

SOCIAL ORGANIZATION: GARO TRIBE

Introduction:

The Garos are the inhabitants of North East India, particularly concentrating in the Garo Hills districts of Meghalaya. However, few of the branches of this tribe are scattered in some areas of neighbouring states of Assam, other North Eastern states, West Bengal and also in Bangladesh. There are different views regarding the meaning and use of the term 'Garo'. Major A. Playfair in his work "The Garos" holds that Gara or Ganching is a sub-tribe which first received the appellation of Garo who lived in the southern portion of the Garo Hills. Gradually, the name has extended to mean all the inhabitants of the hilly region. In course of time 'Gara' came to be pronounced as 'Garo', Playfair is of the view that the Garo is merely a corrupt form of the name of one of the sub-tribes. Another version on the origin of the term 'Garo' is that while the tribe of our discussion was migrating from Tibet they had a leader whose name was 'Garu. It is very probable that after his name the followers came to be known as 'Garos'. According to the census of India 2001, total Garo population was 725502, mainly concentrated in the state of Meghalaya, Nagaland, Mizoram, Assam, West Bengal and Tripura. On the other hand a large number of Garos are found in the Bangladesh who once upon a time they have been migrated from the state of West Bengal through north-eastern part.

They represent Mongoloid racial stock. They speak a language belonging to Tibeto-Chinese family of languages. Animalism is the core of Garo religion. The doctrine of animism rests side by side in which 'souls' are conceived as the 'elixir of life'. They are considered as the unsubstantial human images which are indestructible. After death, they become the spirits of both benevolent and malevolent nature. On the other hand, a number of natural object and phenomena are considered to be animated by supernatural spirits

Migration:

Dr. Mihir N. Sangma in his book on "Unpublished Documents on Garo Affairs" (1993) has mentioned about three groups of Garos who have migrated from Tibet through

three different routes. These are - 1. One group of Garos migrated from Tibet along the source of river Tista or Tarsa as they call it towards south western side of Tibet under the great leadership of Jappa Jalimpa and Sukpa Bonggipa. 2. Another group of Garos came from central Tibet. They moved towards the south along the source of river Brahmaputra under the leadership of Alak Raja, Asilik Gitel, Durka, Buia, Rengwa, Salbong, Suakpa and Nenggilpa etc. 3. The third group of Garos who moved towards the south-eastern part of Tibet along the source of Chinwin, Salnein and Irrawady rivers under the leadership of Raja Sirampa, Kotta Nangrepa and Muga Dingchepa.

Occupation:

The Garo are at present mainly concerned with agriculture. They practice both permanent and 'shifting hill cultivation' which is known in the local term *jhum*. The Plain Garo, however, practice permanent wet cultivation in the same field, owned by them, every year. Artificial irrigation and manuring are known to them. They mainly cultivate paddy (summer variety). Maize, potato, tobacco are their cash-crops every year. They also grow various types of vegetables which also give them to earn ready cash.

The Hill-Garo still practice their traditional calling of '*shifting hill cultivation*' by primitive '*slash-and-burn*' method. In dry summer months, they cut down small trees, bushes and leave them for few days to dry. Then, they set fire to the dried woody collection. The residual ash serves them as manure to their '*Jhum*' fields. Before the start of monsoon, they loosen their fields by means of a hoe or digging stick. When monsoon starts, they sprinkle the seeds of different kharif crops including bajra, jowar, and also pulse seeds; tobacco and potato seeds are also planted by them. They harvest their crops in winter season.

They also participate in occasional hunting and fishing activities, especially in agricultural off-season. They also gather different forest products which are either sold or kept for home consumption. Honey and fuel are gathered regularly from the forest by which they are able to earn money. Occasional hunting is carried on by various traps of which pit-fall and transfixing traps are common. Bow and arrows are also used in hunting. Fishing by poisoning, by implements, and also by traps is carried on by the Garo. The

activity of fishing is restricted to rainy season when agricultural fields, streams and pools are filled in with water.

Culture:

These tribes are also lovers of music and dance. They use various traditional musical instruments like stringed instruments, wind instruments and self sounding instruments. Men flaunt turban with clothes in villages. Whereas, blouse and a cloth tied around their waist is worn by Garo women. They also love to wear traditional jewellery made of beads and other material.

Garos also celebrate different festivals. **Wangala** is one of the significant festivals of these tribes which is generally celebrated in the month of October. This festival is celebrated after the harvest of crops as thanks giving ceremony to their deity Salijong. Rice is the staple food of Garos and most of them are non-vegetarians. They also make liquor at home from food grains. Their main cultivation crops include rice, ginger, millet, bananas, vegetables, pepper, chilli and cotton.

Social Organization:

Kinship System:

Kinship is a distinctive element of every society. It plays an important role in the social life of a community. The tribal societies are also marked by strong kinship systems.

Kinship terminology

The Garo kinship terminology is basically of classificatory type. By a common term, father, father's brothers, mother's sister's husband, father's sister's husband are called. Similarly, the term applied to address mother being used to call all the female relatives in the status of mother. Cousins of Same sex have a common term.

The kinship system in the Garo society is described below:

The Clan:

The most important part of the Kinship system of the Garos is constituted of the clans. There are five exogamous clans in the Garo society. Clan is called **Chatchi** by the Garos. The five Chatchis are **the Sangma, the Marak, the Momin, the Areng** and **the Shira**. Each clan has a number of sub-clans or steps. Septs are called **Machong**. Chatchi means relation, while Machong means entering round a common mother. So, Chatchi is a clan and Ma chong is sub-clan. Originally there were only two clans viz. Sangma and Marak. In course of time Areng, Shira, Momin have been evolved out of the two original clans. The Areng clan is an offshoot of the Sangma while the Shira clan has emerged out of the Marak clan. It is believed that the third group, i.e., Momin clan has come into being as a result of union of Garo girl with a Muslim man from Bihar during Mirjumlas's invasion on Assam in 1661. Thus Sangma, Marak, Areng, Shira and Momin are the five clans in the present Garo society. But, according to Playfair, there were only three Chatchis namely **Sangma, Marak** and **Momin**. He does not consider Areng and Shira as different clans and believed that once they were all Momins.

Every Chatchi has number of septs or Machongs affiliated into it. For example - Agitok, Ampang, Bangshall, Chimm, Koksi, Dareng, Bangbonggre, Bangjolgri, Manda are septs of Sangma chatchi. Adokgre, Bolwari, Chambugong, Wagi, Rangsa etc. are septs of Marak chatchi. Gabil, Watre, Rongchu, Saka etc. affiliated to Momin chatchi. Dalbot is a sept of Shira chatchi Dochik, Nongbak, Chingkota, Wage are septs of Areng chatchi. The Machong or the sub-clans are named after animal, bird, trees, bamboos, rivers and hills or after the name of places where they live. For example, the Adokgre Machong of Marak chatchi and Bangbonggre Machong of Sangma chatchi are named after the name of the villages where they live. In the same way Do po Machong is name after the bird owl (Do'po means owl in Garo language). Bolwari Machong is named after the name of a tree; Gara Machong is named after the name of a kind of lizard, Chambugong (a kind of wood), Mecheng (an odorous plant) etc. It was because of this practice of naming of sub-clans after the name of their dearer trees, birds, rivers etc. some scholars regard the Garos a "totemists".

Family Pattern:

The framework of Garo society in general is represented by a basic unit of their social life, a family (*nok*) or a household (*hokdang*), a matrilineal maximal group (*mahari*) and unilineal exogamous descent group (*machong*) and a still larger group of constellation of clans (*chatchi*). These organizational units are universally observable among all the Garos. The smallest kinship group is the **nuclear family** which is initiated with marriage. Burling regards marriage as the convenient starting place for the description of the Garo social organization. The composition of the Garo family changes with the marriage of the daughters in particular and their children in general. In case of an Agate marriage a Garo family consists of a married couple and their unmarried children. An Agate marriage means of the marriage of a daughter who is not the heiress of the family. Such a family branches out of a Nokrom family. A Nokrom family consists of a married couple, their unmarried children and a married daughter (own or adopted) with her Nokrom husband along with her progeny if any. A newly started family also becomes a Nokrom family. Nokromship is an institution which perpetuates the continuation of a household. Family of a non-heiress daughter may temporarily stay for a year or two with the parental family until they shift to a neolocal residence. Each family has a house of its own. The marital possession of the family as well as its members constitutes a Nokdang. Each family must have a Nokma. Nokma is the managing head of the family. Nokmaship always goes to the husband. Old Nokma the father-in-law is succeeded by the son-in-law of the heiress daughter. The new Nokma is generally the son of the old Nokma's sister's. The heiress is called **Nokna** and her husband is called **Nokrom**. The heiress daughter has to remain in her parental house with her husband and children.

Marriage:

Marriage is strictly exogamous among the Garos and husband and wife must belong to the different septs and motherhoods. For example, a Sangnia cannot marry a Sangma, a Marak a Marak, or a Momin a Momin. The children invariably belong to the mother's sept. In the matrilineal Garo society, according to traditional practice, marriages have to be celebrated in accordance with their own recognized customs and rules. The marriage customs and laws of the Garos are based on matrilineal principles in which descent is always traced from the mother's side. Children born of a couple is known after the mother's

surname and her Machong. But in recent times there is a tendency in the Garo society of tracing descendent from the father's side also. For example, Shri Albert Cheran Momin of West Garo Hills is married to Smt. Luminus D. Marak of Chitukna (Garo) village of East Garo Hills district. The couple has three sons and one daughter. Contrary to Garo custom, his children use to write their father's surname and Machong name.

The Garos practice two types of marriages viz - '**Nokrom**' marriage and '**Agate**' marriage. Under **Nokrom** marriage the bridegroom has to stay compulsorily in the household of his parents-in-law and becomes a part of the House and family. This Nokrom rule is applicable in case of heiress daughter only. The '**Agate**' system is adopted in case of daughters other than the heiress. In Agate marriages the son-in-law can stay in his father-in-law's house for a temporary period. After staying for a temporary period he has to build a new and independent house for his family in the village of his father-in-law. However, to build house in father-in-law's village is not compulsory. But in case of Nokrom marriages the rule of groom staying with his in-law has to be strictly followed. By marriage a man married to a heiress is transferred from his father's authority to that of his maternal uncle cum father-in-law. Family resulting from Nokrom marriage is a joint family consisting of the family of the father-in-law, and the family of the son-in-law. The family of Agate marriage tends to be nuclear family.

In Garo society, marriage establishes a perpetuating relation and a customary contract between the respective Machongs of the principal male and female of a household. The son-in-law for the inheritress daughter (nokna) is to be ideally chosen from any of the sons of her father's Machong. A Nokrom son-in-law is a resident son-in-law of the house. He will become the Nokma of the family after the death of his father-in-law. There are some interesting pre marriage practices found to be prevalent in the Gam society. The elderly Garos want to arrange their families in such a way so that one young couple will live with them in their old age - a couple who will support them and who will eventually inherit property and assume much of their social position. For this purpose they choose one of their daughters as heiress (nokna) who along with her husband and children stay with and look after them.

Marriage in traditional Garo society is regulated by two customary laws- Law of Exogamy and Law of A'kim. According to the Exogamy law marriage is strictly prohibited

within the same Machong. The bride and the bridegroom must belong to different Machong. If marriage takes place within the same Machong, such marriage is looked down by the society and is termed as '**Ma'dong**'. '**Ma'dong**' meaning marrying one's own mother. It is regarded as a social offense. A person who has married from the same Machong is deprived of the right to inherit the parental property. When a boy and a girl belonging to the same clan but not the same Machong wants to marry, no formal marriage can be performed. They can live together as husband and wife and their union gets recognition from the society in the course of time. This type of union is called '**Bakdong**' which means marrying one's own relative. Now a days marriage within the Chatchi has become very frequent. Such unions are tolerated.

In the traditional Garo society Polygamy was prevalent. A man could marry as many wives as he wanted. But three was usually the maximum. He could marry two sisters from the same parents. In such case he had to marry the elder one first, than the younger one. Before taking a second wife it is customary for a man to take the permission from the first wife. A break of this rule entitles the first wife to compensation. The chief or the principal wife is called '**Jik-mamong**' or '**Jik-mongma**' and the others are known as '**Jik-gite**'.

In the Garo society there is no system of dowry or paying bride or bride groom price. No money is paid as the bride-price or the bride grooms; there is no hard and fast custom to give presents or gifts. However, those who can afford may give something to their sons as gifts. Such gifts may include a sword, shield and spear and perhaps a cow or a bull.

Garo Customary Laws allows remarriage. According to A kim kanga in the event of the death of one's spouse the man or woman can go for second wife or husband. The second wife or the husband must be from the same Machong of the deceased one. The girl whom the widower is going to marry should preferably be the younger sister of his first wife. Normally the Mahari has to provide a new partner to the widowed person.

Divorce:

Divorce is permitted in Garo society to both man and woman. According to Garo traditional rules, one can seek divorce on the following grounds - (i) If there is imminent

danger to life and security of any one of them; (ii) When one of them commits adultery with other man or woman; (iii) If either of them found to be mentally ill. (iv) If they live separately in different places without having any connection for at least two years; (v) When husband or the wife is proved to hermaphrodite; (vi) If either of them is very cruel and may become a cause of harm and mental injury of the other partner; (vii) In case of refusal to maintain the family by the husband the wife may seek divorce; and (viii) Impotency.

Before taking any step for divorce, man has to inform his maternal uncles (father-in-law) and the **Mahari** of his wife first. So that they may get time to rectify the woman. If divorce is sought by the wife, then she should inform her husband's **chra** and **Mahari** first. If the respective Maharis fails to rectify the person, divorce is finally affected. Sometimes divorce may take place by mutual consent. When both husband and wife justify that they cannot live together. But in case if either of them is proved to be guilty for some reason he or she must pay a fine called **Dai**. Amount of Dai varies from time to time.

Mahari:

A Machong is too big a body to carry out all its functions. Its responsibilities are carried out by a smaller group consist of closely related kins within the same Machong, called **Mahari**. The concept of Mahari has two folds expressions namely a consanguineous unit in relation to a member of a household and as a functional unit in respect of that household. Mahari as a consanguineous unit refers to a body consisting of the closer or matri-relations both male and female members. Here the male matri-relations (chra) predominate with the maternal uncle being held in the highest esteem. Garos loosely refers to the other members of the group as **Chra-Pante** or **Chratangrang**. **Chra-Pante** means the elder or younger brothers, maternal uncles, and the great maternal uncles. Functional Mahari refers to a small effective group of the consanguinals and an affinal i.e. the principal male and his nokrom in the household. To be precise it consists of the father-in-law and the resident son-in-law. These two males hail from the same Ma chong and domiciled in the same household identifying their interests and obligations with those of that household (except their obligations towards their own Mahari). They participate in decision making along with the consanguineous Mahari in affairs of that particular household.

Functional unit of the Mahari relates primarily to a household. It has to consider all problems, rights and obligations of that household in the society. It has to assume the role of a “bridge and buffer” between the constituent Machongs of a household. It plays effective role in uniting interests. D.N. Majumdar refers to the Mahari as an extended family. Prof. Milton S. Sangma calls it a localized sub-group. Robbins Burling calls such a group as ‘*village lineage*’. He also states that in a “village lineage” the members may not be able to trace actual blood relationship. Therefore, he prefers to term ‘minimal lineage’ to trace actual blood relationship. J. B. Bhattachajee is of the view that Mahari is a smaller homogeneous group within one Machong. He opined that originally one Machong had only one Mahari; since a Machong owes its origin to single ancient mother.

Therefore, a Mahari is in fact an organization of households within the same Machong whose members trace their blood relationship from a common mother. It is the cohesive exogamous social institution. It functions collectively in the interest of all its members.

Property and Inheritances:

The Garo recognize two types of property – (a) Private, and (b) Communal. The agricultural land, pasture field, ‘jhum’ land are included in the second category while homestead, dwelling huts, personal dress & ornaments, cooking utensils, furniture, weapons & implements are considered as of the first category. According to Garo rules of inheritance, all private properties belong to the mother and those can only be inherited by the daughters, but communal properties cannot be inherited. The youngest daughter enjoys the lion’s share of her mother’s property. In the absence of daughter, the property right flows to mother’s sister’s daughters.

The Institution of Nokma:

Each Garo village community is an autonomous political unit. Each village has a *Nokma* as its head. The Nokma holds his office through the right of the A king which theoretically belongs to his wife and her Mahari. The office of the Nokma is hereditary through the ‘Nok’ institution. The office of the Nokma has the intrinsic importance from the point of the village organization through which the basic network of the entire Garo society

is woven. In fact the Nokma plays the leading role as the central figure in the village activities, and externally represents the village. However, the position of the Nokma is very delicate. As a matter of fact, the Nokma cannot be compared to a Chief who exercises his political authority with various social and economic advantages. The Nokma is rather a social and economic representative of the village without having any distinguished authority. The Nokma's position becomes clear when we consider the characteristics of the Garo social structure, associated with the 'nok' institution. Though every nok is independent, the function of the nok is always backed by all the members of the two lineages in moiety relation. No 'nok' can develop a social solidarity special status from others. From the economic point of view also, the Nokma's status is also equal to that of others.

The institution of Nokma is as old as the first settlement of Garos in the Garo Hills. It is believed that the Garos have entered the Garo Hills in batches from different directions. Each of these batches consisted of either a clan or sub-clan. They settled in different area. The person who led the clan, in settling down in a particular area of the Garo Hills, was regarded as Nokma of that particular clan. Thus Nokma was the leader or Headman. In the earlier stage of their settlement in the Garo Hills, there evolved various types of Nokmas, namely the Chalang Nokma, the Gamni Nokma, the Gana Nokma, the Miteni Nokma and A king Nokma.

The Institution of Nokpante:

The institution of Nkopante is another important institution of the Garos. In Garo language '**Nok**' means house/family and '**Pante**' means bachelor. So 'Nokpante' means house of the bachelors. The Nokpante usually serves as the dormitory for adolescent youngmen. Garo traditional custom does not allow a grown up boy to sleep in the house with their parents. So a separate house is build for the bachelor in the villages to sleep in. A Nokpante was constructed in the open but central place of the village. It is a big hall type house with carved posts. The house is only partially walled which looks like an open porch. It is considered to be a joint responsibility of the whole village for construct the Nokpante. Each Chatchi has their separate Nokpante. Bachelors of two different Chatchis are not allowed to sleep in the same Nokpante. Nokpante is the training institution for preparing a

boy to enter into the married life. They must learn there different kinds of handicraft essential for independent living. The institution serves the purpose of imparting traditional skill, knowledge and training in bamboo work and basketing. It is also a seat for learning of folklores, folktales, legends and traditional dances etc. It helps the Garo youth to become the useful member of the society, thereby become very close to each other and can discuss the matters of common interest. Boys become members of a Nokpante at the early age of five or six years. This institution also prepares them to become conscious of their lineage and social group. The members belong to the same Mahari gather at the Nokpante. Boys belong to minor lineages in a village and with no Nokpante of their own lineage can join the Nokpante of the major lineage of the village. Boys gather at the Nokpante after their supper to spend the night. In the Nokpante the boys use to play music and dance which they perform in their festivals. The eldest among them becomes the leader. A Garo Nokpante is an entirely a masculine institution, no female is allowed to enter the Nokpante except in certain exceptional cases. Women can come to the Nokpante only in their festivals. Another occasion on which a girl can enter to the Nokpante is that when a girl proposing to a boy for marriage comes to offer the boy some food staff. On such occasion the girl can enter the Nokpante only through the backdoor. The front entrance is forbidden to women. Actually their social orientation gradually shifts from their fathers to their maternal uncles who begin to look after his nephew sin the Nokpante. In the Nokpante a youngman learns lots of things for the development of his personality. There he learns to know and assess himself and his place in the society. Thus, Nokpante phase of life is the phase of training, learning, enjoyment and happiness. Nokpante days are delightful and carefree. In the Nokpante the village boys receive training in village admministratin, citizenship, community life, warfare training under the guidance of veterans. The Nokpante hall is also used as a village conference hall. Village elders use to come to the Nokpante to discuss important issues of common interest in their leisure time.

Changes in the Garo Society:

Christianity started to take root in Garo Hills since the thirties of the 20th century. The decline of the Nokpante started with the spread of Christianity. After adopting Christianity Garos started to give up traditional practices. They gave up the dormitories of

the traditional type. Christianity brought about a noticeable change among the Garos. They gave up traditional culture, traditional dress and ornaments, musical instruments, pattern of house, personal name etc. Formal education and Christianity acted upon Garo culture jointly and simultaneously. At the earlier stage Christianity was propagated through primary education. Boys who go to the primary school gave up their habit of sleeping dormitory. They regarded the Nokpante as an institution for non-converted boys only. With the expansion of Christianity, the institution of Nokpante lost its importance gradually. In some places Nokpantes are converted to either primary teacher's houses or into primary schools. Plough cultivation requires lesser group effort than in shifting cultivation. For adopting plough cultivation, it became necessary for grown up boys to stay with or at least within an easy reach of their parents. Thus the institution has lost its importance in the Garo society.