

Philippe Ramirez

Tales of origin, cultural encounters and political claims in Northeast India: Ethnic Labels and Migrations



Colloque "Migrations", Porquerolles, Var, France, 7 September 2007

Do people divide because of migrations?

- Herder, 1772: "The division of the families into separated nations certainly does not proceed in accordance with the ... connections between distance [and] migration... The basis of this difference between such near little people in language, manner of thought, and manner of life is reciprocal familial and national hatred".

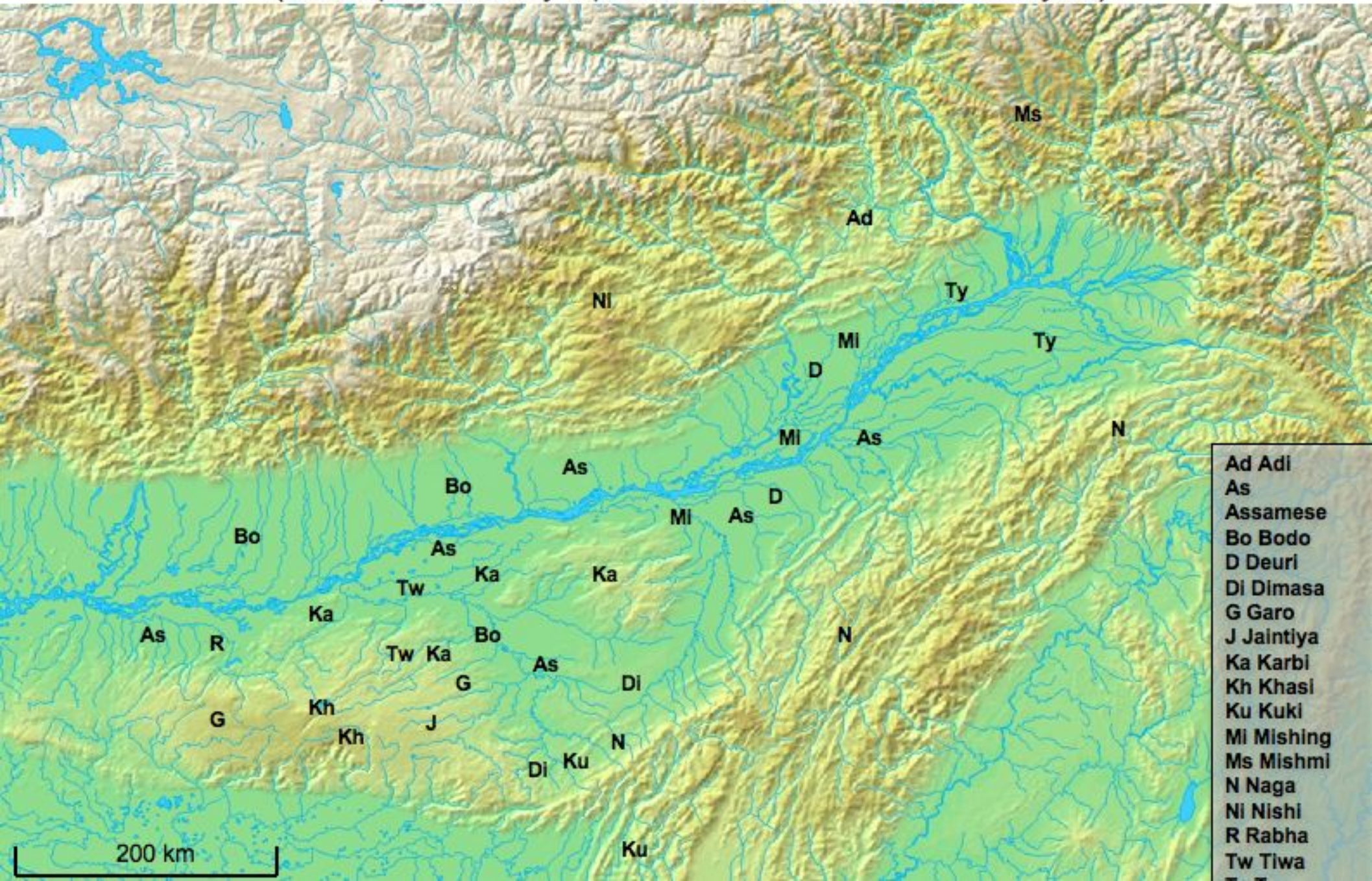


Northeast India's Location



The Northeastern complexity: a multiplicity of Ethnic Labels.

(the map shows only a part of the most common ethnonyms)



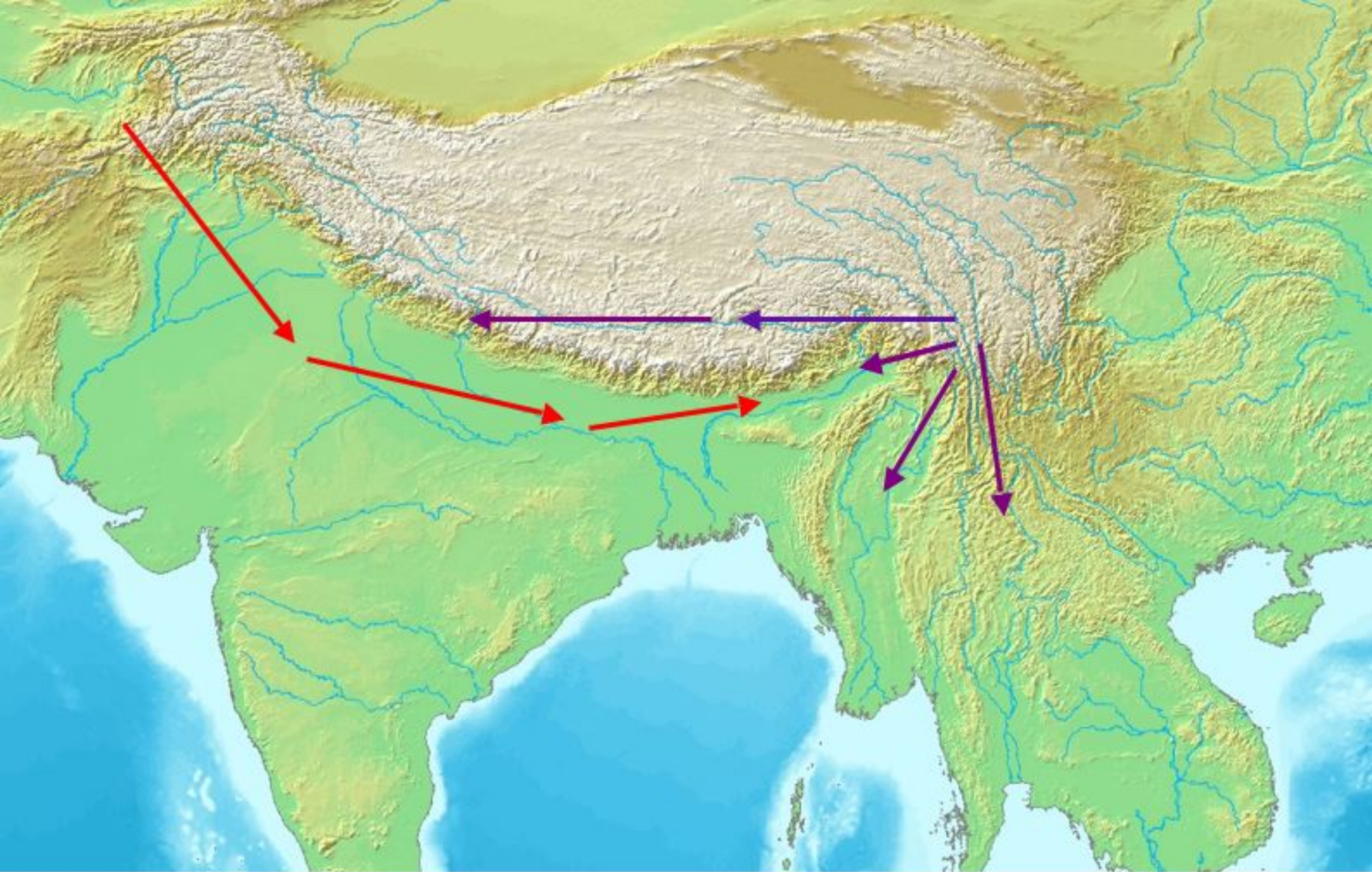
Ethnic groups and migrations: the general assumptions

For scholars and ethnic politicians alike, the multiplicity of different ethnic entities is mostly due to migrations.

The present population of Northeast India would be the result of the encounter between "waves of migrants", mainly the "Indo-Aryans" and the "Tibeto-Burmans".

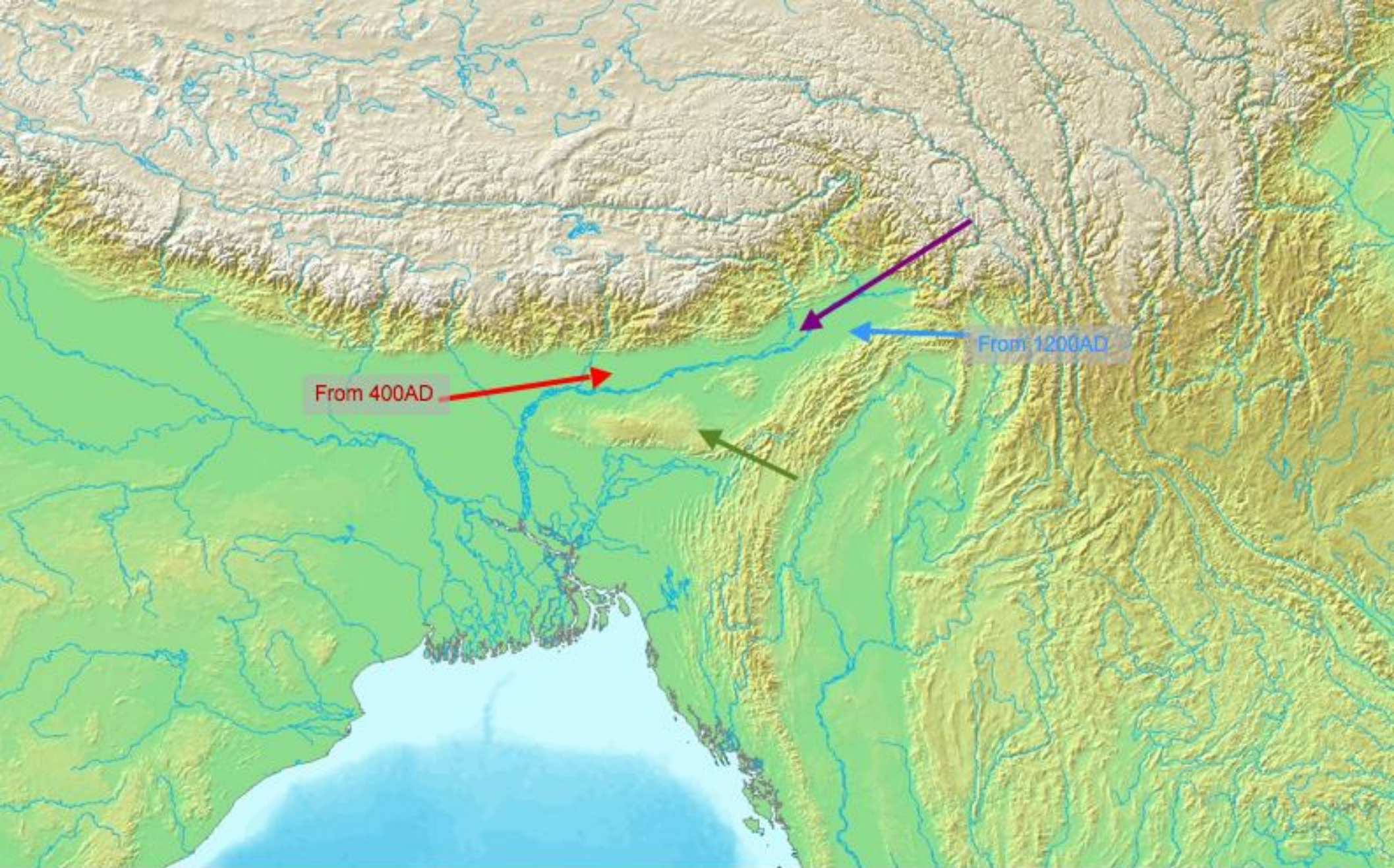
Similarly, "Mon-Khmers" and "Tay" are supposed to have come down all the way with their language, culture and identity.

The general assumption is that each label refers to a permanent group of people with a perennial culture and language.



"Indo-aryans" & "Tibeto-burmans » in India : the Classical model

Tibeto-burmans 
Indo-aryans 



Peoples of Northeast India : the Classical model

(periods given correspond to the first evidences when available, but except for the Tay, datation is very uncertain)

Mon-khmer	
Tibeto-burman	
Indo-aryan	
Tay	

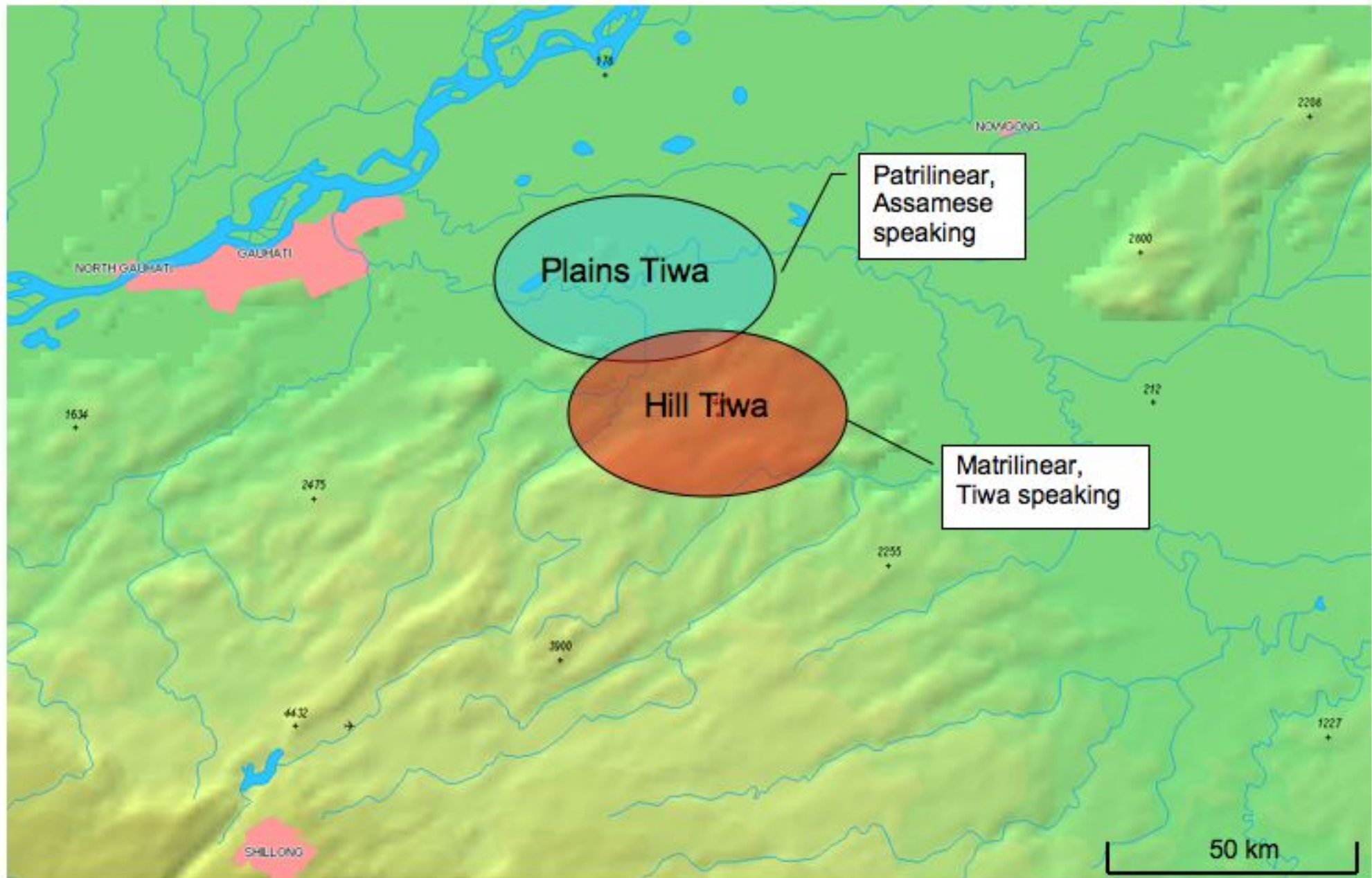
The Contingency of Ethnic Groups

Present Northeast India provides several cases which deny both the cultural homogeneity of named groups and their permanence.

Entire clans or villages may adopt a new identity overnight.

And some communities express different belongings according to contexts.

The Tiwa Case: one label, two languages, two kinship systems, two religions, two economies



The Paradigm of Ethnic History

It is mainly the languages and ethnic labels which determine the way common people and experts perceive the human landscape.

- Tibeto-Burmese languages speaking people are equated with "Mongoloids", "tribes" or "hill people".
- All "Mongoloids" are supposed to descend from the Kirata briefly mentioned in ancient Indian literature (Mahabharata) as the inhabitants of Himalayas.
- This has recently given rise to a "Mongol" identity.
- Thus an increasing number of Tiwa claim they have come from Mongolia.

Finding the origins: linking ethnic labels through history

- The reputation or direct experience of similarities among tibeto-burmese languages supports the general belief of a close kinship among their speakers.
- Historical proofs are sought for in the ancient texts:
 - colonial reports (XIX-XXth c.)
 - Buranji: Assamese royal chronicals (XV-XVIIIth c.)
 - Mahabharata (VIII c. in its written form)
- Linkages are established between apparently similar ethnonyms coming from these different historical contexts.
- For the most ancient period, a priori genetic link is asserted between all "Tibeto-Burmans" and the Kiratas.

Finding the origins: linking ethnic labels through history

centuries

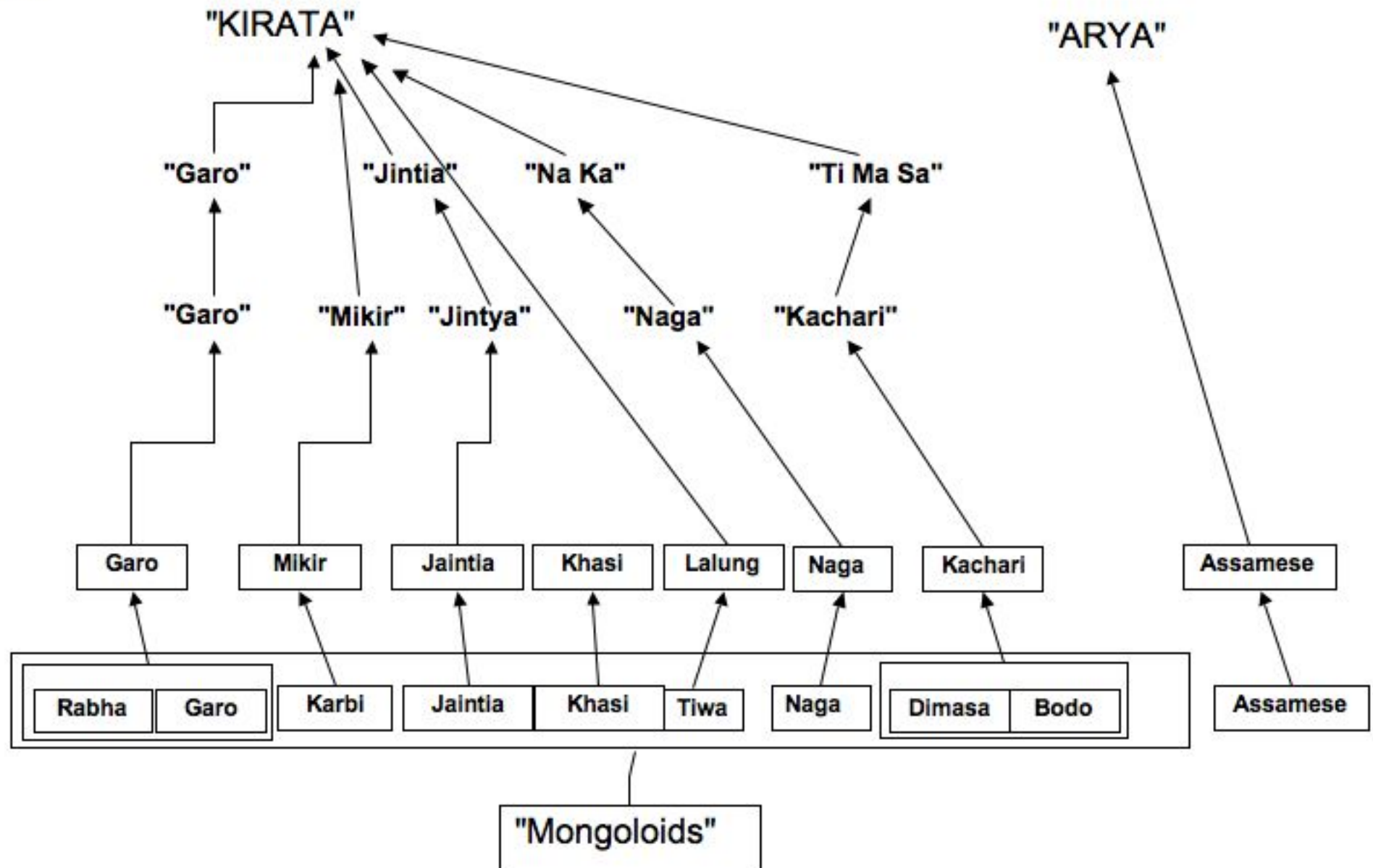
VIII

XV

XVIII

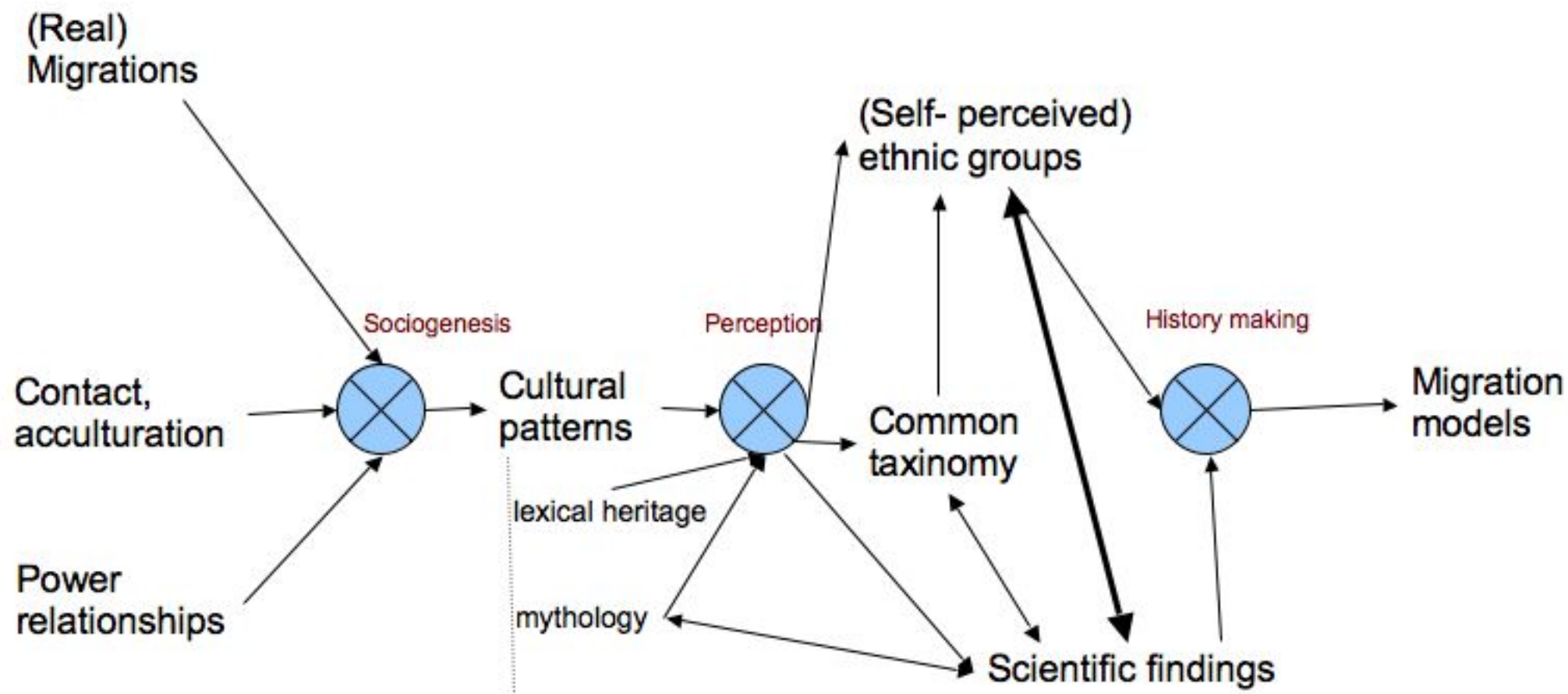
XIX

XX



The making of migration histories

- Reconstructions of migration histories may be modeled as a system of interactions among popular knowledge, ethnic politics and scientific productions.
- "Real" migrations, cultural encounters and power relationships contribute to a set of cultural patterns which are perceived and categorized by various observers.
- Common people, ethnic writers and researches interpret the differences and similarities between cultural patterns and produce narratives about the history of human groups.
- Models produced by these various sources constantly re-feed the "common" perceptions that will shape future narratives.



The making of migration histories

The Origin of the Tripuri People

TripuriSociety.org

- **Pre-Civilization:**

Before the evolution to modern Homo sapiens, there were many human like monkey named anthropoid apes like orang otang, gorilla, chimpanzee etc. Then they evolved to Homo erectus...

- **Ancient Civilizations:**

There were four major civilizations in the world, all of which were founded in Asia. These were: Chinese, Egyptian, and Mesopotamia and Indus civilization. All the civilizations were interrupted by unknown circumstance other than Chinese civilization which is continuing till date.

- **Indus civilization:**

... The skulls found of Harappa and Mahenjo-Daro belonged to proto-australoid, Mongoloid, Mediterranean and Alpine races. This clearly proved that the mongoloid were also part of the Indus civilisation. ... but no skull was found of from the site of excavation belonging to Aryan people.

Who are the descendants of mongoloid living during Indus civilization in present day in India? These are none other than the present day's indo-mongoloid people or the Kirata or the Borok race living in India namely, Himalyan mongoloid tribes, Kinnours, Spitian, Lahuli, Nepalese, Koch, Mech, Bodo, Rabha, Garo, Tiwas, Dimasa, Kachhari, Karabi, Tripuri etc.