Journey to the Lyngams: People of Meghalaya, Northeast India
การเดินทางสู่ลงัม: ชาวลงัมแห่งรัฐเมฆาลัย ภาคตะวันออกเฉียงเหนือของประเทศอินเดีย

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Abstract

The Lyngam people of Meghalaya State in Northeast India and adjacent areas in Bangladesh speak an Austroasiatic language with the same name. This article reports the findings of my two fieldwork trips of six months in total, with the objective to study and record the language and culture of the Lyngams in the area between the villages of Umdang and Shallang in the West Khasi Hills District of Meghalaya. Wedged in between speakers of Tibeto-Burman tongues to the north, west and south, and speakers of closely related Austroasiatic speech varieties to the east, the Lyngams are claimed both ethnically and linguistically by both the Garos and the Khasis. I found that, while their language is definitely Austroasiatic, it has Tibeto-Burman loanwords and the Lyngams present cultural traits that are similar to both their Garo and Khasian neighbours

Keywords: Austroasiatic language; Linguistic Fieldwork; Lyngam; India

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บทคัดย่อ **

　　　　คนลงัม (Lyngam) แห่งรัฐเมฆาลัยซึ่งอยู่ภาคตะวันออกเฉียงเหนือของ ประเทศอินเดีย และติดกับประเทศบังกลาเทศนั้นพูดภาษาลงัมซึ่งเป็นภาษาหนึ่ง ในตระกูลภาษากลุ่มออสโตรเอเชียติก บทความนี้รายงานผลการวิจัยที่ผู้วิจัยได้ เดินทางไปเก็บข้อมูลทางด้านภาษาศาสตร์ในท้องที่ 2 ครั้ง รวมเป็นเวลา 6 เดือน โดยมีวัตถุประสงค์เพื่อศึกษาและรวบรวมข้อมูลทางภาษาและวัฒนธรรมลงัมใน พื้นที่ระหว่างหมู่บ้านในอุมดัง (Umdang) และชาลลัง (Shallang) บริเวณเทือกเขา กาสีตะวันตกในรัฐเมฆาลัย ด้วยเหตุผลที่ชาวลงัมอาศัยอยู่ท่ามกลางกลุ่มคนที่ใช้ ภาษาย่อยทิเบต-พม่า ทางตอนเหนือ ตะวันตกและทางใต้ และกลุ่มคนที่ใช้ภาษา ถิ่นย่อยในกลุ่มตระกูลภาษากลุ่มออสโตรเอเชียติกทางตะวันออก ชาวลงัมจึงถูก มองว่ามีความสัมพันธ์ทางชาติพันธุ์และภาษาศาสตร์กับชาวกาโรและชาวกาสี ผู้วิจัยได้ค้นพบว่า แม้ว่าภาษาลงัมจะเป็นหนึ่งในตระกูลภาษากลุ่มออสโตรเอเชียติก แต่ก็พบว่ามีการยืมคำในตระกูลภาษาย่อยทิเบต-พม่ามาใช้ และคนลงัมยังมี ลักษณะทางวัฒนธรรมที่คล้ายกับชาวกาโรและชาวกาสีซึ่งอาศัยอยู่ในบริเวณ ใกล้เคียงอีกด้วย

คำสำคัญ: ภาษาตระกูลออสโตรเอเชียติก; ภาษาศาสตร์ภาคสนาม; ชาวลงัม; 　　　　　อินเดีย

1. Introduction

　　　　This is a report of my fieldwork research with the Lyngam [lŋɑm ~ lə̥ŋɑm] people in the villages of Umdang, Shallang and the area in between, conducted between 26 July to 19 October 2013 and between 19 March and 9 June 2014. The research was made possible with a grant from the American Firebird Foundation. I tried to practice participant observation fieldwork and immerse myself completely in the language as I

had done during my research on the neighbouring Atong language (see van Breugel, 2014a), living within the language community and interacting closely with Lyngam speakers in their day-to-day life. In this way I would gain maximum insight into the language. This appeared not to be possible, which made the whole research experience completely different from what I had anticipated, but not less interesting. I worked mostly with a few language consultants whom I met in their houses or shops, while I stayed in the local mission of the Salesians of Don Bosco.[1]

The goals of my fieldwork research were:

1. to provide information on the geographical distribution of Lyngam
2. to accumulate natural language data supplemented by elicited data
3. to find out about the linguistic relations of Lyngam with the surrounding languages
4. to find out about the cultural relations of the Lyngams with the surrounding communities.

How and where these objectives were obtained and to which extent will be treated in sections 2 to 5. Sections 6 to 9 report the anthropological information about the Lyngams I recorded during my fieldwork.

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2. Finding the Lyngams

Actually, I did not set out to study the Lyngam language: I wanted to find a language called Megam, a language shrouded in mystery that I had stumbled upon during my fieldwork at Atong. Even since I started working in the South Garo Hills in 2005, I had heard the Atong people speaking about the neighbouring Megam tribe and their language which was said to be like Garo but very different because of all the mixing with Khasi. Ever since, I had been curious about what lay beyond the Garo Hills to the east. When I visited one of my Garo friends in his birth area of Adokre (in the north of the Garo Hills in the border area with Assam) in 2012, he told me that Megam people regularly visit Adokre market and that their villages were not too far from there, but that they were quite isolated.

Only a few weeks later, while staying with my Atong friends in the South Garo Hills, I finally met a man in the market in Siju who was a native speaker of Megam. When I asked him to say something in his native language; I did not recognize a word. This was definitely not Atong or any other speech variety of Garo.[2] I did not know any Khasi at that time, and could not tell whether it sounded like Khasi or not, but it sounded exotic and intriguing and I decided to one day find out where these Megam people live and what this Megam language is like.

Then, in early 2013, when the Firebird Foundation announced its call for research proposals, I decided to write a project to that end. During my search for existing information on the Megam language, I found out that

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[2]   The Garos are a people who speak closely related Tibeto-Burman speech varieties, who intermarry and share the same clan names, viz. Sangma, Marak, Momin, Sira and Areng.

Ethnologue (Lewis et al. 2013) stated that the Megam language is spoken in Bangladesh in the Netrokona district, Kalmakanda subdistrict, that the language shares 60% of its vocabulary with another called "Lyngam" and 7 to 9% with the Abeng dialect of Garo. No mention was made about any Megam speakers in India, which was intriguing, since I knew from my Garo friends that they should exist there. It was only in the third week of my fieldwork in 2013, that I found out that Megam is in fact the exonym given by the Garos to a people who call themselves and their language Lyngam.

Before I left to India, I had made a research plan. Since I had never been to any Megam villages before and had no Megam contacts in the area, I needed someone to take me and introduce me to those people. Luckily, my Garo friend, Mr. Mobbin J. Sangma, whom I have known ever since I first came to Meghalaya in 2004, had said that he would take me to one in the area of his home town of Adokgre in the border area between Assam and the Garo and Khasi Hills. He had never been to a Megam village either, but he knew where to find them and had told me that we would manage to find a place to stay for me to start my research. After arriving in India, I was to meet him in Adokgre and we would start on our quest.

Unfortunately, the day before my flight, Mobbin called me to say that he was in the hospital in Shillong with appendicitis and would not be able to go with me to find the Megams. Very kindly, he had asked Mr Tapsrang M. Sangma, to help me, and, very kindly, Tapsrang agreed. Tapsrang, although Garo, has lived most of his life in Shillong. His father Mr B.B. Marak is a Meghalayan government employee who arranged a meeting for me with the Secretary of Law of the Government of Meghalaya, Mr L.M. Sangma. I met Mr. L.M. Sangma at his office. Tapsrang had

warned me that finding out about the Megams might not be easy because they might not want to be identified as such, especially in Shillong, where they would not want to be singled out as being different from (other) Khasis.

I write the word "other" in parentheses because the term Khasi refers to four different things. First, it refers to the name of the Austroasiatic standard language of the Khasi Hills and is actually based on the speech variety of Cherrapunji, because that is where the Christian missionaries started their bible translation. I will refer to this language as Standard Khasi. Second, Khasi refers to the name of the people who live in Shillong and the surrounding area. Third, it refers to all the peoples who speak closely related speech varieties in Meghalaya and immediate surroundings.[3] Thus, the Lyngam people would be Kahsis etymologically, and at some level maybe ethnically (but I leave this up to the people themselves to judge), but they are not native speakers of Standard Khasi nor geographical Khasis from the surroundings of Shillong. This polysemy of the word Khasi is one of the roots of the confusion and intolerance I have noticed among native speakers of Standard Khasi from Shillong towards the Lyngams: Lyngams are Khasis who don't speak Khasi. Since Standard Khasi is the prestige speech variety and the only written one, all other closely related Austroasiatic speech varieties, most of which are not mutually intelligible

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[3] Other sources say this about the term Khasi: Khasi is a name that refers to a group of peoples that speak closely related Austroasiatic languages of separate branch termed Khasian (Sidwell, 2009), and that live mainly in the Eastern part of the state of Meghalaya, viz. the Khasi and Jaintia Hills, and adjacent areas in Assam and Bangladesh (Grierson, 1904; Sidwell, 2009; Lewis at al., 2013). Gurdon (1907: 1) writes: "The Khasis reside in the Khasi and Jaintia Hills district of Assam."

with Standard Khasi, are frowned upon and considered backward. Since they are all ethnically Khasi they should speak Standard Khasi, at least when they are in the capital, Shillong. This is one of the reasons why the Lyngams are not very forthcoming is disclosing their native identity, I assume. When I met with the Law Secretary Mr L.M. Sangma, I did not yet know all this. I was looking forward to learn where I could find the mysterious Megams.

Mr. L.M. Sangma started out saying that there is no such thing as a Megam language. It had died out more than a century ago due to contact with Garos and Khasis. More recently, modern education has caused all Megam people to speak Garo. When L.M. Sangma was born in 1958, he grew up speaking the Chisak dialect of Garo. This was of course quite disappointing information for me.

It was only a bit later into our conversation, that it became apparent that there in fact is such a thing as a Megam speech variety. L.M. Sangma did not want to call it a language or dialect. In India, the term language is used to refer to speech varieties with official status. The term dialect is used to refer to non-official speech varieties. He referred to the tongue of the Megam as a mix of Garo and Khasi, or Garo or Khasi with a Megam accent. The variety of Khasi that is used by the Megam is not Standard Khasi, i.e. people from Shillong cannot understand it.

I asked him about the difference between Lyngam and Megam. He said that Lyngam, Megam and Garo peoples are mixed now. Only local people can hear from the accent someone speaks whether that person is Garo, Lyngam or Megam. Most Megam people will not identify themselves as Megam. They will say that they are Garo or Khasi. This has to do for a

big part with their participation in the economy and society outside their villages.

Mr L.M. Sangma said that there is a difference between Megam-Lyngam and Megam-Garo. Their speech was different, he said. I recorded two songs he had written many years ago, which he said were in Megam-Garo. When I replayed these in the village of Shallang in 2014, the speech was identified as Nongtrei, a speech variety closely related to Lyngam, spoken in the Assam border area.[4]

The Megams, Mr L.M. Sangma continued, mainly practice slash-and-burn cultivation.[5] Recently they have begun making terraces for the cultivation of wet rice. The many interior villages are not reachable by vehicle and have to electricity or modern-type water supply. Water from streams and rivers is used.

To conclude our meeting, he said that he could take me to Memylam village next year. It was not advisable to go there this year because dangerous militant rebels were holding up in the area. Other villages proposed by him where it would be good to stay were: Cha'lang (also called by its Standard Khasi name Shallang), Nonghawe and Mangsang.

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[4] Nongtrei is also called Nongtrai and is, by some Lyngam speakers, considered a speech variety of Lyngam, as will be discussed below.

[5] This information needed to be corrected. As transpired to me much later during my research, most of the people cannot live from slash-and-burn agriculture anymore due to heavy logging in the past and the consequent heavy erosion and depletion of the soil in almost the entire West Khasi Hills area.

I had decided to travel to Shallang, since it was along the National Highway 44 and might be relatively easy to reach. The other villages recommended by Mr. L.M. Sangma were either in the jungle or along small roads that might be inaccessible for vehicles during the rainy season, which was in full swing.

Upon arrival in Shallang on 9 August 2013, it was the Reverend Father Marzo who provided me with a place to stay in his Don Bosco Catholic mission in an act of great hospitality. He provided me with a letter to Mr. Raisen Mawsor (a.k.a. Bah Raisen), the headman of the village of Umdang and representative of his clan. Fr. Marzo told me to go to the Don Bosco mission in Umdang, find the reverend Fr. Simeon Myrthong (no longer in office now) and tell him that I want to speak to Bah Raisen.

I was introduced to Bah Raisen by Fr. Simeon. Father Simeon offered me to stay in the Don Bosco mission. Bah Raisen agreed with that. I had finally found the people whom the Garos call Megam and who call themselves Lyngam.

3. The language and its speakers

3.1 Geographical distribution

Lyngam is spoken in an area that forms a narrow band stretching from the northern part of the West Khasi Hills district down to the border with Bangladesh. The language is also spoken on the other side of the Bangladeshi border; however, I was not able to travel there to find out its distribution by direct observation. Some Lyngam speakers from India told me that the language straddles the border from Borsora in an eastern direction. Since Parkins's 1991 publication, the language area seems to have gotten smaller. Parkins (1991: 58) writes that Lyngam is spoken in the

"western Khasi Hills and eastern Garo Hills". Nowadays there are no more Lyngam speakers in the Garo Hills, except for the village of Memylam (Garo spelling Memilam), and there is a considerable band of territory inside the West Khasi Hills along the border with the Garo Hills where only Garo and Atong are spoken, except in the northern parts of the West Khasi Hills.

The area where Lyngam is spoken in India is indicated in grey on Map 2. Map1 indicates the location of the West and Southwest Khasi Hills districts within the state of Meghalaya. In the lands immediately bordering the east of the Lyngam-speaking area, there are villages where people use speech varieties that are considered by Lyngam speakers to be a mix between Lyngam and Maram. There also villages, especially along the Bangladeshi border, where Lyngam speakers live together with speakers of Garo, Atong and Maram, e.g. Ranikor. Map 3 is a replica of a map by R. Momin of the Parish of Shallang in 1999, as it was before it got split up into two by the Bishop of Nongstoin in 2008.[6] The western border of the parish is also the administrational border between the West Khasi Hills and East Garo Hills districts. Since the original Parish of Shallang was divided into two parts, the new, smaller Parish of Shallang consists of roughly the western part of the original area and comprises only Garo- and Atong-speaking villages, except for Shallang itself, where Lyngam is spoken. The eastern half of the original area is now the Parish of Umdang, which contains only Lyngam-speaking villages.

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[6] The original map is in possession of the Don Bosco mission in Shallang.

Map 1   The districts of the state of Meghalaya and their headquarters
        (Map designed by author and digitally created by Mr. Weerachai
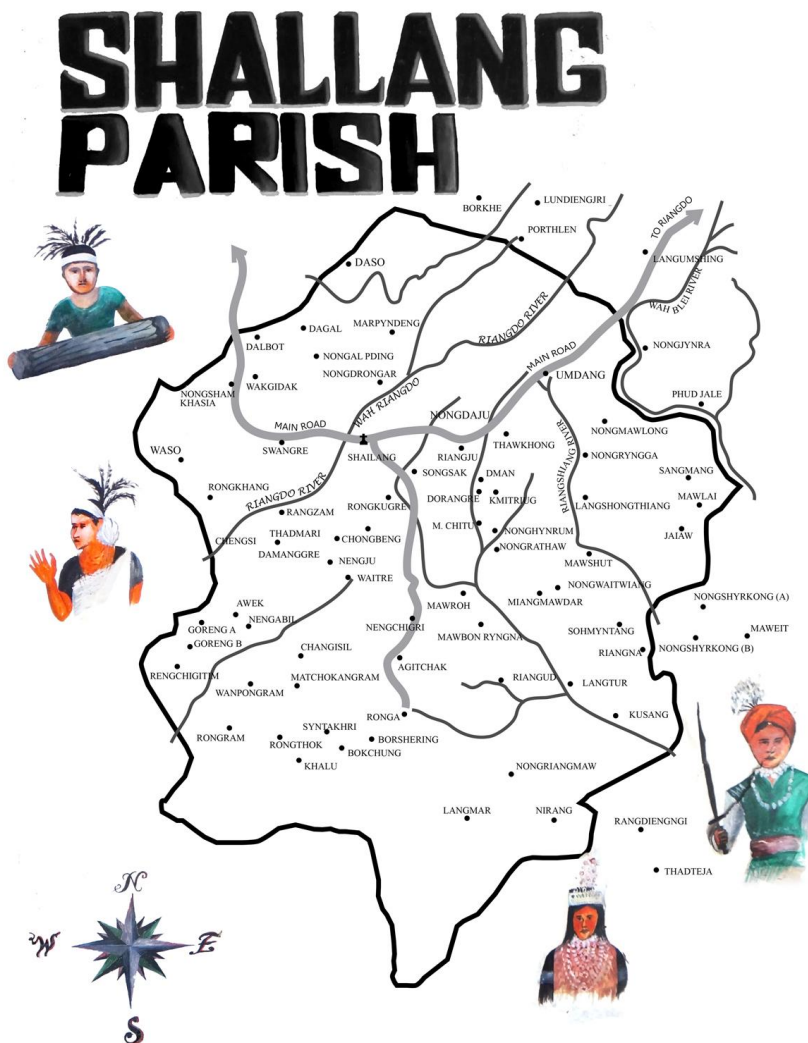   Sriwai.)

Map 2   The area where Lyngam is spoken in the West and Southwest
        Khasi Hills National Highway numbers are indicated in rhombuses.
        (Map designed by author and digitally created by Mr. Weerachai
        Sriwai.)

Map 3   Replica of a map of Shallang Parish by R Momin, 1999
         (Digital replica by Mr. Weerachai Sriwai. Published with the
         permission of Rev. Fr. Marzo.)

3.2 Language

Lyngam belongs to the Austroasiatic language family, and within that family, its closest relatives are the languages of a group that some linguists call the Khasian or Khasic group (Sidwell, 2009). The languages within that group are, according to my Lyngam informants, Khasi, Bhoi, Pnar (or Jaintia or Synteng), War Shella, War Jaintia, Langrin, Maram and Lyngam (see Sidwell, 2009: 98-104 for other divisions of Khasian). Lyngam is in close contact with different speech varieties of the Tibeto-Burman group of closely related speech varieties called Garo: Chisak mainly to the west, and north and Atong in the south. To the east, there are different Khasian speech varieties are spoken by different clans. Bengali is in close contact with Lyngam in the southern part of the linguistic area and Assamese in the north. Loanwords from all these languages and dialects, alongside loans from Hindi and English, can be found in Lyngam. The only alternative spelling of the autonym of this language that I attested in the field is Lyngngam, which is also the spelling used by Baker (2013); Grierson (1904: 17-21) spells Lyng-ngam, Lewis et al (2013) mention the spelling Lyngym, Gurdon (1907) writes Lynngam and Karotemprel (1986) Lyngám.

Speech variety within Lyngam depends mostly on geographical location and to a lesser extent on clan membership. According to my Lyngam consultants, the following varieties exist in the Lyngam language area from north to south: Nongtrai, Rongrin, Lyngam of Shallang and surrounding area, Rengmaw, Thatteja, Nongjri, Nonghlam and, straddling the Bangladesh border, is Borsora. Unfortunately I was unable to visit all the areas where said varieties are spoken to verify that they are indeed different one from the other. In her Master's thesis, Baker (2013: 3) writes: "From the limited data she acquired on Nongtrai during her fieldwork, she

"would suggest that the two should be classified as being separate language varieties, however further investigation is required to either substantiate or disprove this hypothesis."

Within the area where I did my fieldwork, the Rongrin clan's speech variety differs more from the other speech varieties than the others differ from one another. The Rongrin clan spoke the variety of Lyngam also spoken in the Riengmaw area. The differences are mostly lexical and extend to the personal pronouns and the occasional grammatical morpheme. Examples of these differences can be seen in Table 1. Most of the information in that table was provided to me by Ms Etilda Rongrin. Within the area where I conducted my field research, all the Lyngam speakers could understand each other completely and have indicated multiple times that they are aware of the differences between different speech varieties in their area. Because most households consist of members from different clans—the Lyngams are exogamous and marry outside their own clan—speakers mix different speech varieties to a greater or lesser extent.

Table 1 Lexical and morphological differences between varieties of
　　　　　Lyngam in the village of Umdang; Lyngam words in IPA

Rongrin	Mawsor	Glosses
kʰot (also Khasi)	*hək*	'to yell'
bru	*brɘ*	'person'
ej	*aj*	'to give'
pnpʰej ~ pʰej	*pnpʰaj~ pʰaj*	'to return, to go back'
pʰej	*pʰaj*	'to turn'
bjang ləʔ	*koc ləʔ*	'enough already!'
lkʰɘ	*ʔlom*	'to laugh'

Rongrin	Sohbar	
rwjaŋ	*rweŋ*	'the marks that look like eyes on the intestine of a chicken that is slaughtered to predict the future'
Rongrin	Other varieties	
tɕə-	*tə-*	bound morpheme: 'to(wards)'
jaw	*jϴ*	'we, us' (first person plural pronoun)

Lyngam is mutually almost completely unintelligible with other Khasian languages. Even so, Lyngam is called a Khasi dialect by Lyngam speakers and by other Khasian speakers. This has the following reasons. First of all, in India, all non-official languages are called dialects and Lyngam is an unofficial speech variety; and second, the Lyngam consider their speech to be similar to that of other Khasians. The Garos consider Lyngam to be a dialect of Garo, and in schools and in university in the Garo Hills, it is taught that the Megams (as the Garos call the Lyngams) are one of the sub-tribes of the Garos.[7] In schools and universities in the Khasi Hills, it is taught that the Lyngams are a sub tribe of the Khasis.

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[7] As was mentioned above, the Garos are a people who speak different but closely-related Tibeto-Burman speech varieties, locally called Garo dialects. Speakers of these "dialects" intermarry and thus share the same clan names (Sangma, Marak, Momin, Sira and Areng). The collection of all people speaking a Garo "dialect" and bearing these clan names forms the Garo tribe. However, the Garo-speaking Garos consider the Lyngams a Garo sub-tribe even though the Lyngams do not speak a Garo "dialect". There are no sharp boundaries between the different Tibeto-Burman speech varieties of the Garos, but not all of them are mutually intelligible. Each Garo sub-tribe exists because it

Until 2014, Lyngam was an unwritten language, the speakers reverting to Standard Khasi when they wanted to communicate in writing. This year, the first ever bundle of stories, based on transcriptions of field recordings, written in an orthography developed especially for Lyngam has been published (van Breugel, 2014b). Whether the orthography will catch on or not, or whether it will lead to alternative ways of writing Lyngam has yet to be seen.

3.3 Linguistic relationship with surrounding languages

During my research to date, I have merely focused on the Linguistic relationship between Lyngam and Atong. More research is definitely needed to establish the extent of the influence that the Tibeto-Burman and Austroasiatic speech varieties have on one another in their contact area. Given the very likely hypothesis that the Tibeto-Burman languages currently spoken in Meghalaya are spoken partly by people whose ancestors used to be speakers of Austroasiatic tongues (see Jacquesson, 2006), I would not be surprised if there is an Austroasiatic

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is or was linked to a specific speech variety. Some of these speech varieties or dialects are either no longer spoken, like Ruga, or heavily influenced by Standard Garo, while others are still clearly distinct. Other peoples who live in close proximity and speak very closely related languages, like the Koches and Rabhas, do not share the same clan names and are not considered Garos. In addition to clan membership, all Garo people share the same culture, many aspects of which overlap with the culture of the Lyngams. Lyngams and Garos frequently intermarry (see also Karotemprel, 1985) and there are Lyngams who bear Garo clan names like Sangma and Marak, although I was told that these people are changing their surname to one from the Lyngams more and more often. I have never met a Garo with a Lyngam clan name.

substrate in Atong and maybe even other speech varieties of Garo. Even though Lyngam is Austroasiatic and Atong is Tibeto-Burman, Atong has Austroasiatic loans and Lyngam has Tibeto-Burman ones. Since etymology does not have priority in my forthcoming research, I will present my findings on the similarity in lexicon between the Atong and Lyngam here. Table 2 provides a list of the most striking similarities discovered to date in the vocabularies of the two languages. Each item is briefly commented upon in the text.

Table 2 Morphological similarities between Lyngam and Atong

item	Lyngam (in IPA)	gloss	direction of borrowing	Atong (in IPA)	gloss
1	k^ha	'fish'	→	k^ha+	'first element in fish names'
2	tɕoŋ; tɕnoŋ	'stit, stay; village'	→	soŋ	'village'
3	bar	'outside'	→	balaga ~ haʔpal	'outside'
4	=baʔ	'derelational enclitic'	?	=gaba ~ =ga	'derelational enclitic'
5	=bə	'and, also'	?	=ba	'and, also/Constrastive Topic'
6	sorat	'death anniversary'	?	sorot-	'to celebrate the anniversary of someone's death'

item	Lyngam (in IPA)	gloss	direction of borrowing	Atong (in IPA)	gloss
7	*mama*	'mother's brother'	?	*mama*	'maternal uncle'
8	*asor*	'real, true'	?	*asol*	'really, true'
9	*mantaw*	'species of gourd'	?	*mantaw*	'species of gourd'
10	*taw*	'to ascend'	←	*taw*	'to ascend'
11	*dawʔgep*	'duck'	←	*dawʔgep*	'duck'

Item #1, Lyngam *kʰa* 'fish', appears in Atong as a cranberry morpheme in fish names, e.g. <u>*kʰachol*</u>, <u>*kʰadok*</u>, <u>*kʰamənkʰap*</u>, *kʰarok*. Most recorded fish names in Atong are compounds with the Atong lexeme *naʔ* 'fish' followed by the species name, e.g. <u>*naʔrəmkhu*</u>, <u>*naʔjek*</u>, <u>*naʔja*</u>, <u>*naʔru*</u>. The Atong root *naʔ* 'fish' is etymologically related to the Proto-Tibeto-Burman root **ŋa* 'fish' (Matisoff, 2003: 606 and personal communication). The direction of borrowing of *kha* 'fish' is clearly from Austroasiatic into Tibeto-Burman.

Item #2 consists of two words in Lyngam, viz. *tɕoŋ* and *tɕnoŋ*, the second derived from the first by an infix <-*n*->. The Atong word *soŋ* is most probably etymologically related to the simplex form *tɕoŋ* 'sit, stay'. The Atong root meaning 'sit, stay' is *muʔ*, from Proto-Tibeto-Burman **m-duŋ/k* or **m-tuŋ/k* 'sit' (Matisoff, 2003: 587). The direction of borrowing is therefore most probably from Austroasiatic into Tibeto-Burman.

Item #3: the Lyngam word *bar* may be related to the second syllable in the Atong word *haʔpal*, where *haʔ* means 'ground'. The occurrence of a /p/ instead of a /b/, as in Lyngam, may be due to devoicing

influenced by the preceding glottal stop. The synonym *balaga* 'outside' may be a compound of the word *bal* followed by an ancient form of the word for ground **ga* < Proto-Tibeto-Burman **ka* (Matisoff 2003: 593) with an epenthetic vowel /a/ in between these two elements of the compound. The elements *pal* and *bal* with the meaning 'outside' have only been recorded in these two Atong words. It is therefore most likely that the direction of borrowing is from Austroasiatic into Tibeto-Burman. The direction of borrowing of the following items cannot confidently be established.

Item #4: Even though the lyngam derelational enclitic *=baʔ* is glottalised and the Atong form *=gaba ~ =ba* is not, they are remacably similar in form and function. Both morpheme indicate that the referent of a kinship term is not related to the speaker. Examples of this morheme in Lyngam can be found below in (1) and (3). Examples of the morpheme in Atong can be found in van Breugel 2014a (pp. 297-306). The Atong form, which also has the function of turning clauses into attributive clauses and cardinal numerals into ordinal ones (see van Breugel 2010: 297-306), also looks like the Standard Khasi morpheme *kəbə=* (or a back-clipped version of it in the case of *=ga*), which shares the latter function with Atong. Unlike Lyngam and Khasi, Atong only have suffixes and enclitics.

Item #5: The Lyngam morpheme *=bə* and the Atong morpheme *=ba* share the additive and Contrastive Topic functions.The Atong enclitic can also function as indefinite or affirmative marker functions (see van Breugel 2010: 341), which are not (yet) attested in Lyngam. Examples (1), and (2) show the use of the respective morphemes as markers of Contrastive Topic. Examples of *=bə* and *=ba* in additive construstions are presented in (3) and (4).

(1) Lyngam.[8] In the first clause, the father is the Topic, in the second
clause, the stepmother.

pa-baʔ dɘ ʔo=rɘ kʰɛj mnsɘ

father-DREL is ART=person trade cow

'His father is a cow tradesman.'

mɑwrɛj=bɘ dɘ ʔo=rɛj soʔsɑn krtəŋ ʔam=g-dʑu

stepmother=CT is ART=person Soʔsɑn name GEN=F-3SG.H

'His stepmother's name is mother Soʔsan.'

(2) Atong.[9] The first two clauses are about what his elder brothers did to
the small child. In the last clause, the child is marked as a contrastive
topic since the clause will only be about it.

gadak-tɕitɕi=aj=muna tʰəp-set-tʰiri=ok=no

cut.up-into.pieces=ADV=SEQ throw-DISPOSE.OF-AGAIN=ASP=QUOT

ətəkmaʔtɕiba u=ba saʔgəraj=ba dʑumu kʰaʔ-tʰiri~tʰiri=ok=no=təj

but DST=CT child=CT collect do-AGAIN~RED=ASP=QUOT=MIR

'[They] cut [him] up into pieces and threw him away again, it is said.
But that child joined together again and again, it is said to [our]
surprise.'

(3) Lyngam[10]

baŋ-son=ləʔ b=gmaw-baʔ=bə pa-baʔ=bə tʰaw-baʔ=bə […]

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[8] Taken from the story *Hur* by Mr Robort Sohbar, see van Breugel
2014b: 39, lines 1 and 2.

[9] Adapted from van Breugel (2014a: 236), example 355. Here, the
example is presented in IPA.

[10] From the story *Marseng nam khla* (The fox and the deer) by Mr
Robort Sohbar, see van Breugel (2014b: 50), paragraph 4, lines 3 and 4.

eat-together=ASP A=mother-DREL=ADD father-DREL=ADD

grandfather-DREL=ADD

'[They] were eaten by the mother and father and granfather […].'

(4)   Atong[11]

kokt͡ɕeŋ galat=ok=no, sap^haw=ba galat=ok=no

basket fall=ASP=QUOT rabbit=ADD fall=ASP=QUOT

'The basket fell, it is said, and the rabbit also fell, it is said.'

Item #6 displays a vowel difference between Lyngam *sorat* and Atong *sorot-*. More research is needed to find out what this difference can be attributed to. Furthermore, the Lyngam word can function as the head of a referential expression whereas the Atong word *sorot-* cannot, because it is a verbal root.

Item #7: Except for Atong, I have found this form with the same meaning in Standard Garo (Nengminza, 2003: 138), Standard Khasi (Sing, 1906: 128) and Rabha (Jose, 2000: 161). The maternal uncle is an important and authoritative figure in the matrilineal cultures of Meghalaya.

Item #8: In Atong, the phonemes /l/ and /r/ are contrastive only in syllable-initial position. "In words which are truly of Atong origin, only /l/ occurs syllable finally, e.g. *ol-* 'to talk', *wil-* 'to go down', *təjkhal* 'river'" (van Breugel, 2014a: 41). In Lyngam (van Breugel, forthcoming) /r/ seems to be the preferred syllable final oral liquid. The words *asol* and *asor* are thus well integrated into the phonologies of both Atong and Lyngam respectively. According to Matisoff 2003 (663) the Proto-Tibeto-Burman word for 'real' is

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[11] Adapted from van Breugel 2014a: 53, example 10. Here, the example is presented in IPA.

t(y)ak or *t(y)ik*. I could not find the word *asor* in Standard Khasi. Other Tibeto-Burman languages of Meghalaya do have the word *asol* with the same meaning, viz. Standard Garo (Nengminza, 2003), Rabha (Jose, 2000) and Tiwa (Jose, 2014). It is looks like the Lyngam word *asor* is a Tibeto-Burman loan, but more information is needed to confirm this.

Item #9, *mantaw*, does not exist in Standard Garo or Standard Khasi, cannot be found in Tiwa, or Rabha or as a Proto-Tibeto-Burman root in Matisoff (2003). I am therefore at a loss as to where this word originated.

Item #10, *taw* 'to ascend', might be originally Tibeto-Burman, given that it exists in Standard Garo as *do* (Nengminza, 2003), and in Tiwa as *taw* (Jose, 2000) and does not occur in Standard Khasi. The difficulty is that the etymological development from Proto-Tibeto-Burman *tak* (Matisoff, 2003: 328, 640) has not yet been explained.

Item #11, *dawʔgep* 'duck', is unmistakably Tibeto-Burman in origin with its first syllable reflecting Proto-Tibeto-Burman *daw ~ *dow* 'bird' (Matisoff, 2003: 586). The second syllable is onomatopoeic.

3.4 Relationship of the Lyngams with surrounding communities

The Lyngams are the neighbours of the Garos to the north, west and south. To the south and southwest of the Lyngams live the Atongs (a Garo sub-tribe). Speakers of other Khasian languages live to the east of the Lyngams. There are many cultural traits that the Lyngams and the Garos have in common. Lyngams, (other) Khasis and Garos are all matrilineal and matrilocal: clan membership inherits through the mother, and a bride and groom move into the house of the bride's mother at the time of the

marriage. Possessions can only be inherited through the female line. Lyngams, (other) Khasis and Garos are patriarchal: the most important decisions with in both the clan and the family are made by men. Within a clan, these men are the brothers of a married woman; within the family, either the brothers of the married woman or her husband. Gurdon (1907); Becker (1925); Karotemprel (1986); Rabel-Heymann (1989); Burling (1963) provide valuable in-depth information on these cultural aspects of the Khasis and the Garos.

Lyngams and Garos share epic stories that are not shared with the other Khasis like the tales of Bandi and Dəkhi, and both Lyngams and the Garos consider Balphakram to be the old land of the spirits of the dead and the highest top in the South Garo Hills, Waimong Ha'byri/Chikmang Habri, to be the new land of the spirits of the dead. Both the Garos and the Lyngams are matrilineal (clan membership and possessions are inherited through the mother), matrilocal (a married boy goes to live in the house of his wife's parents), patriarchal (the older relatives of the wife make all important decisions) and exogamous (they marry outside their own clan, see also Karotemprel, 1986; Burling, 1963; van Breugel, 2014a).

There are also things, except language, that distinguish the Lyngams from the Garos. Lyngams often, but not always, go to schools that teach in Standard Khasi, while many Garos living in the West Khasi Hills go to schools that teach in Standard Garo. Popular places, with those Lyngam parents who can afford it, to put children to school are Williamnagar and Tura, where Lyngam boys and girls receive education in Standard Garo or a local variety of English. For higher education, college

and university, for most Lyngams, Shillong seems to be the preferred city over Tura.

Furthermore, Lyngam women dress unlike Garo women but like Khasi women with the characteristic, long cloth worn diagonally across the chest covering one shoulder and going under the other to be tied at the back. These phenomena could imply identification of the Lyngam with other Khasis rather than with Garos. There are many Lyngams that understand and speak a great deal of Garo in one or more of its varieties. Atong and Standard Garo, for example, proved to be good contact languages in the market place of Shallang, but not in Sankelo or Umdang. In the latter places, Khasi was the best contact language.

All the Lyngam speakers that I asked whether they felt more related to the Garos or the "other" Khasis (i.e. speakers of Khasian languages) said that they feel more closely related to the Khasis, i.e. they consider themselves to be a Khasi sub-tribe; although they say that they have more in common with Garo culture than with Khasi culture.

When I asked my Atong friends in Siju and Badri about the Lyngams, the older generations told me that, in the past, the Atongs went to work for the Lyngams to earn money. Usually they would work in the rice fields. Almost all the Atong people in their forties or older whom I have spoken to had been to some or other Lyngam village when they were younger and they were all able to speak at least some words in Lyngam. My Garo friends in Williamnagar and Tura knew nothing about the Megams (as they call the Lygnams) except that they had learnt in school that Megam is one of the Garo sub-tribes.

3.5 Number of speakers

During my fieldwork I was unable to ascertain the number of speakers. Lewis et al. (2014) puts the number of Lyngam speakers at 6,000, of which 5,000 in India and 1,000 in Bangladesh. The number of speakers is given as 30,000 by the People's Linguistic Survey of India (Bhasha Research and Publication Centre 2011, under the tab 'Language sample and impact'). The Linguistic Survey mentions that there are speakers in Bangladesh but does not provide numbers for India and Bangladesh separately, nor does it become clear from the text that the speakers in Bangladesh are excluded from the census.[12] The total population of the West Khasi Hills was about 385,000 according to the population census of 2011,[13] which means that the Lyngam constitute either about 1.3% of that population or around 7.8%.

Counting Lyngam speakers might be a complicated task. Baker (2013: 3) writes that:

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[12] The text is oddly inaccurate in that it mentions that "[t]he Lyngngam [sic] area is thickly covered with forests, wild animals like elephants, tigers, bears, boars, monkeys, deer", while there is hardly any forest or wildlife left in most of the region due to massive deforestation that the authorities have only began to tackle in the last decade.

[13] Different sources, both apparently based of the official 2011 census, present different numbers. The website *Population Census 2011* presents the population of the West Khasi hills as 383,461; whereas page 10 of a PDF file *Census of India 2011*, downloadable via an URL of the Indian Government, states that the population as 385,601.

"speaker number may vary dramatically depending on the parameters used to identity (sic) an individual as a Lyngngam speaker. These parameters can be difficult to define as a result of the classification of neighbouring language varieties, intergroup marriage, local trade centres and social stigmas."

The Lyngams whom I asked about this could not or would not give me even an approximate number. Given the small size of the villages (except Shallang with about 200 houses) that I have seen during my fieldwork in India, between ten and twenty houses, the former size being rare, and given that the area in India where the language is spoken is quite small, I estimate that the number will be nearer to 5,000 than 30,000.

4. Data collection

The recorded linguistic and anthropological data consist of folk stories, people's life stories, historical narratives and lists of words. I made audio recordings of various speakers; some short stories were recorded in writing. All audio recordings were made with a Zoom H4n digital recorder and were supplemented with elicited materials and fieldnotes. I recorded 26 different speakers, 17 males and 9 females with ages ranging between 20 and 80. The audio recordings were transcribed and translated with the help of a native speaker with whom I worked together for this purpose. The resultant corpus of linguistic data and fieldnotes forms the basis of my linguistic analysis. The data were annotated with the relevant metadata necessary for an accurate description of the language as well as for archiving purposes.

I recorded almost four and a half hours of speech of which a bit more than two hours and 20 minutes are transcribed. The reason that so much of the material has not been transcribed is that most of the longer recordings were made towards the end of my stay in the field and there was no more opportunity to transcribe them. The recorded anthropological data are presented in this report.

My contact languages were English and Atong. Atong appeared to be a very useful contact language in the area where I did most of my work and English much less so. I speak some Atong due to my research on the language (van Breuge,l 2009a; 2009b; 2010; 2014a). English is one of the official languages of Meghalaya and is spoken by educated people. Standard Khasi, which I do not speak, would have been ideal as a contact language.

5. A note on some Lyngam villages

I have included this section because it may be useful for future fieldworkers who want to work on Lyngam. Most villages where Lyngam is spoken as the main language lie within the Catholic Parish of Umdang, except for Shallang, which lies in the Parish of Shallang. Most of these villages are not easily accessible because of the lack of (good) roads. The dry season would be the best time to visit these villages.

5.1 Lyngam villages I have visited

I have visited the following Lyngam villages during my fieldwork: Langumshing, Umdang, Nongdaju, Pormawlein, Iawnaw, Sankelo, Kylon Mathei and Shallang (locally called Cha'lang [tɕaʔlaŋ]). Except for Iawnaw and Pormawlein, these villages all lie along the NH 44

road. I have been to Riangdo several times, but people there mainly speak Maram and some Nongtrei.

5.2 Lyngam villages that I have not visited

Ranikhol and Nongjiri are not far from the Bangladesh border, outside the old Shallang and Umdang Catholic parishes. Lyngam people have told me repeatedly that in Ranikor, there are few Lyngams and that people mainly speak Maram and Garo. A Lyngam informant told me that Nonghylam, a village close to the Bangladesh border, might be a good place to do fieldwork because people speak Lyngam and are very educated, meaning that it would not be difficult to find an English-speaking consultant there. The Lyngam variety spoken there is said to be Rongrin. Father Marzo warned me that there might not be any electricity.

The village of Riengmaw was not recommended by my consultants in Shallang because people there speak a variety of Lyngam called Rongrin, which, my Shallang consultants said, is mixed with Khasi and Maram.

On the northern or Assam side of the Khasi Hills, the Nongtrei or Nongtrai variety of Lyngam is spoken. Nongdengkain would be the first Lyngam village to be found when taking the road from the border village of Boko into Meghalaya. Not far from that is the Lyngam village of Umsohpieng. The following sentences give an impression of the difference between Nongtrei and Shallang speech varieties:

Nongtrei: Kren Nongtrei iiry. [kren noŋtrej ji=rə] (speak Nongtrei we=declarative) 'We speak Nongtrei.'

Shallang: Krah Lyngam iyery. [kraʔ lŋam jɘ=rə]. (speak Lyngam we=declarative) 'We speak Lyngam.'

6. Stories about the history and origin

Two people volunteered short stories about the history or origin of the Lyngams during casual conversations. I have noted these stories down and present them here. The speakers have asked to remain anonymous and I honour their wishes.

Story 1

The Lyngams were originally called Maram. They lived in Bangladesh and were Garos. They had many *oja*s 'medicine men'. The Khasis invited the Megams to stay in the Khasi Hills because the Khasis needed *oja*s (an *oja* herbal medicine man). Then the Megams intermarried with the Khasis and changed their language and their family names so that they became Khasis.

Story 2

Until the 70s, the name Lyngam did not exist. These people called themselves Megam. When I was young, I never heard the name Lyngam, only Megam. Then, the King of Nongstoin at that time came back from a trip around the world. He found his people very backwards and said that nowhere in the world had he seen people as backward as these. The used the word *lyngam* to describe them, which means 'stupid, backward'. The people followed the example set by their King and started to call themselves Lyngam.

7.Cultural events

I collected descriptions of three cultural events that are presented here. The description of the singgydok has also been published in van Breugel 2014b.

7.1 Sorat

Sorat is a feast to celebrate the anniversary of a dead person. The spirit of the dead person is believed to come back from Balphakram to attend. The family of the deceased welcomes the guests with *choh singkrum* [tɕoʔ siŋkrum] 'the dance with the drum'. The guests usually bring a cow or give money. All debts that any of the guests have to the family of the deceased have to be paid on that day. The guests also have to bring a present for the older female relatives of the deceased person, especially the *meikha* [mejkʰa] 'fathers sister or paternal grandmother'.

7.2 Niangchoh

Niangchoh [ɲaŋtɕoʔ] is a big feast in honour of someone or out of gratitude to someone. A *niangchoh* is only given by a woman to a man of the same clan. The person who receives the *niangchoh* at his house has to pay for the delivery of the food that the woman brings for him. In addition, he has to prepare *ja* 'rice' and *jhur* [jhur] 'vegetables' and tea. The woman giving the *niangchoh* has to give eggs, a pig (of which the intestines are not eaten) and *pyelang* [pəlaŋ] 'ground rice with sugar and salt put in a leaf and then boiled'.

7.3 Singgydok

Singgydok [siŋgədok] is the event where the family of the groom gives a dowry to the family of the bride. This happens some time before the marriage. How the amount of money given at a *singgydok* is determined differs between clans. According to some clans, the amount can be whatever the groom's family deems appropriate. In other clans, the *burang* [buraŋ] 'male family members of the groom' will have a meeting to decide how much money they will ask as a dowry from the bride's family.

The groom, called the *chong* [tɕoŋ], is already living at his wife's house at the time of the meeting and he will not attend it. After telling the bride's family their demand, the bride's family will start collecting money from all the clan members to pay the dowry.

Suppose the groom's family asked for 50,000 rupees, and the family of the bride has collected 100,000 rupees. Of the collected money, 50,000 will go to the dowry. Then, of the remaining 50,000 rupees, the bride's family will deduct the money calculated to be needed for the singgydok and wedding events. Whatever money remains after that will go to the family of the bride.

8. Sacred sites

8.1 Mithangram

According to Mr. L.M. Sangma, there is a sacred site in the village of Memylam [meməlɑm] called Mithangram [mitʰaŋrɑm]. Here, two sisters, Aje [adʑe] and Gyrge [grge], planted a special kind of rice and bamboo. If you touch that rice or bamboo, you will not live through the night.

8.2 Balphakram

The Lyngams believe or believed that the spirits of dead people go to Balphakram, a plateau on top of one of the highest hills in the area close on the border with the Garo Hills and close to the border with Bangladesh. Balphakram is also a national park. The following story about the road that the spirit of a deceased has to travel to reach Balphakram comes from Mr. Robort Sohbar and was recorded by me in the village of Shallang in April 2014 in the form of written notes. Another story about

Balphakram, told by Mr Louis Rongrin from Umdang, can be found in van Breugel 2014b.

When a person dies he becomes a *ksoit* 'ghost'. The first stop on the way to Balphakram is the *Deng pon*.[14] This is a tree that lies across the road and functions as a gate. If the person is not really dead, he is not allowed through the gate and is sent back to the land of the living, i.e. the person presumed dead comes back to life. If the person is really dead, the tree will let the ghost pass. The ghost then has to take a road called *Phokso'lait*,[15] the road over a hillock. Then, the ghost reaches the river of *Umbyllein*.[16] Ghosts usually have a cow with them to take with them to Balphakram. While bathing in *Umbyllein*, the ghost ties up this cow to a tree standing on the river bank. When living people go to that place, they can see the marks made by the ropes on the bark of the tree. When the ghost bathes in the river *Umbyllein*, he forgets everything, and can continue on the way to Balphakram without any memories of his life.

Then the ghost goes on to *Rijanop*, also called *Jarinop*,[17] where he eats rice out of leaves called *jakntap*.[18] Then the ghost precedes to a place on the slope of a hill where only broom grass grows, where the soil is red and where bog rats dig many holes. The sand dug out from the holes

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[14] *deng* [deŋ] 'tree', *pon* [pon] 'to put across'.

[15] *phok* [pʰok] 'hillock' *so'lait* [soʔlac] 'species of fruit'.

[16] *um* is the compound form of the word *gum* 'water', byllein [blleɲ] 'to forget'.

[17] *ja* [ʤa] 'cooked rice', the rest of the compound is opaque.

[18] *kyntap* [kntɑp] 'packet'.

makes dark red patches on the slope of the hill. You can see the rats at work from afar, and the whole hillside looks like the tongue of a monster. This is the place where the *law'aw* [jawʔaw] live. They are evil spirits that have never been human. They can eat a *ksoit* 'ghost'. The ghost has to cross this place on his way to Balphakram. The family and friends of the deceased help the ghost to cross this place by distracting the *law'aw*. They do this by throwing eggs, pots of rice wine and other things on the ground and break them. These objects also travel to the land of the spirits where they appear whole again before the *law'aw*. The objects then dance around, thus distracting the *law'aw*. The *ksoit* can pass the *law'aw* and enter Balphakram, land of the spirits of the dead.

8.3 The three big rocks

Mawlyng, Lumkyllang and Lumsymper[19], are three enormous rocks that are spirits and to whom offerings can be brought. They are the spirits of three kings. Mawlyng is the most powerful of them. Because they are kings, no other kings can visit him. Kings, or members of the royal families, who visit the site of Mawlyng will die on the way. They may get acute dysentery or may be killed by a wild animal. Lumkyllang is a rock bigger than Mawlyng in the Maram area near Mawsingram. Lumsymper is a rock even bigger than Lumkyllang and is located on the way to Mawkyrwat. The story of Lumkyllang and Lumsymper can be found in Gurdon (1907: 169). The large rock located in the Lyngam area is Mawlyng.

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[19] Pronunciation: [mawlǝŋ, lumkllaŋ, lumsmpɛr]

Mawlyng is an enormous oblong rock that towers above the surrounding landscape as if the moon has crushed down on earth. It is located about 5 km north of the village of Umdang. There are two other small villages in the area: Nongiawnaw and Pormawlein. In the past, before the Lyngams became Christians, they made offerings to Mawlyng. A local authority told me that these offerings probably involved sacrifices of animals. The surrounding landscape is dominated by big grey rocks that are said to be the offspring of Mawlyng.

I visited Mawlyng on 17 May 2014 on foot from the village of Pormawlein with a group of Lyngams. I also visited the village Nongiawnaw, where I hoped to record the story of Mawlyng from local people. Unfortunately that did not happen. Fortunately, I recorded it in Shallang two days later. The whole story of Mawlyng as told by Mr Robort Sohbar from Shallang is published in van Breugel 2014b. Here is a synopsis.

A young unmarried woman gets a small stone stuck to her foot while walking in the river looking for river snails to eat. The stone grows bigger and bigger until it swallows her entire body and then still grows bigger. The stone is actually a man, a king, who wants to marry her. They get a child who marries the offspring of another huge stone, called Lumkyllang. The two families visit each other every year in the form of spirits when the great storms occur.

9. Ghosts and spirits and priests

This section presents what I have recorded about the supernatural world of the Lyngams, which seems to coexist effortlessly with the relatively

recently adopted ideas of the Christian religion. More about the non-Christian religious practices of the Lyngams can be found in Karotemprel (1986: 18-21).

The *iawchwar* [iawtɕwar] or *chwar* is a flying, disembodied woman's head full of fire instead of hair. A woman can change into a *chwar* at night and change back into a person during the day. Women with long breasts are suspected to be the most likely ones to change into a *iawchwar*. A *chwar* likes to eat foetuses. You can prevent a *chwar* from getting into your house by hanging up thorny branches in the doors, windows and elsewhere in the house. If you see one, you have to spit. To protect a child, you can put a black dot on its head.

The *niakhla* [ɲak^{h}la] is a person, man or woman, who changes into a tiger at night and potentially goes around the village killing people. This is what the Atongs call a *matsadu* (see van Breugel, 2014a: 396n).

The *sangkhnei* [saŋk^{h}nɛj] is a mythical water dragon that lives in big rivers. This is what the Atong people call the *sangkyning* (see van Breugel, 2009b: 3).

In the past, all Khasi tribes had priests. They formed a separate group or caste within the society and were called *lyngdoh* [lŋdoʔ] in Khasi. Today, Lyngdoh is the name of the clan of those who are the descents from those priests.

In the past, some Khasi tribes gave offerings to a snake kept in their house. They could ask the snake to curse someone. If someone had been cursed by a snake, the *s'imlih* [sʔimliʔ] was the only person who could lift the curse.

10. Conclusion

As a result of my two fieldwork trips to the Lyngam-speaking Area in Meghalaya, Northeast India in 2013 and 2014, the mystery of the Megam language in Meghalaya has been solved. Megam is the Garo exonym for a language and people who call themselves Lyngam. I have collected enough data, both linguistic and anthropological, to meet my four goals. In the coming years, the collected data will be organised and analysed. The analysis presented here shows that Lyngam speakers have a lot in common with the speakers of neighbouring Tibeto-Burman speakers, both linguistically, culturally and spiritually, sharing lexicon as well as traditional narratives, cultural events, beliefs in the supernatural. The language has also made the transition from a purely oral one to a written one.

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Appendix: Abbreviations

3SG	third person singular		F	feminine
A	agentive		GEN	genitive
ADD	additive		H	human
ADV	adverbial		MIR	mirative
ART	article		QUOT	quotative
ASP	aspect		RED	reduplication
CT	contrastive topic		SEQ	sequential
DREL	derelational			