



# GARO RELIGION MEGHALAYA: TRADITIONS AND MODERNITY

<sup>1</sup>Dr. Bimal Mazumdar

<sup>1</sup> Professor Department of Assamese, Gauhati University, Guwahati, Assam

<sup>1</sup> email: bmazumdar959@gmail.com

<sup>2</sup> Gayatri Mahanta

<sup>2</sup> Research Scholar, Department of Assamese, Gauhati University, Guwahati, Assam

## Abstract

Gara are one of the major constituent people of Meghalaya. Meghalaya is a state where The Garos, The Khasis and The Jaintias are the main inhabitants. Religion is a set of beliefs, Practices and philosophical values concerned with the definition of the sacred, the comprehension of life and salvation from the problems of human existence. The indigenous faiths of the tribal people to North-Eastern India follow a familiar and largely indented pattern. While all of them believe in the existence of a supreme being, a powerful creator and a being protector, they also believe in a host of spirits. The present paper will try to highlight the tradition and modernity of the religion of the Garo people of Meghalaya.

**Keywords** – indigenous, Mite, wangala, saljong, chu-rugale, sangsarek.

## 1.1 Introduction:

Religion is a beliefs, practices and philosophical values concerned with the definition of the sacred, the comprehension of life, and salvation from the problems of human existence. Religion is essentially an institutionalized or traditional path to salvation. All men in a society ultimately must face certain of life's problems essentially alone, despite all efforts of others to help. Religious traditions are the result of man's attempt to capture and enshrine his philosophical and spiritual insights so that they are available to the individual as he faces life and its stresses, confusions, and complexities. Religion is a social phenomenon (as

well as a psychological one) because it necessarily stresses fellowship in the development, teaching, and perpetuation of religious insight and knowledge. It is concerned with the common plight of all people at all times, regardless of age, sex or status within society. The concept of the supernatural or a path of salvation may work to bind man to the dictates of limited contemporary social values and social groups, or it may serve to provide the wisdom and techniques by which man may free himself from contemporary groups and values – it may give him periodic freedom to achieve values that transcend the demands of the social present. Thus religion is both ‘intensely personal and intensely social.’<sup>1</sup>

## 1.2 Traditional Religion of The Garos:

Numerous theories have been advanced to explain the origin and nature of religion. Spencer felt that religion’s fundamental datum was the current generation’s respect for the older generation, thus making it a kind of ancestor worship. Tylor said that visions and dreams gave rise to man’s developing the concept of his soul apart from his body, extending it to the whole material universe so that he reached the concept of a belief in spirits, or animism which is the least common denominator in religion. Durkheim believed that religion arose from the crowd excitement in group ritual, such as totemism, and stressed the difference between things with power-sacred and those without power-profane. Hauer saw religion as deriving from the mystic experience peculiar to some persons in a community being transmitted with such authority that it becomes more important than any other experience. Lowie treats religion as a cultural phenomenon. Frazer said that religion is a kind of individual, emotional, supplication to spiritual beings. Marett emphasized that animatism is personification of inanimate powers.<sup>2</sup>

The indigenous faiths of the tribal people of North-Eastern India follow a familiar and largely identical pattern, while all of them believe in the existence of a supreme being, a powerful creator and a benign protector, they also believe in a host of spirits, good and bad, whom they propitiate or appease by appropriate offerings. It may be said that their ordinary day-to-day life is believed to be influenced by action of these spirits, more manifestly perhaps by the malignant ones. Sickness, misfortunes, accidents are believed to be caused by their machinations, owing to some lapses on the part of the sufferer. It is because of this that tribal religion has for long been described as animistic. The fact, however, remains that in the last

<sup>1</sup> Scott, William P – Dictionary of Sociology, p – 344

<sup>2</sup> Tylor, E.B : Dictionary of Anthropology, p – 452.

resort, tribal people must turn to the supreme being for deliverance. The above observations are equally true of the hill people of Meghalaya.<sup>3</sup>

The non-Christian Garos of the districts are called heathens by the converts while others call them animistic. Playfair described them as a animistic “Like all animistic religions, that the Garos consists of the beliefs in a multitude of beneficent and malevolent spirits.”<sup>4</sup> But really Garos are neither heathens nor totally animistic; they have their own spiritual beliefs as well as others of the world. They believe that there is an Almighty God above us all who has created the universe and all the creatures of this world of ours. They respect all the faiths of the people, and in this respect their outlook is much broader than that of many others acknowledging some of other of the noble faiths or religious beliefs of the human beings.<sup>5</sup>

The supernatural world of the Garo consists of supernatural beings. Some supernatural beings are considered as males while others as females (however, in Garo language it is possible to speak about them without mentioning their sex). Supernatural beings act and behave like human beings. When offended they take revenge by causing harm to the offending human beings. The supernatural beings cause illness, failure of crops, cause damage to houses by lighting and similar other calamities. The behaviour of supernatural beings can be made to comply with the wishes of human beings by performing appropriate rites which consist mainly of sacrifices.<sup>6</sup> All these good and evil spirits are commonly called *Mite*. The term *Mite* covers what we call Gods and Goddesses and some other lesser spirits and imps. According to their belief, these spirits or mites are everywhere in the sky above, on the earth beneath, in the depths of the waters, in the dark covers, recesses of mysterious mountains and in the trees and bamboo groves. Rivers and lakes, mountains and hill, trees and shrubs, sticks and stones, are the dwelling places of some spirits. Similarly, the stars, the sun and the moon are associated with some spirits or mites and all these mites are considered immortal by them. To some of these spirits are attributed the creation of the world, to others the control of natural phenomena and the destinies of man from birth to death are governed by a host of spirits where anger be appeared by sacrifices and whose good offices must be entreated in like manner.<sup>7</sup>

The mythology of the Garos is voluminous and intricate as that of the Hindu. And as they have no written record, nothing but memory of trust to the preservation of their traditional myths, their mythology

<sup>3</sup> Simon, I. M., – Maghalaya : state of our Union, p – 29

<sup>4</sup> Playfair, A., – The Garos, p -80

<sup>5</sup> Choudhary, B.N., – Some cultural and Linguistic Aspects of the Garos, p-42

<sup>6</sup> Goswami, M.C., and Mazumdar D.N – Social Institutions of the Garos of Meghalaya, p – 109

<sup>7</sup> Sangma, M.S., – History and culture of the Garos, p – 220

varies with change of places and circumstances.<sup>8</sup> Different divisions of the tribes have different names for their gods and goddesses and there are only a few spirits which are common to them all. Again, the same spirits are known by different names in different places, and it is impossible to get their religious concepts and mythology from the Garo animists at the present days. Besides the above difficulties, the names of spirits or mites are remarkable in their length and in some cases, they bear the teknonymous affixes for father to mother.

### 1.3 Religious Festivals:

Festivals consist of two parts, namely religious and social. The religious functions of the festivals are first completed. It consists in the worship of the various duties and the spirits having special relations respectively with the individual and the village. Then the social side of the festival beings, which consists of feasts, music and dancing.

*Wangala* is the biggest of all the festivals of the Garos performed in connection with the jhum cultivation. It is usually held in October and so sometimes it synchronises with the Durga Puja, but each village sets its own time and so there are two or three weeks during which wangala is celebrated in one or two village. The festival of a single village lasts about a week. This festival is observed to honour and offer sacrifices to their greatest god called *Soljong* (the Sungod), and to seek its blessing for the future.

The festival begins in the evening in the bachelors house (Nokpanthe) where the young men act as hosts to all the villagers. Rice beer, rice and beef curry are served by the bachelors to the whole crowd. This is followed first by a few dances which are only the preliminary of what is to come on the following day.

The actual festival begins on the next day with the '*Chu Rugala*' ceremony (chu-liquor, and Rugala pour out). But before the actual pouring out of liquor ceremony is performed, worship of the various duties and spirits are made first in the house of the *Nokma*, in the house of the priest and then in the house of the other villagers. In this festival Garos worship various spirits and duties as follows :

Rongdik Mite is one of the female spirit (Rongdik-big earthen pot, and Mite-spirit). This worship is made in the presence of women. The spirit resides in the pot in which rice is kept and the conception of this deity is similar to that of the Hindu goddess *Lakshmi*. In the evening, the Kamal (priest) comes and a cotton thread is tied round the neck of the rice pot with three lumps of cotton hanging round it. After that the priest invokes the spirit with incantations within the room, and sacrifices three hens with a dao in front of the pot.

<sup>8</sup> Dalton, E.T., – Some Account of the Garrows, p – 28



The blood is sprinkled all over the pot and on the cotton lumps, and the feathers are tied to the pot. This is the goddess of wealth among the Garos and is particularly revered by the ladies. The women also have a special claim to worship her. Here there is a similarity with the practice of the Hindus whose guardian of wealth is the goddess *Lakshmi* regarded as the special goddess of the ladies.

After finishing the worship to the *Rongdik Mite*, the priest comes before the front wall of the house. Here he first worship *Nokne Mite*, the spirit of the house and then sacrifices one red cock. The blood of the feathers are scattered all over the wall.

In the same way honour and offer sacrifices to *Krongna Do'tata* (sacred post), *Kram Do'tata* (Drum), *Ang'ke Do'tata*(crab) in the wangala festival. After these worship the *Sasat Soa* ceremony is performed. *Sasat Soa* is a part of wangala festivals. The priest takes a piece of *Sasat* or incense and goes near the *Maljuri* post where all the jhum product and the agricultural implements are collected and burns the incense with queer incantations. The idea of worshipping the *Sasat* is that according to Garo cosmology, God first made the *Sasat* tree and after it all other trees were made. Therefore, the annually worship this tree and in each worship *Sasat* forms an important ingredient.

After the worship of *Sasat*, the people assemble in the courtyard to dance, but before this dance, they are not allowed to dance outside. Wangala is one of the many festivals at which group dancing takes place. Both married and unmarried male and female take part in the dances. Group dancing is almost exclusively a night pastime and continue until dawn.<sup>9</sup>

All the wangala, it is custom to mix flour with water, and for the assembled people to dip their hands into the mixture and make white hand-marks on the posts and walls of the house and on the backs of the guests. This custom is known as *Wanti Toka* by *Am'beng* and *Ramchandol Toka* by the people of plains.<sup>10</sup>

Besides the sacrifices for individual cases of illness and other socio-religious festivals, there are certain ceremonies which are observed annually by a whole community or village. This is known as *A'songtala* ceremony. This is observed in order to safeguard its members from dangers of the forests, and from sickness and mishap during the coming year. The ceremony takes place at a place set aside for the purpose. Close to the outskirts of every big village a number of stones is noticed which are stuck into the ground without any order or method. These are known as *A'song*, and on them is offered the sacrifice which

<sup>9</sup> Sangma, M.S – Ibid, pp – 237-244

<sup>10</sup> Playfair, A – Ibid, p-95

the A'songtala demands. The sacrifice of a goat takes place and a month later, that of a langur or a bamboo rat is considered necessary.

Besides these, *Mangona*, *Amua*, *Rusrota* several ceremonies are observed by the Garos through out the year. Some festivals are purely religious and some festivals are socio-religious. The above can be said to represent the most popular religious beliefs and their observances. It may also be mentioned here that the Christians do not take part in any of these religious worship and observances.

## 1.4 Conclusion

To-day all over the district there is a large number of Christian converts. Those who are following the old faith as described above are known as *Songsarek*. Christian converts are to be found in large numbers in the areas adjoining the plains. The more interior the area is the lesser is the number of convert. In Garo Hills the largest number of converts are Baptist Christians. There are a few Roman Catholics. The people following the traditional faith are not at all hostile towards Christianity. The older generation does not care to get themselves converted. Often hear from the old man 'our boys and girls are nowadays becoming Christian but we are *Songsareks*; we are going to die soon ; what is the use of forsaking the customs of our forefathers?' However, the Songserak Garo are very liberal in religious matters. They do not interfere with the individual choice of a faith, indigenous or foreign. They allow their children to become Christians without osensible opposition.

Christianity was introduced among the Garo by missionaries from Europe and America about in the second half of the nineteenth century. Today more than 50 percent of the Garo have accepted this new faith. Conversion involves not only a change of religions belief, it also simultaneously makes its impact felt on other institutions as well.

## 1.5 References

1. Bhattacharyya, Asutosh – *The Sun and the Serpent*, 1977, Firma KLM Ltd, Calcutta.
2. Bose, Nirmal Kumar : *Tribal Life in India*, 2004, N.B.T, India.
3. Burling Robbins, *Rengsangri*, 1963, University of Pennsylvania.
4. Carey, William – *Garo Jungle Book*, 1966, Tura Book Home, Tura, Garo Hills.
5. Chattarji, S.K – *Kirata-Jana-Kriti*, 1974 The Asiatic Society, Calcutta.
6. Choudhary, B.N – *Some Cultural and Linguistic Aspect of the Garos*, 1969, L.B.S, Guwahati.
7. Dalton, E.T – *Some Account of the Garrows*, 1872, Calcutta.
8. Dasgupta, Sashi Bhusan : *Aspects of Indian religious thought* 1977, Firma KLM Ltd, Calcutta.

9. Frazer, James – *The Golden Bough*, 1959 Macmillan & co. Ltd, London.

10. Goswami M.C and Mazumder D.N – *Social Institutions of the Garo of Meghalaya*, 1972, Nababharat publishers, Calcutta.

11. Kar, P.C – *Glimpses of the Garos*, 1982, Garo Hills Book Emporium, Tura.

12. Muzumder, B – *Janajati Aru Garo Janajati*, 2004, Bina Library Guwahati.

13. Mazumder, D.N : *Culture change in two Garo village*, 1978, Anthropological Survey of India Calcutta.

14. Mazumder, D.N : *The Garos*, 1996, L.B.S. Gawahati.

15. Marak, C.R – *Rivers and Culture Focus on Garo Hills*, 2004 i. G.R.H.S. Bhopal.

16. Nakane, Chie : *Garo and Khasi*, 1967, Mouton & Co., Paris.

17. Playfair A : *The Garos*, 1975 United Publisher, Guwahati & Calcutta.

18. Rongmuthu, D.S : *Apasang Agana*.

19. Sangma, M.S : *History and Culture of the Garos* 1985, N.E.H.U, Shillong.

20. Singha, T.C : *The psyche of the Garos*, 1966, Calcutta.

21. Scott, William P. : *Dictionary of Sociology*, 1999 GOYL saaB, Delhi.

22. Simon, I.M : *Meghalaya, state of our Union*, 1980 Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, New Delhi.

23. Tylor, E.B : *Dictionary of Anthropology*, 1999 GOYL Saa B, Delhi.

