



A TRADITIONAL PRACTICES OF THE GAROS

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This research paper is based on the traditional knowledge system and practices of the Garos of with special reference to its relation with land resources and sustainability. *A·song Kosi* or *A·song Raka* is a sacred place reserved by the A·king Nokma for the purpose of conserving bio-diversity. A·king Nokma is the Village Chief who ruled in the erstwhile polities and looks after the villages. The Nokma under his Nokmaship has the power to declare and reserve one of the lands as *A·song Kosi*. *A·song Kosi* is a traditional knowledge system of the Garos which believes in the existence of a forest god called Abetpa Ranggapa. This god is said to protect the land and also maintains prohibition of entry of people or animals to the sacred place. As such, whoever enters the sacred forest illegally was punished and it is feared that trespassing would bring negative impact on the person's life such as untimely death. *Kosi Ro·ong* or *Kosi* stones were placed to demarcate the sacred site and it is named as *A·song Kosi*. This practice and knowledge has been handed down from generation to generation in many villages in Garo Hills. From time immemorial, this system has helped in conservation of flora and fauna in the Garo Hills. At present, *A·song Kosi* is preserve in the Nokrek Biosphere reserve. It is famous for the diverse ecosystem and biodiversity. Garos belief in after life and when a man dies, his soul remains, because the soul is immortal and returns to the creator Tatara Rabuga, who lives in the land of spirit known as *Balpakram* which is now a National Park. It is the home of many flora and fauna. The flora includes the medicinal plants used by the Garos to treat various illnesses.

Therefore, this paper seeks to study the traditional knowledge system of the Garos in Meghalaya and how their religious beliefs have helped to conserve the natural resources including biodiversity reserves of the state. It will also deal with the sustainable use of medicinal plants which are part and parcel of these sacred natural sites.

Keywords: *A·song Tata, A·king Nokma, Nokrek, Balpakram.*

Introduction

The Garos are one of the Indigenous tribe settled in the North Eastern part of the Indian sub-continent. They settled mainly in Meghalaya, Assam, and Tripura. They practice the unique tradition, culture, economic, and political system where they chose the leaders from among their community whom they called *Nokma*, or the Village chief, to look after the entire village. They believed themselves to be migrated from Tibet. In his book '*The Garos*,' Playfair states that the original leader whose of the migration was named Garu, and that he gave his own name to the tribe'(7) So they believed that he might have given name for them and thus, they called themselves as Garo. In his book *A·chikni Ma·biding* Moniram R. Marak(2016) cited that they originally came from

Nonoi A-song Chiga Appel Jaseng(1) in Tibet. They migrated from Tibet to Garo Hills under the leadership of *Jappa Jalimpa Sukpa Bongepa*. Grierson, Playfair, and Majumder witness to conclude that the Garo people do not like the word Garo since they belief this word to be a corrupt one. So, they hardly use the word among themselves. They mostly addressed themselves as *Mande* (Man) or *A·chik-Mande* which means a ‘Hill Man.’

NOKMAS

The Nokmas were the earliest political figure in A·chik society. The entire village people depend on the Nokma as he is the chief of the village. Before the British rule, the Nokmas were the ones who took the responsibilities of the whole villagers regarding their safety and livelihood. The A·chiks, being the matrilineal society, the daughter is the heiress or *nokna*, who inherits the family properties and this process, is brought down to daughters from generation to generations. In each A·chik family, the *Nokna* inherits the family property but in some cases the particular daughter inherits the whole plot of land which belongs to the whole clan known as *A·king* (whole plot of land) and thus, *Nokna* becomes the *A·king* Nokma. According to Milton S Sangma, the word *Nokma* has two literally meaning, ‘nok’ means ‘house’ and ‘ma’ means ‘mother’. So literally it is ‘the mother of the house.’ The daughter, who inherits the family property including the whole plot of land belonging to a clan, becomes a *Nokma*. The husband of the *Nokna* also known as *Nokkrom* becomes a custodian and supervisor of the *A·king*, and thereby become the *nokkrom* of the whole *ma·chong*.

A·SONG KOSI & A·SONG TATA

The *A·king Nokma* has the power and authority over the village. He has the authority to distribute the land to every household within the village. No person can make an entry or exit without the prior information by the *Nokma*. Apart from distributing land for the villagers, *A·king Nokma* holds the power to reserve a land located outskirts of the village to offer to the gods. In this sacrificial ceremony, a plot of land is set apart at the outskirts of every village inhabitant by the Non-Christian Garos and a sacrificial stone is erected which is called *A·song* or *A·song Kosi*. The place is considered to be a scared place because it is the residence of the guardian deity of forest, Abetpa Ranggapa. It is believed that the deity live in the shady cool areas far away from reach of humans and animals and no one is dare to enter the place. Whosoever illegally enters the sacred forest got punished and it is also feared

that trespassing would bring negative impact on the person's life such as untimely death. Therefore, once in a year the *Nokma* sacrifice a goat and perform *A-song Tata* ceremony to the deity to drive out the dangers of sickness, animals, etc. from the village community and this sacrifice can only be done under the supervision of the *Nokma*.

NOKREK

Nokrek Hills is one of the living *A.kong Kosi* which is situated toward the East of Garo Hills at a height of 1,412 metres. Marak (2000) states; *there is no human habitational site in the area* (22). In keeping with the landscape of the hill, A·chik legend in ancient days, a king Abong Noga and his wife Silme Doka live in Nokrek Hills and cultivated there and store a huge quantity of rice which is known as 'Nokrek Midan' or 'store house of paddy'. Marak also tells us how *Me·mang narang* (citrus fruit) began to grown at Nokrek. According to A·chik myth, *me·mang narang* were originally from Balpakram. It is from the day when *Maopa Chongdopa* (first human to die) died leaving behind his wife Khisi and daughter Kimi; he seeks permission from his king to set out for Nokrek to give a full basket of orange from Balpakram. On reaching home (Nokrek), finding the house empty and in disappointment he left the basket as a symbol of his visit. To this day Nokrek region is abounding in *me.mang narang* or *citrus indica*. Nokrek is now famous for its Gene Citrus Sanctuary. Government of India declared this area as National Reserve for the Gene Sanctuary with a view of protecting endangered orange in 1986.

Nokrek Hills is the sacrificial land to forest god *Abetpa Ranggapa* in return for the protection of land and agriculture. The stones is placed to demarcate the existence of gods existence in the area. The reserve is rich in biodiversity. As the forest restricts any unwanted trespassers, the forest maintains a favourable natural habitat to many wild animals and plants. This region is believed to host a large population of Red panda. Many have seen the sighting of Red panda and the existence of Asian elephants. This region is also a habitat to Bengal Tigers and Marbled Cat named as 'Matcha Nokpante,' The region also consists of many species of primates, the rare stumped tailed, and pig tailed macaque. State Forest Department also have recorded a variety of snakes such as Burmese Python, King Cobra, Viper, and etc.

Nokrek National Park is not only a home to wild animals but also to a variety of plants. As the forests goods were denied by the villagers, there is a vast range of plants that covers the forests and its environment. Evergreen and

semi evergreen deciduous forests dominate the region. Among the vegetation one such endemic *Citrus indica* known as *me.mang narang* is use for medicinal purposes in treating jaundice and stomach conditions can be found in abundance. Numerous researches have been conducted to study the variety of medicinal plants by research scholars and publishers from this region.

BALPAKRAM

Balpakram is the dwelling place of the spirits of the dead according to the Garos. It holds the record of a tree trunk “*Matchu Boldak Karam*” which is forbidden and still exists in the form of a rock as the spirits take rest on their way to life after death which helps in retaining the soil from land degradation. Besides the rocks there also exists a charcoal black pool *Chidimak*, which is considered to be the spirits bathing place before they enter the abode of dead (Paradise). The colour black represents the ashes that have been washed off from the cremated bodies. It acts as a water reservoir that maintains the soil moisture and helps in water conservation. Balpakram also provides shelter to numerous birds and mammals that serve as a habitat to endangered species. Medicinal herbs called *dikges* can also be found. This myth has been passed down from generation to generations and due to the richness of flora and fauna it highly contributes to the conservation and protection of regions ecosystem. Thus, *A-song Kosi* not only protects the land of people but also helps in conserving the biodiversity in their natural habitat.

In summation, the Garos practice medicines and largely follow sustainability. A·chik people have the traditional knowledge of land use patterns and in order to protect the large area for sustainable use of land resources the *Nokma* imposes certain rules and regulations for the needs of the communities. By means of traditional knowledge A·chiks have the potential to adapt and mitigate the impacts of climatic change. In modern generation A·song Kosi is no longer practiced but has been converted to community forest in each village after becoming Christian and Nokmas are still in charge of all the reserve forests. It is now a challenge to every individual what our ancestors had done to protect the environment without any educational degree to follow the same path that has been shown. Every individual have the potential to mitigate the environmental pollution. In short, this research has shown us to love the nature as to love God.

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PICTURE GALLERY



Fig. 1. A·song Kosi of Nokrek Biosphere



Fig. 2. A·song Tata



Fig. 3. Me·mang narang of Nokrek



Fig.5 Matchu Boldak Karam of Balpakram



Fig. 6. Chidimik of Balpakram