



Farhana Hoque

TO BE A MARMA

A passionately lived identity on the
borderlands between Bangladesh and
Myanmar

Anthropology

Editor

JANISE HURTIG

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For Sami and Hana

Abstract

The book explores a passionately lived identity on the borderlands between South and Southeast Asia. It focusses on one ethnic group, the Marma of the Chittagong Hill Tracts. The book places the everyday lives and meanings of a remote hill people at the heart of a study on identity and nothing is taken for granted. By looking at the history of the region and the way it has shaped the Marma, as well as an analysis of ethnographic data, the book establishes the nature of the group's cultural distinctness. Themes covered are Marma marriage customs and rituals, oral histories around migration and settlement, and Marma material culture and ceremonials.

Keywords

Marma; Chittagong Hill Tracts; Bangladesh; Buddhism; Burma/ Myanmar; ethnic identity; invention of culture; hybridity; syncretism; entanglement; borderlands; migration; Zomia

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Introduction

In the last 30 years, borderlands all over the world have been part of the 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 debates, but specifically looking at the cultural effects of globalisation and migration on border communities. Some border studies also try to understand how ethnic groups negotiate their identity alongside other cultures that express similar or different notions of being and belonging on the borderlands.

This book is a contribution to border studies and identity. It focuses on a region called the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT), which straddles the borders between Bangladesh and Myanmar. This region has experienced many different groups migrating to the area and has been governed over a period of approximately 500 years by an impressive line-up of local and global powers – the Arakan kingdom, the Portuguese, the Mughals, and the British Empire. This book is an exploration of the identity of one ethnic group – the Marma – who live in this historically complex and fluid region of the world.

The stories and thoughts you will find in this book are based on the fieldwork in the Marma community that was part of my PhD research at University College London. This fieldwork was conducted between November 2012 and December 2014, in Bandarban town in the CHT.

Meet the Marma

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 1971.¹ In 2012, I returned to the CHT in Bangladesh for the first time in 20 years to begin the fieldwork.

On a previous visit to the CHT in 1993, I had travelled the country on holiday as a young adult and met for the first time the Chakma people in and around Rangamati in the CHT. 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. There were at the time 15 ethnic groups living in small rural towns and villages scattered across this hilly jungle landscape. Moreover, the people in the hill tracts looked, dressed, and acted differently to the Bangladeshis that I had encountered.

Returning in 2012, 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 had a population of approximately 32,000. In and around Bandarban town, alongside the numerous mosques calling Bengali Muslims to prayer, stood

several Arakan-style² royal palaces built by various Bohmong *Rajas* – chiefs or kings of the Marma people – and an impressive Golden Buddhist temple. My first impressions of Bandarban were not that different from a description of the community noted 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, p. 75)

When staying with a Marma family in a compound of five households, I experienced even more interesting juxtapositions. This Marma family spoke fluent Bengali³ 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 Hasina⁴ – 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 practise 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. However, a Muslim marriage partner was frowned upon. I was also informed of the most recent scandal in the royal family: the daughter of the Bohmong *Raja* (King) had married a local Bangladeshi Muslim who was 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. It felt like here on this narrow strip of hilly land between Muslim Bangladesh and Buddhist Myanmar, people were experiencing something similar to a clash of civilisations.

I was fascinated by the Marma people. Specifically, how they appeared to maintain a singular cultural heritage while living alongside different ethnic groups in a majority culture that was very different to theirs. They appeared to live their identity fully and with a passion, and their cultural journey seemed to underscore this.

The next sections will walk the reader through the various steps involved in the fieldwork on the Marma community and highlight the key themes of the book.

Ethnic hybridity

During this first visit to Bandarban, I repeatedly heard about the fascinating history of the Marma community, both from oral

history accounts and from a huge Bohmong family genealogy chart that stood as a museum object at the entrance of the local Tribal Cultural Institute in Bandarban town. When I came back to London, I checked the Marma narratives 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 Marma oral history 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 therefore an ethnically hybrid group. Within the group, people share common values, eating customs, marriage rules, and religion, and they speak dialects of the same language.

Yet what was particularly striking was that, despite this ethnic hybridity, the group gave the impression of having a singular identity, which is why they stood out as a unique community in the region.

Little Burma

There are over three royal circles in the CHT, and the number of ethnic groups is now 11, as opposed to the 15 communities of the early 1990s. These ethnic communities are collectively seen – by the Bangladeshi state, which is predominantly Muslim – as a non-Muslim buffer zone to Buddhist Myanmar and Hindu India.

The Marma are the second-largest minority group in the CHT and they live mainly in the Bohmong Circle but can also be found in the Chakma Circle (Rangamati area) and Mong Circle (Khagrachari), as well as the coastal areas of Cox's Bazar. The Bohmong Circle is widely claimed to be the most peaceful in the hill tracts. Local people put this down to the Golden Temple and three Buddhist pilgrimage sites in the district. These pilgrimage sites 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 the Bohmong Circle is referred to by Bangladeshis and other groups in the area as "Little Burma".

Shininess

Another key marker that differentiated the Marma from other ethnic groups in the CHT, as well the mainland Bangladeshis, was the bedazzling amount of gold or radiance in the landscape in which they lived. *Alan raung*⁵ (the power of shininess) could be seen everywhere. 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. From the shininess of clothing and props around funerals of both revered Buddhist monks and senior members of the royal family, to the royal sword that is handed down from generation to generation of

Bohmong chiefs, with its glittering golden hilt; and the shininess of the coin garlands given to brides on their marriage day, to protect them during widowhood and divorce. Shininess seemed to represent something undetermined and yet significant for the Marma people. For example, it seemed to me that the Marma people embraced the concept of “shininess” to acknowledge three different things: the radiance of their Buddhist faith, the legitimating shine of the power of the royal family, and the protective shininess of bridal gifts.

Stability in flux

What was remarkable was 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 at the core of their cultural life. Unlike other ethnic communities in the CHT borderlands, the Marma community asserts its 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 and continue to differentiate the group from the other groups in the region. It also explains why the ethnic community gives the impression of an eternal stable group in a region of extreme changeability and flux.

Climate change

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 circa 150,000 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. This has had a huge impact on the CHT. After enjoying over 200 years of peaceful isolation on the borders, the CHT is now “overrun” by Bengali Muslims, and the minority groups that live there feel that their independence and access to land is under threat. Moreover, the rise in the number of Bengali Muslim settlers has resulted in the further militarisation of the area.⁶ Because of this, at the time I was conducting my fieldwork with the Marma, there was a collective feeling of uncertainty about the future of the Marma community. The wealthier Marma families were planning to leave the area and return to Myanmar⁷ or travel beyond the borders.

Studying a lived identity in the borderlands

This study will reveal how one ethnic minority, isolated and on the margins of mainstream culture, passionately live their identity in the borderlands.

This book employs ethnographic data that emerged from the observation of rituals and the narratives around material culture, as well as various theoretical tools that help to unpick the processes of cultural reproduction and constant reinvention in the Marma community. While some groups on borderlands become entangled and assimilate with other groups and the nation state, other groups work on their cultural boundaries to

do the exact opposite. To both differentiate, demarcate, and, through these processes, achieve legitimacy and some freedom in an otherwise highly militarised and politicised zone.

The book presents various narratives, in the form of ethnographic data, around the Marma lived experience. The theory and academic framework serves as the lens to understand how these narratives contribute to the Marma identity as a whole. My main contention 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, p. 5). Outside of ethnographic data and my fieldwork findings, I have referred to other descriptions of the community and the CHT that emerged from travellers to the area, both colonial emissaries and anthropologists. Moreover, to fully grasp the significance of the Marma identity in the CHT, I regularly compare the Bohmong Circle, where the Marma reside, with the other two circles in the CHT, as well as contrast the lived experience of the Marma with the largest ethnic group, the Chakma.

I drew upon a wealth of experts from the region – see Appendix A for a full description.

The research is of importance to students of sociology and anthropology as it will hopefully provide some ideas on how to develop an approach to studying the identity of ethnic minorities on the peripheries of the state and/or in complex regions of the world such as borderlands or understanding communities in multicultural settings in urban zones across the globe.

About me

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.⁸

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 while the minorities on the borderlands suffered military occupation.⁹ 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.

Interestingly, during my first visit to Bangladesh, 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.¹⁰ 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 was 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 practising 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 the wedding of one of my informants, the fact that my husband was Dutch also helped to counter the anxieties about my Bengali heritage. 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, pp. 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 Bengali food-eating patterns than they had probably realised. 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, while rejecting all things Bengali Bangladeshi, some things Bengali had become part of the Marma cultural food script over time.

Even though I am Bengali born, the people of Bandarban greeted me as *Ang ley ma*, which means English lady. Some members of the 15th 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 with 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 realised 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 due to the fact that I enjoyed wearing Marma clothes and made the effort to learn Marma phrases on a daily basis.

A note about terminologies

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 implies descendants of those peoples who were in a certain

geographical location before other peoples. Due to ongoing disputes around the indigeneity of communities in the CHT and their ownership of land, I have deliberately avoided using this term. “Jumma” is still prevalent among political groups and organisations, but as with *adivasi*, it is a highly politicised term and therefore sensitive.

For these reasons, in this book I have referred to the collection of groups living in the CHT as “hill people” or “ethnic minorities”, “ethnic groups” or “ethnic communities”. All of these terms refer to both men and women as people living in the hill tracts of Chittagong. It takes into account 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. Note also that throughout this book “Burma” is often used to describe the neighbouring state of Myanmar.

1

Teacher and student guide

Learning objectives

- **To understand a Passionately Lived Identity.** This book offers an insight into how marginal groups, affected by dramatic change in the environment, are determined and purposeful when investing in a group identity in contested spaces of the world.
- **To learn about the role of identity in ethnic survival in areas of extreme change and fluidity.** The book demonstrates the power of storytelling through an anthropological lens as it deepens understanding, promotes awareness, and stimulates debate on issues around the most pressing global challenges to marginal groups of the world.

Learner objectives

- To study the history of a region to understand how communities respond differently to external influences and how these influences impact ethnic identity.
- To raise awareness of the impact of colonial history and recent effects of climate change on ethnic groups in the borderlands of the world.

- To demonstrate the importance of studying one community in great depth in order to understand the many different aspects of identity formation.
- To listen to the narratives of a group's history through various aspects of their lived experience.
- To illustrate the usefulness of employing anthropological theories to unpick identity creation and maintenance on both the boundaries of culture and from within culture.

Suggested activities (general)

- Looking at the history of the region and the recent effects of climate change: how is the Marma response different compared to the other ethnic groups in the region?
- Identify the key themes of Marma identity and how the group continue to invest in them.
- Who are the different agents adapting Marma identity or inventing it?
- To what extent is ethnic identity shaped by external factors and to what extent is it a self-making project?
- What are the benefits and limitations of community ethnography?

Suggested activities (by chapter)

Chapter 2 The project and the people

- Who are the key powers in the CHT?
- How have they shaped the region?

Chapter 4 Marma kinship and marriage rituals

- What do marriage rules and customs achieve?

- What key anxieties do marriage rituals address?

Chapter 5 Ethnic endogamy: land, culture, and religion

- What are the challenges that the community are facing?
- How are they responding to it?

Chapter 6 Migration and settlement

- What function do narratives on Marma migration and settlement achieve?
- Discuss the role of a historical timeline approach to studying group identity.

Chapter 7 The invention of Marma material culture and ceremonials

- What is the role of material culture in the group's identity and what does it achieve?
- What are the key themes embodied in the objects and ceremonies?

Recommended projects

Design a short ethnographical field trip to understand the cultural identity of one community.

- Consider how you will capture data on identity and which methods you will use.
- When in the field, keep a daily journal and reflect on your first insights and impressions from the fieldwork.
- Identify themes and respondents, and start collating possible questions to draw out further insights.
- Check archives and published books on the history of the

group. Think about how history has shaped the group's identity: what were the key events and who were the key agents/people?

- Return to the community with a list of open-ended questions.
- Write up your analysis.

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