveal ‘historical complexities and fragmentations’, but at this very moment it seems to offer new roads to becoming full-fledged citizens on terms that have already entered state policies.