

Festivals Prevalent in Garo Society: A Discussion

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Abstract

Each caste-tribe is rich in its own language, literature and culture. The Garo people, a part of the Mongolian people, rich in their own cultural traditions and heritage, have been living in Northeast India as a prominent tribe since time immemorial. Adjacent to the Garo Hills of Meghalaya, there are a large number of Garo villages in Kamrup and Goalpara districts as well as Sivsagar, Dibrugarh, Darrang and Mikir Pahar districts of Assam. Festivals are an integral part of culture. This research paper discusses some of the most popular festivals in Garo society.

Keywords: Festivals, Folk-festival, Garo, Culture.

0.1 Introduction:

Each caste-tribe is rich in its own language, literature and culture. The Garo people, a part of the Mongolian people, rich in their own cultural traditions and heritage, have been living in Northeast India as a prominent tribe since time immemorial. Adjacent to the Garo Hills of Meghalaya, there are a large number of Garo villages in Kamrup and Goalpara districts as well as Sivsagar, Dibrugarh, Darrang and Mikir Pahar districts of Assam. Festivals are an integral part of culture.

1.0 Subject-matter

Assam has been inhabited by people of different ethnicities, languages and dialects since time immemorial. The people of Assam can be basically divided into tribes and non-tribes. It is very difficult to make a geographical demarcation among the tribes of Assam and bring them under discussion. This is because the tribes living in the north-eastern frontier region are disproportionately diverse in many branches. At a time, the whole of North-East India was included in the political map of Assam. It is from that greater Assam of the yesteryears, separate states, namely, Nagaland, Arunachal Pradesh, Mizoram, Meghalaya etc., have taken birth. However, most of the tribes in those states now need to understand the tribes permanently settled in Assam. However, at present the tribes living within the geographical area of Assam inhabits in the two valleys of Brahmaputra and Barak rivers and the hilly region between these two river valleys. The tribes of Assam are divided into two parts from the point of view of their settlement-

Plain tribes: Bodo, Mising, Deuri, Rabha, Sonowal Kachari, Tiwa or Lalung, Barman, Hojai and Mech.

Hill tribes: Dimasa, Karbi, Garo, Hajong, Sakma, Hmar, Lakher, Maan, Mizo or Singpho, Pawi, Sinteng, Naga, Kuki and Khasi.

From the language point of view, the Bodo language speaking tribes that falls under the Tibetan-Chinese language group of the Tibetan-Burmese and Assamese-Burmese Bodo-Naga branch are- Bodo, Rabha, Garo, Dimasa, Koch etc. We see that different people have different views on the origin of the word 'Garo'. The 'Garo's did not use the name 'Garo' to refer to their community. The Garos introduce themselves as Achik. The basic meaning of the word Achik is mountain and when it is used in the plural as 'Aichkarang', it means Garo community in a secondary sense. The word 'Ajang' is used in contrast to the word 'Achik', which means 'Non-Garo'. Garo people uses the term 'Mande' to refer to themselves which means human. This is why, they likes to

introduce themselves as the 'Achik Mande' (Majumdar, 7). The major inhabiting area of the Garo tribe is the Meghalaya state in India. We can see the Garo tribe inhabiting in almost every state of north-east India. Apart from the Kamrup and Goalpara district adjacent to the Meghalaya Garo Hills, other states in Assam like Sivsagar, Dibrugarh, Darang, Mikir Pahar too has Garo villages in these. Moreover, the northern part of Tripura and West Bengal too has Garo people residing in it in a more or lesser number.

The Garo people, rich in their own cultural heritage and heritage, have been living in North East India for a long time as a prominent tribe. Each nation-tribe is rich in its own language, literature and culture. Since the dawn of history, the human race has been adapting to its own society and has been carrying out certain customs, practices and ceremonies in its working life. Most of the festivals of this group are associated with entertainment and some other social, geographical, religious beliefs etc. Festivals are an integral part of culture. The main objective of these festivals is to express community delight and these are an inseparable part of the folk literature.

The festivities celebrated by the Garos in the Mongolian community can be divided into two main categories-

- 1.1 Agriculture based festivals
- 1.2 Religious festivals

1.1 Agriculture based festivals

Agriculture is the main source of livelihood for the Garos. Therefore, the number of festivals associated with agriculture is increasing. As the Garos inhabit in hilly areas, they are mostly seen to be dependent on jhum cultivation. From the beginning of the Jhum farming process to the end, festivals are observed following some particular set of conventions. The agriculture bases festivals in a serial order are-

- 1.1.1 Opata or Juming Sia
- 1.1.2 A'siroka
- 1.1.3 A'galmaka
- 1.1.4 Miamua
- 1.1.5 Rongchu gala
- 1.1.6 Ja'megapa
- 1.1.7 Wangala

1.1.1 Opata or Juming Sia

For jhum cultivation, Garo people cuts and burns down the jungles in hills. The people of a whole village choose a particular place for jhum cultivation for a particular year. 'Akhing-Nokma' distributes this piece of land amongst each family during the Assamese months of Aghun-Puh. 'Akhing-Nokma' is the name of the person who is headed with the responsibility of agriculture land distribution among the village families. The land distribution is done as per the number of members in a family, i.e., bigger land is provided to a bigger family. As a sign of owning a particular piece of cultivable land, each family cleans up a little place of the land and places a bamboo as a mark of their ownership. This process of marking a particular piece of cultivable land is called Opata or Juming Sia. On the day of Opata, a bird is being sacrificed and the Nokma sacrifices the bird on a clay dais on the name of the deity.

1.1.2 A'siroka or Denbilchiya

The main objective of the A'siroka festival is to invite the Goddess of rain and crops 'Rokiyema'. 'Denbilchiya' means cleaning and burning the jungles for jhum cultivation and it is just before cleaning up the jungles, A'siroka festival is being celebrated.

1.1.3 A'galmaka

As soon as the A'siroka festival is over, the owner of the land burns down the cut trees and jungles by putting them together. The jungles are generally finished cleaning by the month of Magh and the cut trees and branches are being dried up towards Phagun-Chait. As soon as the rainy season to begin in the month of Chait, villagers choose a day unanimously and burn the land for jhum cultivation on that particular day. On burning the land, the villagers go back to their village to make arrangements for the A'galmaka festival. In this festival, the villagers use to visit each other, drink their traditional rice beer 'Chu' and the younger boys and girls spends the whole night dancing and singing.

1.1.4 Miamua or Mejakchima

'Miamua' or 'Mejakchima' festival is celebrated so that the jhum cultivation can be saved from any sort of bad omen, insects and natural calamities. The main objective of this festival is to seek and receive blessings of 'Rokime Devi'.

1.1.5 Rongchu Gala

It is to please the lord of crops 'Micchichaljong' that the first batch of crops' production is being offered to the deity so that his blessings are received for greater productivity of crops. Rongchugala festival is celebrated as soon as the crops starts rippling and the villagers begin celebration by enjoying their traditional rice beer 'Chu'. The half ripe crop of rice is brought and roasted to make Chira (flattened rice flakes) which is first being offered to the deity and then eaten by the villagers. This festival of the Garo society can also be resonated with the 'Na-khua' festival of Assamese people. (Majumdar, 188)

1.1.6 Ja'megapa

Ja'megapa festival is celebrated as soon as the crops are being cut and brought to home from the field. This festival is observed with little celebration following the Rongchugala festival. Young boys of the village use to make some specific sounds like 'aaha-oo-aaa, aaha-oo-aaa' etc., while roaming on the streets as a part of this festival.

1.1.7 Wangala

Wangala is the main festival of the Garo people and it is a major agriculture based festival of the tribe. It is celebrated right after the cultivation process is over. Once the cultivation is over by the months of Ahin-Kati, the farming people comes back to the village and on reaching their village, they celebrate another festival called 'Ahaya' which is kind of a pre-celebration before the main festival of 'Wangala'. (Majumdar, 21) it is almost two weeks after the 'Ahaya', 'Wangala' celebration starts and the young boys and girls are seen to wear new clothes in this festival. The celebrations for this festival generally start in the evening by offering 'Chu' and other cultivated products to 'Salbhang' or Lord Sun at the house of the 'Nokma' or village head. This is being called as Nokma Wangala (Majumdar, 181). The first night of 'Wangala' passes in dance, music and celebrations. In the morning, villagers come back to the village head's home again. in the second part of the celebration, 'Chachat' is observed in which instruments like 'Dhol', 'Nagara', 'Xinga' are being played. One

particular characteristic of this festival is that, the festival continues as long as there is 'Chu' in the village households.

1.2 Religious festival

Religion is a method of belief. The major religions prevalent in the world consider a super power as the creator of the universe. But, in Garo language, the word religion has no synonyms. The traditional Garo society had no synonym for the word religion as at that religion was an integral part of society and culture. They had a number of religious festivals related to different phases and practices of life, like wedding, birth, death, treatment for diseases etc. Such religious festivals which are an integral part of the Garo society-culture are discussed below-

1.2.1 Dusiya

Dusiya is a marriage festival of the Garo people. In every society, marriage is celebrated according to certain social customs. Such social customs are seen to vary from one society to another. The Garo society too follows certain specific social customs to establish a marital relationship since the ancient times.

The Garo society generally has five clans and according to their social customs, marriage between the people of same clan is not permissible. There are two types of marriage systems in the Garo society. Every family needs to declare one of their girls as the heir of the family. This heir is called 'Nukhrom' Dule and her marriage is called 'Nukhrom'.

In the case of a 'Nukhrom' marriage, the groom is being forcefully brought to the house of the bride and then Dusiya festival is celebrated. A specific date is being chosen for the festival and the village priest is invited to perform the customs. The priest brings to two hens and pats them on the back of the newly married couple. Following this, the hens are beheaded and the blood is being rubbed on the back of the couple. They are then given a treat with the meat of the hens. Another hen is being sacrificed on the name of the deities.

1.2.2 Achungtata, Amuwa, Tamla

These are the devotional ceremonies of the Garo people. They believe on the spiritual powers, ghosts and deities. For which, they believe in performing such ceremonies to get rid of issues like diseases, natural calamities and anything of same sort.

Garo people worship a good number of deities or spiritual powers. The primary deities are – Saalbang (Lord Sun), Susime (the guard of wealth), Richi (the lord of peace and tranquility at home) and Gayera (the lord of thunder). They believe in sacrificing livestock like hens, duck, pig, goat etc for pleasing the deities. They do not worship statues, but a certain level of ground being prepared for the purpose of worshipping.

Such ceremonies prevalent in the Garo society can be resonated with the Apesara xabaah, Sitala puja, Kumari puja, Lakhimi puja etc that are being practiced in Assamese society.

Mangona is a notable death ceremony practiced in the Garo society which is a community death ceremony that is being observed for all those dead people who dies in a village within a year. Usually, there is a convention of playing 'Xinga' (a horn instrument) when a person dies in the Garo society. The burial of the dead is being performed in presence of the community. After the death of a person, a small hut is made in the name of the dead person so that his soul can live in the house and all other things essential for the soul are kept inside the house. A sort of a memoire 'Kif' is placed in front of the dead person's house and at the end of the year, Mangona is observed by the community for the release of the spirits whoever has died in the year.

Another festival associated with the agriculture-based Garo social system is Ghuri-r aa. The significance of this festival is dancing with horse. Garo tribe is a fighter community and they have had to fight with different powers at different points of time.

In this festival, a horse idol is made with clothes of different colours wrapped around it. Several ornaments are also hung on the neck, forehead and leg of the idol. The people participating in the festival also wears similar colourful clothes and ornaments and starts dancing with the horse holding several types of arms like sword, bow and arrow, shield etc. Before starting the dance, they worship the horse by pouring 'chu' on the idol following some rituals. The dancing poses generally comprises of fighting postures and several other types of poses.

2.0 Conclusion

We can see a wide variety of dancing-singing and instruments being used in the Garo society festivals. Every tribe of the world has their particular set of social customs and cultures. Similarly, the Garo society too celebrated a number of festivals as a means of fun and entertainment. Their traditional clothes, ornaments, instruments, beliefs, dancing and singing practices holds a vivid picture of the Garo society and culture.

Footnote:

1. Dhirendra Narayan Majumdar: Garo Sanskritir Ruprekha, P. 7
2. Bimal Majumdar: Janajati aru Garo Janajati, P. 188
3. Dhirendra Narayan Majumdar: Garo Sanskritir Ruprekha, P. 21
4. Bimal Majumdar: Janajati aru Garo Janajati, P. 181

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