

MUSIC AND MUSICAL INSTRUMENTS OF THE GARO TRIBE OF NORTH-EAST INDIA



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IRIS WATRE THOMAS

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of the Garo Tribe of
North-East India**



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FOREWORD

This is a path-breaking research work in the sense that even till today, there is hardly any work done on this line of investigation and more so, in the case of the Garos of north-east India.

That the Garos are music lovers and enjoy their lives to the full to the beating of musical instruments have been testified by all writers, foreign, Indian and local. Starting from John Elliot, the Commissioner of Dacca, the first European ever to visit the Garo Hills during 1788-'89 till the visit of Prof. Robbins Burling of Michigan University, USA in 1997, all the accounts given by them referred to them as lovers of music and merry-making. Similarly, many of the Indian writers such as T.C. Sinha, B.N.Choudhury etc. also testified to this fact. The local writers such as D.S. Rongmuthu, not only confirmed this finding but has dealt with some of these Traditional Songs and Musical Instruments in his works.

However, none of them has dealt exclusively on this aspect of Garo cultural life. Some of them, at the most had extracts of their songs and descriptions of their musical instruments in their works. Even the local literary figure, Shri D.S.Rongmuthu, had dealt with only an epic song in his "Epic Lore of the Garos" and included the Garo music and musical instruments as part of his works on Garo culture in some other books. As such, the Garos do not have any work as yet fully devoted to this aspect of Garo life and culture.

This book entitled "Music and Musical Instruments of the Garo Tribe of Northeast India" is substantially based on finding of her. M.Phil. dissertation, has come out as the first of its kind, and the author herself being a member of the community and being adept in music and musical instruments could handle the subject with confidence and authority which added to the beauty of the book.

I am quite sure that the book will be well received and appreciated by all who come across with it.

(M.S.Sangma)
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PREFACE

Extensive studies have been made on the sophisticated music and musical instruments of India, but till date, no one has shown serious inclination towards the music of the North-East. In my humble way, I have tried to record what I have seen of the instruments, and what I have heard of the music, of the Garos of Meghalaya. The Garos are a simple, happy carefree people who express every little mood through music, which has become their way of celebrating life itself - the happy moments as well as the sad. I believe they have much to contribute to the world of music.

During my research, I had received the support and help from many people starting with my husband Eugene, my children Shane, Adrian and Gail, parents, other family members, friends and well-wishers. I thank them all for their patient support, inspiration and encouragement.

I am immensely indebted to Prof. Milton S. Sangma, former Pro Vice-Chancellor of North-Eastern Hill University, for his invaluable guidance, advice and encouragement without which this work would not have materialised.

I am extremely grateful to Mr Llewellyn R. Marak, late Mr Mihir N. Sangma and Dr. Julius L.R. Marak for the encouragement that they gave me by making valuable documents available to me and for the suggestions they offered.

I thank all respondents who had spared their time for the interview with me, and who had demonstrated the method of playing the various traditional musical instruments.

I acknowledge with thanks all the assistance given by the staff and officials of the Eco-development Society of Meghalaya, Tura who had helped me reach the interior areas of Garo Hills.

I am specially indebted to The Rev. Presley B. Lyngdoh, Mrs. Pauline Warjri and late Dr. Orestor J. Kharpuri who performed the difficult task of writing the staff notation for the songs.

I hope, I am not wrong in believing that my experience and labour will be useful to those who read this book. I shall welcome suggestions on correction or other improvements to be considered in future revisions of this work.

IRIS WATRE THOMAS

1

LAND AND THE PEOPLE

Garó Hills, the land of the Garos or *A. chiks* (as they prefer to be called today, *A. chik* meaning hill man), lies to the South-west of Assam, 25°9' and 26°1' North latitude and between 89°49' and 91° of East longitude. It was formed into a district in 1866 and is now part of the state of Meghalaya. It is bounded by the districts of Goalpara of Assam on the North and West; Khasi Hills on the East and the Mymensing district of Bangladesh on the South. In 1867 Tura was established as the permanent headquarters of the district by the then British government of India. Today, the Garó hills has been subdivided into three districts, namely—East Garó Hills, West Garó Hills and South Garó Hills.

The Garos are a section of the Great Bodo family which traces its origin to the Tibeto-Burman race of the Tibeto-Chinese family of North-West China. The area that lies between the upper waters of the Yang-tse-kiang and the Hwang-ho. Folk tales speak about their settlement in a country known as Mandalae.¹ Invasion from a ferocious Northern tribe is said to have brought about their subsequent migration

¹ Dewansingh S., Rongmuthu, *Folktales of the Garos*, Dept. of Publication, University of Gauhati, 1960, p. 345. Mandalea - probably the name of an ancient Garó country in Upper Burma. It may also mean the ancient Garó village which developed into the modern region of Mandalay in Myanmar.

to the North-West, beyond the "Arurongdi" river, which is probably the Irrawady river in Myanmar. As a result a large contingent of *A.chiks* settled in "A.song Tibotgiri", the ancient Garo name for the country of Tibet. In course of time, the land in *Tibotgiri* on which the *A.chiks* had settled down became drier and drier. The cultivated soil yielded little return and gradually changed into arid waste. This led to the second stage of migration further west towards *Garwar Brⁿ* which probably refers to the Garhwal hills in the Himalayas. Thence they proceeded to the country south of the hills and reached the Assam valley which was like a "land of milk and honey" after the arid landscapes they had passed so far. The reason for their migration are clearly given in the extracts of a song which runs thus:

A.ba cha.na a.namja,
Mina dango minamja,
Kilgron puo kilojana,
Songdongna a.song gitalko am.na
*Chiringna chiga dingdangko nina.*³

Which says that

As the fields are arid,
 Rice crops are poor,
 Cotton seeds do not germinate,
 To search for new land
 And look for fresh flowing streams and rivers.

"A.song Nenggitchu Chiga Nengchibing", identified as *Nokcholbari*,⁴ became the first *A.chik* settlement in the region of *Kalibong* in Bhutan, also known as *Dhon Kuta*. Their second settlement was at "A.song Patari Chiga Suunchi" claimed to be *Cooch Behar*.⁵ Their third settlement was

2 *Ibid.*, pp.1-2.

3 Jobang D. Marak, *The Garo History*, Part I & II, West Garo Hills, Meghalaya, 1982 (2nd ed.), p.2.

4 Dewansingh S. Rongmuthu, *op. cit.*, p. 341.

5 *Ibid.*, p. 341.

“*Udare Jakbri Mehgongma Kolatchi*” which is the ancient Garo name for Rangamati.⁶ Their fourth settlement was in “*Chiga Binengbineng*” in Habraghat. During their migration from Tibet, the Garos of old brought along with them not only the language, culture, beliefs and tales of their original home, but also a distinct love of music. They even carried along with them some musical instruments which they felt impelled to carry, like the various types of *Rangs* or gongs; *Kakwas* or cymbals; *Gaanti* or bells; *Susuaks* or anklet bells; *Singas* or trumpets. This can be deduced from the words of the following traditional song

*Rajiko skang chilate,
Do.pako jaman chakate,
Jappako, Jalingpako, Nokmako Saneko mikkango done,
Janggih meroriko ra.bite,
Ki.me matjangchiko jakkipe,
Kakwa doke, silcha chime
Gaanti morokroke, susuak mojjokjokke,
Gitchi bajing ole, Konkona ra.e,
A.song Patariona, chiga suunchiona,
Behar Rajani songo dongnapeaha.*⁷

The English translation of this song says that they came –
Led by *Raji* (Warrior) and followed by *Dopa* (Warrior) in the rear,
Jappa and *Jalingpa* placing Sane (*Nokma*- Chieftain) in the front,
Carrying the life-giving rice grains on their backs,
Clasping the Yak’s tail, Clashing their cymbals and shields,
Clanging of bells and the jingle of the anklet bells,
With spades and picks
They reached Cooch Behar
And sojourned in the land of the king of Cooch Behar.

They finally crossed the Brahmaputra river on rafts of banana stalks and settled in the nearest hills on the southern bank. Later on, strong differences of interest and opinion

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 342.

⁷ Jobang Marak, *op. cit.*, p. 3.

surfaced and they broke up. Some remained at the base of the hills, while the majority made for the jungle⁸ and came to occupy the dense hills of the present Garo hills. The Garos entered the hills in batches from different directions and settled in different sections, which resulted in the evolution of certain linguistic and cultural variations amongst them. As a result, they are divided into thirteen groups, viz. the *Am.bengs*; the *A.kawes* or *Awes*; the *Chisaks*; the *Duals*; the *Matchis*; the *Matabengs*; the *Matchi Duals*; the *Chiboks*; the *Rugas*; the *Garas*; the *Ganchings*; the *Atongs* and the *Megams*.

The Northern section of the mountain area is inhabited by the *Awes* or *A.kawes* which is adjacent to the districts of Kamrup and Goalpara. They are mainly cultivators as is evident from their name, *A.kawes* which means "ploughers of the plain."

The *Chisak* group occupies the North-Eastern part of the Garo hills, and lives in the region bordering the *Awes*. They inhabit the eastern bank of the *Simsang* river (Sameswari).⁹ The word "*Chi*" means water and "*sak*" means above. Therefore, *Chisak* refers to the Garos living in the area above the water source,¹⁰ renowned for their skill in bamboo products as well as food preparation of delicacies from bambooshoot.

The *Duals* occupy the area directly south of the *Chisaks* on the banks of the river *Simsang*. They have the reputation of being excellent fishermen, and specialise in preparing dry fish.¹¹ A great number of this sub-tribe dwell in the Mymensing district of Bangladesh.

8 Gabrielle Bertrand, *The Secret Lands Where Women Reign*, London, Robert Hale Limited, 1958, p.44.

9 Julius L.R. Marak, *Garo Customary Laws and Practices*, Vendrame Missiological Institute, Shillong, 1985, p.3

10 Milton S. Sangma, *History and Culture of the Garos*, Books Today, Oriental Publishers, New Delhi, 1981, p.135.

11 Gabrielle Bertrand, *op. cit.*, p.45.

The heartland of the Garo hills is occupied by the *Matchis* and they are famous for the production of cotton.

The *Matabengs* or the *Matjangchis*, who are more or less a mingling of *Am.bengs* and *Matchis*, are found towards the north of the *Simsang* river, in between the *Am.bengs* and *Matchis*.

The *Am.bengs* inhabiting the western section, constitute the largest division of the tribes. They populate nearly half the area of the district including Tura. Like the *Matchis*, they are also known for their cotton cultivation.

To the East of the *Am.bengs* we find the *Chiboks*. They live in the upper *Bugi* river valley, upto the *Dareng* river.

The *Gara-ganchings* occupy the southern areas extending from the *Nitai* river nearly to the *Sameswari* river. They have a distinctive craftsmanship in wood sculpture and ingenious technique in house construction.

The *Atongs* occupy the *Simsang* valley and the hills in its vicinity as far as *Siju*.¹²

The *Me.gams* inhabit the area bordering West Khasi hills.¹³ They seem to be a fusion of the Garo and Khasi tribes. In appearance and custom they closely resemble the Garos, but have their own dialect which cannot be understood by the Garos. Dr. Grierson has classified them as Khasi.

A great number of Garos can be found in the neighbouring states like Assam and the Mymensing district of Bangladesh. They retain their various divisions, language and custom, but have acquired some of the nature and ways of the majority people among whom they reside.

Social Organisation

The Garos are divided into various "*Chatchis*" or clans. The most notable clan being the *Maraks*, *Sangmas* and *Momins*. The other clans are the *Shiras* and *Arengs*. These

12 Milton S. Sangma, *op. cit.*, p.134.

13 Julius L.R. Marak, *op. cit.*, p.3.

clans are again sub-divided into numerous sub-clans or "*Ma.chongs*" which claim descent from a common motherhood.

The whole Garo Hills is divided into many clearly defined areas known as "*A.kings*". Each *A.king* is under the ownership of a particular *ma.chong* such as *Nengminja*, *Rangsa*, *Gabil*, *Ampang*, *Chambugong*, and so on. Each of these *A.kings* are placed under the guardianship of a custodian-cum-supervisor known as the *Nokma (A.king Nokma)*, who is selected by the *ma.chong*.

Marriage

The marriage customs and laws of the Garos are based on the matrilineal system, according to which the descent is always traced from the mother. Marriage is governed by two important laws namely, exogamy and *A.kim*, which means that a man and a woman intending marriage must belong to different motherhood. Thus a *Nengminja Sangma* cannot marry another *Nengminja Sangma*; a *Watre Momin* another *Watre Momin*; *Rangsa Marak* another *Rangsa Marak* etc. Those who violate these customary laws commit what is known as *Madong* and *Asimalja*.¹⁴ Rules of *Madong* were violated in a marriage between a *Koksi* and *Koksi*; *Bakdong* where a union takes place between a *Koksi Sangma* and a *Nengminja Sangma*; and *Asimalja* would literally mean something forbidden, taboo, not done, having strong moral connotation. These are considered incestuous and serious crimes punishable by death.

The young boys and girls seldom got an opportunity to meet each other, so they made the most of the various festivals and ceremonies that take place throughout the year, like the *Wangala*, *Ganna mite* and *Mangona* ceremonies. The market place also, besides being a centre for trade, serves as an ideal place for socializing. Here the young girls get the chance of meeting and choosing their life

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p.97.

partners. For, in the traditional Garo custom, marriage proposals must always come from the girl's side. Even in modern times, though the choice is made between the two individuals, a formal proposal has to come from the girl's side. The girl does not personally propose to the boy, but indicates her choice to the male members of her family who make the necessary negotiations and arrangements. An interesting and exciting feature here is the capturing of the boy, who is caught unawares, any where at any time and brought to the girl's house. According to Garo etiquette, it is customary for the boy to resist this marriage at least twice although he may be quite willing to marry the girl. However, if the boy manages to escape the third time, it is taken for granted that he really does not wish to marry the girl, and he is allowed to go free.¹⁵

Besides the legal form of marriage, the Garos have about ten types of marriage which cannot be regarded as legal or formal, but are all the same recognised by customary laws and are prevalent among the *songsareks* (pagans). These are *Cha.senga* (staying in lover's house); *Nokkromna sala* (taken to be the husband of the heiress); *Nape tua* (entering and sleeping); *Chame jika* (baiting for life partner); *Dokchapa* or *on.chapa* (providing an additional wife); *Jikgite ra.a* (second wife); *Seke kima* (marriage by elopement); *Nokpante gaa* (to climb the bachelors dormitory); *Cha.dila* (to induce to eat); *Chawari rima* (to capture a son-in-law). The formal ceremony that is performed to legalise these marriages is the *Dosia* ceremony (*Dosia* - killing a fowl).

Divorce

The matrimonial bonds among the Garos, however, are very loose, but adultery is very severely punished by the tearing of the ear lobes and garments in the case of a woman in olden days. The man found guilty of adultery was either

15 A. Playfair, *The Garos*, London, David Nutt, 1909, p.67.

sold in slavery or killed.¹⁶ The customary law of the Garos permits a man and a woman to seek divorce on certain grounds and must be initiated and approved by the woman's *chra*, i.e., the male members of the family. The *chra* consists of the maternal uncles, great uncles, nephews and brothers of the same *ma.chong* (motherhood). Divorce may be sought on the following grounds:

- 1) When a wife or a husband commits adultery (*somal donna*)
- 2) When a man or woman is insane.
- 3) When a wife and husband cannot live together anymore and desire separation by mutual consent.
- 4) For being hermaphrodite or when either party proves sterile.
- 5) When a husband or wife is cruel and is a cause of fear or harm and injury in the mind of the other partner (*Bamgija wachagrika*).
- 6) When a wife or husband denies conjugal union.¹⁷

The cause of the separation is inquired into by the village elders and the actual divorce accomplished by the 'Bol seki den.a' ceremony (*Bol* - tree, *den.a* - cut). However, now-a-days it is more common for the injured party to seek redress in the civil court, or to apply to a *Laskar* (local magistrate) for compensation as well as dissolution of marriage.¹⁸

Inheritance

Being a matrilineal society which claims descent from the motherhood, the system of inheritance is also influenced by this. There exists a definite account about the decision taken in respect to the question of inheritance, as given by Jobang D. Marak. According to the narration, the *A.chik*

16 *Ibid.*, p.97.

17 Julius L.R.Marak, *op. cit.*, p.125.

18 A.Playfair, *op. cit.*, p 71.

and the *Dikgil* patriarchs assembled together in *Matia Panchia* of *Me.gam Amejang*, in the house of Bonepa. It was the sons of *Siran* who first broached the question, as to who should be the inheritor - the sons or the daughters? To this, the children of *Noman* suggested that it should go to the '*demechik*', i.e. the daughter, and *Ruga Kotchu* seconded this view. It was the *Doli* people who suggested that the householder should bring in the nephew as the son-in-law, a view which was endorsed by *Muga Dingsepa* and *Raja Sirampa*. Ever since, this has been the customary law followed by the Garos in regard to inheritance. All property belongs to the woman and is passed on from mother to daughter. In case there is no female issue, a daughter of the elder or younger sister is chosen as the next heir. In case such an heiress is unavailable, then the nearest female of the clan is approved by the clan members as the inheritor. The property is thereby retained in the motherhood. Men do not inherit property, for if the sons are allowed to lay claim on the properties of the mother, these would pass out of her *machong* or clan, which is never allowed.¹⁹ Men, however, can acquire (purchase) land of their own. This will, however, pass on to the wife according to the usual law of inheritance and this in turn goes to the daughter - thus reverting to the motherhood.²⁰

Economic Life

As far as the economy of the Garos is concerned, it is greatly dependent on agriculture. Cultivation is their main livelihood and means of subsistence in which the whole family takes part. Trade is carried out on the seasonal products of the land such as, paddy, millet, cotton, ginger, betelnut, fruits and vegetables like oranges, banana, maize, job's tears (*Coix Lachyrma-Jobi*), chillies, melons, yam, sweet potato, and pumpkins.²¹ In the old days brisk trade was also done in a limited amount in indigo and lac.²²

19 B. Choudhury, *Culture and Linguistic Aspect of the Garos*, Lawyer's Book Stall, Gauhati, 1958, p.38.

20 Julius L.R. Marak, *op. cit.*, p.141.

21 A.Playfair, *op.cit.*, p.45.

22 *Ibid.*,p.46.

The Garos practise shifting cultivation which is known as Jhum cultivation. They follow a calendar laid down by Bonepa Janepa the first person to perform all the rites connected with jhum cultivation, as instructed by *Misi Apilpa Saljong Galapa* to *A.ni Apilpa chini Galapa*, another patriarch who was the first among the humans to obtain rice seeds. Bonepa, as the first jhum cultivator in the hills of *A.chik a.song*, invented the names of the jhum months as follows²³:

- | | | | |
|---------------------|----------|----------------------|-------------|
| 1. <i>Gamalkaja</i> | - March | 7. <i>Mejaphang</i> | - September |
| 2. <i>Mebakja</i> | - April | 8. <i>Ahnija</i> | - October |
| 3. <i>Jagro</i> | - May | 9. <i>Berokja</i> | - November |
| 4. <i>Sohgalja</i> | - June | 10. <i>Kilokja</i> | - December |
| 5. <i>Jagapja</i> | - July | 11. <i>Awitja</i> | - January |
| 6. <i>Jamebok</i> | - August | 12. <i>Wachengja</i> | - February |

The hills are divided into hundreds of *a.kings* (clan territory) which were under the Clan Chief. The headman of the village called *A.king Nokma* distributes the lands of jhumming equitably amongst the families living in the village under him. Each family starts the clearing of the jungle in their own plots between the months of December and February. All the capable members of the family work in the jhum fields²⁴ known as '*A.ba.*' The land is used for two consecutive years before being abandoned for six or eight years. In the first year, all the crops are planted together, but during the second, the land is devoted exclusively to rice. Since a new patch is opened each year, two fields are always simultaneously under cultivation. One plot is planted with mixed crops and the other with rice alone. Weather and other factors permitting, all crops should be available for harvest each year.²⁵

23 Dewansingh S.Rongmuthu, *op.cit.*, p.289.

24 B.Choudhury, *op.cit.*, pp.21 & 22.

25 Robbins Burling, *Rengsanggrī*, University of Pennsylvania Press, 1963, p.27.

***Nokpante* or Bachelors' Dormitory**

A unique feature of the Garo society is the importance given to the proper training and grooming of the young men of the villages through the institution of the *Nokpante*. 'Nok' means house and 'pante' means bachelor. Such houses existed in every *A.chik* village, each clan having its own *nokpante* for their own youths.

When the boys reach adolescence they are sent to sleep in the *nokpante* at night as the Garos regard it improper for a grown up boy to sleep with his parents and sister in the same house. Besides serving as a common dormitory, it has other important purposes too. It was essential that every young man learns all kinds of skills and handicrafts before entering married life. Thus, it was here that the Garo youth was given training in the various skills of art, craft, music, carving and painting with indigenous colours extracted from natural sources like roots, leaves, barks, etc., making of baskets, fishing nets, musical instruments as well as the art of playing these instruments, making of hunting and war implements, the art of warfare, defense as well as training in discipline and physical fitness. Agricultural know-how was also imparted, which was considered a must for every young man, as it was the main source of livelihood. It was the skilled elders of the village who took the responsibility of imparting their skill and knowledge to the younger generation, and thereby keep alive the old traditions and culture. Every young man was expected to keep himself physically fit and to be vigilant for the safety of the village. Life in the *Nokpante*, in fact, was an education in the art of living²⁶ where the youth learns discipline and are moulded into men with all round skill, personality and sense of responsibility.

Various folk songs, mythological folklore, traditional accounts, ancient tales of war and adventure, principles of animistic worship, etiquette and morality were also taught and narrated by the elders and *the Katta agangipa* (Folktale narrator).

26 Julius L.R. Marak, *op.cit.*, p.161.

The other uses of the *Nokpante* was as an assembly place for the village elders and young men,²⁷ whose opinions were also considered as important in decision making. It also served as a court room of the *Nokma* or the *Laskars*.²⁸ At times the *nokpante* even became a guest house for strangers in the village.

The structure of the *nokpante* is distinctly different from the dwelling homes. It is much larger in size and stronger too, as it is built with solid timber posts of *Sal* or some other strong wood. It is also the most decorated and adorned building, as every pillar and post is etched with beautiful carvings of animals, birds, lizards and people, done on one solid block of wood, by the young men themselves. Even the steps leading to the *nokpante* is a whole tree on which steps have been carved out.

An interesting and unique feature of the *nokpantes* in the villages of *Siju* and *Emangre* is the intricately carved and coloured king-posts called 'Do.kaku' by the people, which resembles the totem poles of the American Indians. As to the origin of this art narrated to me by Aldat Sangma of *Siju* village, he said that it was *Siju me.apa Aseng Dimseng Sangma* and *Emangre pante Sutik Dentik mamasa* who first constructed a *nokpante* at the instruction of the spirit *Katchi a.ning Do.pagisim* (spirit king Crow of the underworld). He taught *Rongkan*, another man, the technique of carving a *Do.kaku* out of the *Gamare* wood and colouring it with seven different colours red, blue, dark green, parrot green, black, yellow and white, which could be obtained from natural sources. Red was obtained from the bark of a tree which is first dried and then boiled to obtain the colour and yellow from the root of the "*mese nachil*" (wild bougainvillea). Green was obtained from three sources, (a) *nirri* leaves, (b) *chengrang* leaves and the root of the *Alot Matchadu*. Blue was obtained

27 *Ibid.*, p.163.

28 Sinha, Tarunchandra, *The Psyche of the Garos*, Calcutta, 1966, p.93.

from the *chalue* leaves, black from the bark of the *Dokime* tree and white from a soft white material which is available between layers of rocks. Once water is mixed and dried, this material becomes as hard as a brick.²⁹ The *do.kaku* was meant to give an attractive touch to the *nokpante*, to lure the female folk. The *Do.kaku* is also supposed to be bestowed with the mystic power of protecting man from misfortune. As the legend goes, a youth by the name of *Chengot* was being chased by a man-eating tiger. Finding no place to hide, he quickly took shelter in the *Nokpante* by climbing right up to the king-post and hid behind it. The bright colours of the *Do.kaku* blinded the tiger and prevented it from seeing the youth. In this way *Chengot* was saved from a horrible death.

Women were strictly forbidden to enter the *nokpante*. If by accident a maid even climbs up two steps, she was to give a fine of one pig and a jar of rice-beer, and a cleansing ceremony commences to remove the defilement. However, girls were allowed to enter the *nokpante* on special occasions like *chugan ringa* or post-funeral ceremony, *Galmak doa* or *Amua*, i.e. festivals after the burning of the jhum fields and during the time of the construction of the barns (*mi jam*).³⁰

Agricultural Festivals and Ceremonies

Agriculture being their occupation, their main festivals and ceremonies coincide with the various stages of cultivation throughout the annual agricultural cycle. They attach much importance to the worship of the spirits which rule the seasons, to maintain harmony with the spirits and thus obtain their blessings in the form of good harvest. They start their festivals with due solemnity, through invocations and prayers made to various spirits of the jhum season. These ceremonies slowly build up towards the final

29 As told to me by Agat Sangma of Siju village.

30 Julius L.R. Marak, *op. cit.*, p.158.

and most important social function of the Garos, the "Wangala" or harvest festival, during which a lot of feasting, singing, dancing and other social activities take place. An important feature is the *Katta Agana* or story telling by the bards and minstrels, and singing competitions through the singing of *Doroa* and *Ajea* where competitors try to out-do each other. It is a time for romancing for the young and the choosing of life partners.

The annual festival begins with several preliminary religious ceremonies which commence from the beginning of the year. The first of these is the *Opata* ceremony,³¹ when a man first decides on the plot of land which he intends to cultivate. If he has a good dream that night he takes it as a good omen and starts cultivating. However, if he has an unpleasant dream then he takes it as a bad omen and abandons the plot and looks for a better one.

The next ceremony is the *Den Bilsia* ceremony also known as *Gitchipong roka* or *Asiroka*. This marks the cutting down of the trees and bamboo and the clearing of the land, and takes place in the month of January and February. Here the ritual of 'Okamdoa rimdosola'³² (inviting and bringing up) is performed in the *Nokma's* (clan chief's) house, for *Rokimema* the goddess of rice, pleading her to dwell in their field and thus bless it with good harvest. The Garos believe that if the land is not cleared of all uncleanness and disease, *Minimaa Rokime* (mother of rice) will not bless them with her presence. So, they not only clear their jhum fields at this time, but also their homes and surrounding areas.

The *A.galmaka* or *A.gal doa* ceremony follows this. According to Robbins Burling, it "is second only to *wangala* in importance". This is the jhum burning ceremony of the new field and the first of the important rituals in connection with the jhum cultivation festival. Here a cock and rice

31 A. Playfair, *op. cit.*, p.93.

32 Mihir N. Sangma, *Maniani Bidik*, Garo Hills Book Emporium, Tura, 1989, p.5.

beer is offered (*Churaron*) to invoke the blessing of *Sre-Tonggitchak-Warika*,³³ the mother of the god of fire, to free the land from any profanation, pollution, and desecration through fire. In front of the *Kimdim* or *Sambasia* (sacrificial altar) which is made of bamboo, offerings of fowl, fish, and cooked rice is also made to *Rokime*, for her blessings on their jhum fields. Then millet seeds are scattered in all directions for good harvest. After the sowing of the seeds everyone returns to the village. The elders circulate from house to house in the day time and the young visit the same houses at night. Time is generally spent in feasting, dancing, and merry-making.

The next important festival is *Rongchu gala* or *Ginde gala*³⁴ which is a thanksgiving for the first fruits to *Misi Saljong*, the God who first taught man the technique of cultivation. It is said that previously, the Garos lived only on the natural and seasonal products of the land, like a variety of yam and herbs. It was *Misi Saljong* who gave the first rice seeds (*mi bitchri*) the seeds of which were handed down from generation to generation as *Rongjanggi* (life giving seed) and taught the technique of cultivation - using the seasons. Thus, the rainy season indicated the time of sowing the seeds and the dry season marked the harvest period. The offering consists of freshly plucked and pounded, flattened or powdered rice or millet, served on a plantain leaf. The other items offered are citrus fruits and sugarcane cut into pieces and sprinkled with rice beer. There is great feasting and singing and playing of gongs but no dancing takes place. Following this a small but special ceremony is observed called *Jamegappa-Ahaua*³⁵ which signifies the reaping of the jhum products. While carrying the last sheaves of crop to the house, the children follow the person carrying the sheave and utter the sound "*Ahaua*". The rice grains of

33 Julius L.R.Marak, *op. cit.*, p.64.

34 Milton S. Sangma, *op. cit.*, p.239.

35 Julius L.R.Marak, *op. cit.*, p.68.

the *Medong* or sheave are kept to be made into the rice beer to be used during the *wangala* festival.

Finally, we come to the most important festival and that is the *Wangala* or harvest festival, which ushers in the final stage of cultivation. It is believed that it was the God of the underground *Meenma Drongma*³⁶ who enlightened man on the details of performing the *wangala*. This is celebrated with great pomp and grandeur and gay abandon, when the harvest of all jhum crops have been fully gathered, in the month of October. The day for celebration is fixed according to the convenience of each village and goes on for a week. The Garos will not take any of the crops produced in their jhum lands till the performance of the *wangala*. There is a deep underlined meaning behind the observance of this festival. It is a moment of thanks-giving to *Misi A.pilpa Saljong Gatapa* (gods), as well as a bidding of reverent farewell to the Gods who have blessed them for the year. The *wangala* celebration can be divided into two stages. The first stage *Chu-Rugala*³⁷ is a solemn ritual performed by the priest (*Kamal*). The rice beer prepared from the "*Medong*" (rice specially set aside for rice beer), and no other beer is used during this ceremony as offerings to *Saljong*. *Chachat* or incense are burnt at the centre post of the house. Following this rice powder is mixed with water into a paste with which the posts and beams of the *Nokma's* house is decorated. This is done in every house. The guests are also smeared with this paste on their backs. This is known as *Wanti toka*.

The second stage is *Chachat soa*³⁸ meaning burning of incense. The Garos get their incense (which is a form of resin) from the bark of a certain tree called *Chachat bol*, which they believe was made by God before all other trees. This ceremony is performed by the priest in the *Nokma's* house, where the sacred drum is hung. On this day, rice is

36 Mihir N. Sangma, *op. cit.*, p.13.

37 R. Burling, *op. cit.*, p.64.

38 *Ibid.*

scattered all around the *Nokma*'s house signifying the season of rain and hail. Incense is burnt till the whole room is smoky to signify the coming of rain clouds. Throughout this ritual the *kram* or sacred drum, the Rang or gong and the *Dama* or big drums are played ceaselessly. When the ritual is over, rice and curry is served directly by hand to all the guests amidst much joviality. The young and old form their own groups and start dancing to the beating of drums, gongs, blowing of flutes and horns, led by the *Nokma* who does the "Grika" or warrior dance. The dancers present about fifty different styles of dancing imitating animals and birds and depicting everyday events. This is also the time for choosing of life partners. Folks sit around the fire and sing songs related to *wangala* like *Ajea*, *Dani doka*, *Kurama sala*, *Ohomai*, *Kore doka*, *Doro agana*, *gosai ringa*, etc. The culminating ceremony is the *Rusrota*³⁹ ceremony observed for the safe keeping of the crops in the granaries.

Another festival celebrated by the *A.kawes* and *Chisaks* of the North and North-Eastern region is *Gure Wata*⁴⁰ or releasing of the horse God, who is taken as the God of fertility and wealth. This stems from the belief that, if due reverence is not given to this deity it can take away the fertility of the land on which one is cultivating. It is most probable that the importance of the horse comes from the respect given to the 'Matchik', the Garo name for Yak, which was brought along with them from the land of Tibet when they first migrated. Being an agricultural based society, the fortunes of a man depends greatly on the soil. The image of a horse is fashioned out of straw and plantain trunk, decorated and taken round the whole village by the priest, followed by dancing villagers. This goes on for three days and two nights. Finally, the horse is taken to a stream and thrown into the water. The head, however, is preserved for the next year.

39 A. Playfair, *op. cit.*, p.95.

40 *Ibid.*, p.94.

The customs and traditions and other cultural traits of the Garos narrated above, are only few aspects of some of the vast and varied Garo culture. However, most of these traditional-cultural patterns have been giving way, in course of time, to various outside influences.

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