



# WANGALA FESTIVAL OF THE GARO IN MEGHALAYA, NORTH EAST INDIA

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## ABSTRACT:

A festival is an essential role of the socio-religious and cultural practice of all of community of the people. Festival is celebrating direct or indirect bearing on the good harvesting of crops. Wangala is the largest festival which is traditional harvest festival celebrated by the Garo community in the Garo Hills region of Meghalaya and in some other parts of Nagaland, Assam, Tripura and Bangladesh. Wangala is known as the Hundred drums which is the post-harvest festival where the Garos give thanks to the Misi Saljong the sun God, for blessing the people with a rich harvest. Every year, it is celebrated in the month of October to November in different villages, setting different dates for the occasion. In Wangala there are so many rituals and sacrifices. In this festival, people are being enjoyed the beats of the log drums and the merrymaking. Every part of the Wangala dance highlights the social and the religious life of the Garos in the society.

**KEYWORDS:** Wangala, Misi Saljong, Garo, Jhum, Nokma, A.king, Songsarek, Wanti Toka, Cha.chat Soa, Nagra, Chu-rugala, Asiroka, A.a O.pata, Den.bilsia, A.galmaka, Rongchu gala, Ahaia, Gando, Wanchi, Krongna Do.tata, Kram Do.tata.

## INTRODUCTION

Meghalaya is the state which is one of the seven sisters of North East, India. The meaning of Meghalaya in Sanskrit is the "Abode of Clouds". Meghalaya became a separate full state on 21<sup>st</sup> January, 1972. It is bounded by Assam on the North and East and by Bangladesh to the West and South. Meghalaya can be divided into two zone- The Khasi-Jaintia region and the Western Zone i.e. Garo Hills region. Meghalaya is a small hill state in the North Eastern region of India and abode of three matrilineal tribes namely the Khasis, the Jaintias and the Garos.

The Garo people lived in the North Eastern part of India concentrated in the State of Meghalaya. They resided the hills that derived its name from Garo and hence it is referred as Garo Hills. The Garo called themselves as "A.chik" or "Mande", which means Hill man or Hill tribes and they migrated from the northern region of the Tibetan plateau from the land of Garo in Tibet and they belong to the Tibeto-Burman stock. After they migrated, they settled in Garo Hills under the leadership of Abong Noga. The Garos are one of the largest

groups of tribes of North-East and are widely scattered. The Garos tribes are subdivided into a number of groups on the basis of linguistic and cultural variations.

The Garo people lived in forested area. The Garos categorise themselves into a number of groups based on dialectical and location. The Garo village people depend on Slash-and-burn technique for agriculture refers to as Jhum cultivation. The festival of Wangala was also related to the Jhum cultivation. The Garos are mainly agricultural people and use burn method of cultivation the worship of presiding deities which control seasons and whose blessings are required for a good crops form an important part of the Garo socio-religious festivals. Every festival has two components social and religious. The religious component includes regain the favour of deities and spirits while the social aspect centres on feast, music and dance. Some important annual festivals before Wangala are:

**Aa.a O.pata:** The Ceremonies and festivals of annual cycle of begin with Aa.a O.pata Ceremony, this ceremony performed by every family on the plot of land, to be cultivated by chanting and performance of other rituals.

**Den.bilsia:** The Den.bilsia festival marks the completion of clearing the jhum field sometimes during January- February. During this festival deity is propitiated for blessing at the house of the Nokma. Thereafter, a feast is arranged followed by a dance with the swords.

**Asiroka:** It is celebrated in connection with planting of rice and other crops in the old Jhum field. During this celebration sacrifices is performed and meat of the animal is distributed to all the participants. Mite Misi Saljong is worshipped for his blessings. The festivals ends with a dance in which unmarried boys and girls take part.

**A.galmaka:** A.galmaka is performed just after the burning of jhum plot cleared for cultivation. Every family performs it individually at its own field by sacrificing an egg. The Nokma sacrifices fowl. Thereafter seeds are sowed by scattering them over the field. Feast, visits to each other and dances continue for some days.

**Rongchu Gala:** Rongchu Gala it is a ritualistic offering of the flattened rice known as Rongchu from the first harvested paddy of the field. It is believed that before harvesting the crop it is essential to offer first to the gods. The offering includes powered rice prepared from new crop. This offering is placed on banana leaves at the prepared spot by the Nokma. Other articles offered during the occasion include lime and sugarcane. Later people eat, drink and play musical instruments.

**Ahaia:** After completing the harvest usually in September Ahaia ceremony is held to mark the safe and healthy crop given by the presiding deity. On this occasion every household cooks fish, dried fish, crab or fowl and offer the food to gods. Later for many days, feasting, drinking and dancing continue to mark the festivity.

The Wangala is most famous and biggest festival. It is a thanksgiving harvest festival. Almost all sections of Garo community celebrate it. A preparation for this festival starts in advance after announcement of dates by the Nokma. Villagers repaired their house to provide lodging to guests during festival. Rice beer and meat are consumed in large quantities. The festival begins with the house of Nokma with rituals and sacrifices, and residences of the villagers. After this some ritual performed and during this evening the Kamal (priest) ties a cotton thread around the mouth of the pot and invokes the spirit by incantations. He sacrifices three hens near the pot and sprinkles the blood over the pot and thread and later ties bird's feathers around the pot's mouth. This spirit is associated with wealth. Thereafter priest, before the front wall of the house, worship Nokni mite or spirit of the house by sacrificing one red cock and scatters blood and feather all over the wall. Similarly other smaller deities are worshipped by sacrificing cocks and hens. Some of these sacrifices are Krongna Do.tata, Kram Do.tata etc. After completing these rituals as Chu - rugala meaning pouring out liquor ceremony begins amidst beating of drums, gongs and playing of musical instruments. The liquor is first

poured to the Kamal (priest) by the Nokma (Village Leader) and later all villagers will take part of it. Kamal on this occasion wears the traditional ceremonial dress called gando and dances around the fire. Nokma and other residents also join him. After the dance the women distribute powdered rice cakes to participants. This ceremony called Wanchi. Later, this ceremony the women in their traditional ceremonial costumes dance in Nokma's house for the first time. In this way dancing and worshipping of other deities continues for sometimes at different places such as priest's house etc. In these dances married and unmarried persons of both sexes participate. Such occasion give an opportunity to members of younger generation to select their mates. In this Wangala Festivals the dancers make a line to two parallel line- one of the men and the other of women, both turning out in festive traditional outfits. The men beats the drums and move forward in tune with the sound of music flowing out of gongs, buffalo horn, flutes and the drums. The dancer show energetic, active movements, aided by the feasts of meat and rice beer.

## WANGALA FESTIVAL

Wangala, the biggest of all the festivals of the Garos are accomplished in the connection with the Jhum Cultivation. It was usually conducted in the month of October sometimes in November but every village sets their own time and so there are two or three weeks during which Wangala is celebrated. This festival of a single village lasts about a week.

It is the most essential harvest festival of the unconverted Garos (Songsarek). Wangala is a thanksgiving harvest festival which every Garo Village celebrated for several days. They celebrated with drinking rice beer, eating various types of meat, sprinkling rice flour, beating drums, playing flutes, merry making. All the people, young or old, men and women, rich and poor, wear traditional dresses, headgears and ornaments. They all joined in together to dance vigorously to the popular songs and celebrated together for many days in the month of October and November every year. This annual festival ceremonies were designed to preserve harmony with the super natural, though the festivals included far more than rituals. They combined different agricultural activities in their dances, making out the significant stages in the annual cycle and made it an occasion for the most joyous celebration of the year. Even sacrifices were carried out in a matter of fact, almost secular manner. During the annual ceremonies, rice beer is the most integral part, along with feasting and dancing, everyone enjoyed the festivities to the full. It shows that all the Garo festivals had two parts, which is the religious and social. The religious rituals were performed with solemnity and devotion, but the social part was a joyful celebration of indulgence in feasting, dancing and merrymaking.

When the rice harvest has been fully gathered, the great sacrificed and festival of the year, the Wangala takes place. For its celebration, a date is fixed by the Nokma (village leader) and announced among the village people to facilitate the cleaning of the village, the household and make other preparations for the festivals.

Wangala preparations begin before during the time of celebration. Prior to the First ceremony, livestock must be brought collectively from the household well in advance to provide meat for the feast. In the villages, most of the Garo people bought new clothes, repaired the houses, etc. During this festival, entertainment took place in the bachelor's dormitory and the other village's youth also joined and village youth served all the rice beer, rice and feasted together.

The Second ceremony of the Wangala was the real ceremony called Chu-rugala which means pouring the rice beer, an offering to Saljong and this ceremony was started from the house of the Nokma / headman (Village leader). Before offering to Sun God the harvested crops cannot be taken. Everyone drinks rice beer after it is provided to the gods and the ceremony ends with the beating of the drums. Before sunset, every village houses were painted with powdered rice flour (Wanti Toka). At sunset, the Kram (the drum used for solemn occasion) was taken out ceremoniously by the priest from the house of the Nokma, where it was kept. Another drum used for solemn occasion (Nagra) was also put outside. The Nagra was beaten on three occasions only;

the first was for inviting the people to join the drink; the second, while celebration was in progress and in full swing and the third, when the drinking was over and the villagers had to leave for home.

The main ceremony, Cha.chat Soa (burning of incense), is performed on the following day. A macro number of the people gathered at this ceremony which is performed in the house of Nokma (village leader). A small feast is organised accompanied by the beating of drums and gongs. It was to please the god, Saljong, to ensure that the harvest of the following year would be abundant. It was the custom that during the day of sacrifice and great celebration, every villager participated and played their role whether it is big or small.

These all rituals and ceremony performed from the beginning day of the festival by the priest, is also known as “Kamal”. These rituals are performed inside in house of the Nokma or village leader or the husband of the woman who holds power over the A.king or the Land

The Nokma carries some powdered Sasat and burning twigs and lights the bark filling the house with fragrance. The Nokma extinguishes the flames and the drummers reduce the intensity with which they beat the drums when a man fires a gunshot outside in house of the Nokma. This is followed by dancing and merrymaking.

During Wangala, every villager dressed in their colourful traditional outfits and feathered headgear and dance to music played on long oval-shaped drums. The dance is starting from the Nokma house or village leader house.

The Garos believe that they catch the attention of Saljong by burning the Sasat and thus, seek his blessing for a best harvest. After Saljong has been honoured, this festival reaches its climax. There are no further ceremonial rites celebrated in the next three or four days which is characterized by feasting on the slaughtered animals, dancing and drinking rice beer. Visitors in the village are entertained with dance, feasts and rice beer. The houses are visited in a fixed sequence starting from the Nokma’s house. Mostly, young people perform group dances to the beatings of the drums and gongs. In certain cases, married and older people also as a part in dance performances. The dance figures are stylized highlights of everyday activities. Besides the gongs, a small bamboo flute, a trumpet made from a buffalo horn tied to a long bamboo tube and the Nokma’s small sacred drum which is carried from house to house are played too, synchronized with the movement of the group dancers. After much fun fair and gaiety, the celebrations come to an end. Of all the annual rites and ceremonies performed in relation to the agricultural cycle, in this festival is most elaborate.

Besides these, certain ceremonies are observed annually by the entire village community to safeguard the members from the disasters of the forest, and from illness and mishaps during the entire coming year.

## CONCLUSION

Wangala Celebration is traditionally celebrated for two and three days in the towns and in villages. This celebration is lasted for a week. In towns, it was celebrated as a try to conserve the ancient heritage of the Garos cultures and traditions and to enlighten the coming generation about it to preserve their roots. This celebration is the important festive observance during year and combines religious sacrifices. It is examine to honour and offer sacrifices to the deity of the Garos, Mite Misi Saljong or Sun God. This festival is also used as a special occasion during which the youths takes the change to select, choose and propose to the girls to be their life partners. The original traditional styles of celebrating this festival can be found in the remote songsarek (animistic) villages. This festival is the way to exhibits the culture and tradition of the region. The Wangala indicate the beginning of winter, which means the harvesting season is the end and the worker in the field. Although, the Garos transition of religion and many other festivals and ceremonies might have lost their grandeur, and show but nowadays this festival is celebrated with enthusiasm.

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