CHAPTER II

THE GAROS

The Garos are numerically and sociologically one of the important scheduled tribes of North East India (Fig. 1), particularly Assam, and Meghalaya. The highest concentration of the Garos is seen in the Garo hills district of Meghalaya, followed by Goalpara, Karbi Anglong and Kamrup district of Assam. Ethnically the Garos belong to the Mongoloid race like most of the tribes of North East India. Multiple theories exist to explain the origin of the name ‘Garo’. Playfair (1909) who wrote the most detailed and authentic monographical account of the tribe entitled ‘The Garos’ believes that the name ‘Garo’ has been corrupted from the name ‘Gara’, initially referred to the tribe who inhabited the southern part of the hills, but later extended to all the inhabitants of the hills. The Garos however call themselves ‘Achik Mande’ which literally means ‘hill man’.

The Garos have been studied since 1788 when Eliot was deputed by the British authorities to study the conditions of the Garo hills. His
Fig. 1: Map of North East India showing the location of study areas
account was published under the title *Observations on the Inhabitants of the Garo Hills in the Asiatic Researcher*. The first comprehensive study of the tribe by a professional anthropologist is Burling's study between 1954 and 1956. Burling, who was a Harvard anthropologist, made an exhaustive study of the tribe in a village named Rengsanggiri, which preserved the traditional culture of the Garos to a great extent. Mazumdar gives a brief account of the history and general culture of the Garos and a detailed description of the two villages Wajadagiri and Matchakolgi of the Garo hills district in his doctoral thesis entitled 'A study of Culture Change in Two Garo Villages of Meghalaya'; based on his work among the Garos between 1953 and 1962. His thesis was first published with its original title in the year 1980. Barkataki (1969) has also written about the Garos in the book entitled *Tribes of Assam: Part III*. Sangma’s book entitled ‘Caro Hills: Land and the People’ published in 1984 and Sangma’s book entitled *Jadoreng: The Psycho–Physical Culture of the Garos* published in 1993, include the details of various aspects of the life and culture of the Garos.

1. History and Migration

The origin of the Garos has been exhaustively dealt with by Playfair. He advanced several hypothesis based on traditional lore of the Garos. According to one legend the Garos believe that their traditional home was Tibet. This hypothesis can neither be rejected nor accepted because it was not based on any historical or archaeological evidence; but it is generally believed by many authors like Barkataki and Sangma.
that the Garos migrated through the routes of Tibet from either western or northwestern part of China. Regarding the origin of the Garos, Dalton in his book *Descriptive Ethnology of Bengal* states on this subject that the Garos have no tradition of migration, they believe themselves to be autochthonous, and the only people with whom they claim alliance are the Buts and the English' (Playfair, 1975: 8) Playfair however refutes this theory as only a legend and emphasises the existence of a very distinct story of migration from Thibet. Playfair states that the Garos are of the stock known as Tibeto-Burman, which drifted into Eastern India and Burma across the plateaux of Tibet. Their language and few of their ideas still retains some similarity with Tibetans. Presence of traces of affinity in their language with that of the Turkish further supports the theory that from some spot in Central Asia, a vast migration was impelled, possibly by growing scarcity of rainfall and that from some of the wandering hordes are descended peoples which now occupy Burma, and a great part of Assam. It is remarkable that traditions should still be current amongst the Garos after their migration from the uplands of the Himalayas to the valley of Assam. It is also noteworthy that the yak referred to as Tibetan cow by the Garos is not found in the Garo hills but yak's tails believed to have been brought by their ancestors while migrating from Tibet are regarded as sacred.

Majumdar (1980) also believes that the exact route of migration of the Garos into undivided Assam is quite obscure. Based on the linguistic and other cultural affinities with the Kacharis and the Rabhas, two major
plain tribe of Assam, he regards the Garos as the first Mongoloid immigrants into this part of India perhaps preceded only by the Khasis of Meghalaya.

Bose’s study of the Garos, who according to him started to migrate to the plains of Bangladesh, adjacent to Garo hills, around 1891, is very important for ethnology in general, and Garo ethnology in particular, from two points of view. First, it highlights the impact of plough cultivation in the social organization of a people whose culture was traditionally a manifestation of shifting cultivation, and second, how a culture reacts to the impact of a bigger culture which exerted its influence on it.

2. Habitat

At the western end of the range of hills which forms the southern boundary of the Brahmaputra valley, where the river flows through the province of Assam, is situated the Garo hills district. It lies between 25°9' and 26°1' North latitude, and between 89°49' and 91°2' of East longitude. It is bounded on the north and west by the district of Goalpara, on the south by the district of Mymensingh and on the east by the Khasi Hills. It contains an area of 8130 square kilometres. This at present is the homeland of the Garos.

Existence of certain subdivisions of the Garos does not show presence of significant difference in their culture (except in the case of Megams) and the division seems to be mostly linguistic. The main
subdivisions of the Garos are the Ambengs, Atongs, Awes, Chisaks, Gara-Ganchings, Matchi-Duals, Megams and Rugas. The Awes inhabiting the areas adjacent to the plains districts of Kamrup and Goalpara have absorbed a great amount of plains Assamese culture due to close contact with the Rabhas inhabiting the adjacent area. Traces of outside influence is clearly visible among the Chisaks inhabiting the northeastern side of the Garo hills, not far from the Awes. The Ambengs and the Gara–Ganchings inhabit the central and central western portion of the district and the Ambengs can be said to be the least influenced by outside elements. Quite in contrast the dialect of the Atongs and the Rugas inhabiting the southern and south–eastern portion of the district exhibit peculiar resemblance to the Rongdani (a section of the Rabha tribe) dialect residing in far away northern areas of the district and the adjoining portion of Goalpara district. The Megams, who inhabit the easternmost areas of the district and extend into the adjoining Khasi hills, speak a dialect of the Khasis, and in other respects as well they are more akin to the Khasis. But in certain traits like identification of their clan with pure Garo clan they show close affinity to the Garos.

The highest hill in the Garo Hill is Nokrek and its peak reaches a height of 1,418 metre above sea level. The largest among the rivers flowing from these hills are the Dudnoi (Manda), the Krishnai (Damring), and the Someswari (Simsang ). The climate of the district is not uniform. In the high areas the climate is very mild, but in the areas near – about the plains, the summer is very hot.
The Garos inhabit some areas of the adjoining districts as well. The south-western portion of the Kamrup district is inhabited by the Garos side by side with the Pati Rabhas, a section of the Rabha tribe. The southern portion of the Goalpara district is inhabited by the Garos side by side with two sub groups of the Rabha tribe-Rongdani and Maitariys. In the south of the district they extend to the plains of Mymensingh. The western border of the Khasi hills is inhabited by the Megam and no pure Garos are to be found there excepting the northern and southern tips. There are colonies of the Garos in Burnihat (Khasi Hills), Tengelijan (Sibsagar district), and in some scattered patches all over the tea garden areas of upper Assam.

3. Physical Feature

The Garos have round short faces and are robust in health. Both men and women are short statured and they show presence of epicanthic fold. Regarding the physical features of the Garos, Dalton refers that 'Their faces are round and short. The forehead is not receding, but projects very little beyond the eye, ... set. The want of prominence in the nose is remarkable. The whole face has the appearance of being flattened, the mouth sharing in the compressed appearance and not at all prognathous' (cited in Playfair, 1975 : 1-2). The Garos have no distinctive manner of wearing their hair, which is sometimes straight but more often wary and even curly. The men rarely have hair on their faces, though some grow apologies for beards.
Over the years close contact with caste populations combined with conversion to Christianity has brought about many changes in Garo lifestyle. Instances such as women wearing enormous earrings which often tears the lobes in two and men tying their uncut hair by means of a *pagri* are things of the past. The impact of modernization is clearly visible in the considerable improvement in the Garos in matters related to personal cleanliness.

4. **Material Culture**

The term material culture refers both to the psychological role, the meaning, that all physical objects in the environment have to people in a particular culture and to the range of manufactured objects (techno-complex) that are typical within a socio-culture and form an essential part of cultural identity. Human beings perceive and understand the material things around them as they have learned to from their culture. The material culture of the Garos of the study areas exhibit their ingenuity in the traditional socio-cultural life of the Garos.

(a) **Village and House Type**

A Garo village is usually situated near some stream or waterfall as they attach great importance to pure water. Water from stream or waterfalls is piped to a convenient place with bamboo pipes. Nowadays presence of wells in almost every household in more particularly the villages of the plain Garos also caters to their water related needs. The
entrance to nearly all villages are through grooves of jackfruit, pummelo (
\textit{Citrus grandis}), guava and many other trees and plants. At a distance
from the village are their jhums, which they call \textit{aba}. The chief crops
harvested through shifting cultivation or jhumming are hill paddy, millets, maize and cotton.

The houses in the hill Garo villages are arranged around an open
space known as \textit{atela} where many social and religious ceremonies are
performed. At one end of the \textit{atela} is the bachelor's houses or nokpante
where young unmarried boys live. The houses are built without any
definite village plan. The hill Garo always build their houses on platform.
The house stands on wooden posts of about 10 to 15 centimetres in
diameter. On top of them are placed cross-beams of the same kind. A
layer of whole bamboo is placed over the cross beams and above it a
bamboo matting is laid as floor. The house has one room only usually 9
to 12 metres long and 4 to 6 metres wide. Houses are devoid of
windows, and possess only two sliding doors made of bamboo, one at
each end of the house. Inside it, at a central place is the hearth and over
it a bamboo rack (\textit{ongal}) for putting dried fish, salt, and other sundries of
the kitchen. At a convenient distance from the house the granary
(\textit{jam'nok}) is constructed.

The villages of the plains Garos are just like those of their
neighbours, the Rabhas and the plains Assamese. Betel nut trees very
rarely seen in the hill areas but are found in abundance in the villages of
the plains Garos. Due to this fact the Garo villages in plain areas very
much resemble a common Assamese village. In the plains, the big Garo settlements characteristic of the hills are absent. From the distribution of the house types in the Garo settlements in the plains, pile houses are common in settlements, which are situated within a kilometer from the border of the hills. The settlement which are about one to two kilometers away from the hills, both types of houses, viz., constructed on earthen plinth and pile are found in the same settlement. In some cases mixed types, such as some portion of the house on platform and the other on the plinth of the same house, are noticed. But beyond three kilometers from the hills the Garo settlements have in most cases adopted the type of plinth houses prevalent among the plainsmen and rarely any other house type is to be met with.

Proceeding from the hills towards the plains, various modified forms of houses from pile to plinth houses are to be found. The conservatism of the people makes them maintain the structure of the hill type of house, but the environmental conditions are leading to inevitable changes. The influence of the local house types has also modified the Garo houses of the plains.

(b) **Dress and Ornaments**

Different stages of dress habits are to be found nowadays amongst the Garos. In the most interior areas the males use a small piece of cloth worn between the thighs (*gando*), and the women wear *reaking*, i.e., a small piece of cloth about forty five centimeter wide, and one to one and
half meter long round the waist. Sometimes a shirt or jersey are used by the males, and a blouse or a black jersey are worn by females to cover the upper part of the body. This is usually done when they come down to the markets. In the areas near about the plains the people dress just like the plains Assamese people. The males use a dhuti and the females a mekhela (usually black in colour) worn high up covering the breasts or the 'mekhela' with a blouse. Nowadays the native Garo women's dress has been improved by making it broader and longer so that it covers the legs also. It is made more attractive by giving a border of native pattern. This garb known as dakmanda is used with an unsown cloth to cover the upper part of the body. Keeping in line with the changing times Garo girls also wear salwar kameez, skirts, blouses, frocks, besides dakmanda. Boys wear shorts or trousers with shirts, men also prefer to wear shirts and trousers.

The Garos like to adorn themselves with ornaments. With the passage of time traditional ornaments like the kadisal (a circlet of cloth covered with brass studs and worn by Garo men around the head on the level with the brow while on the war path) are worn only on festive occasions. Very few men distend their ear lobes by wearing rings. Jewellery of glass beads, nickel, brass, and silver are becoming common among the plain Garos but ornaments of conch shells are still to be found in few households. They also wear rings made of brass or nickel. Due to close contact with people of the plains, the Garo women residing in the plain areas have cultivated a fascination for the various types of
ornaments worn by them. Women who are able to afford have become habitual users of ornaments of gold and silver. Artificial trinkets like chains; earrings; bangles are also commonly used. Iron, brass or nickel hairpins are also used to keep their hair in place. Necklaces of glass beads are more popular among the hill Garos.

(c) Food

In the plains, food can be purchased from the markets so the plain Garos does not entirely depend on their own agricultural produce like the hill Garos. In the hills, Garos eat three meals a day throughout the year, but the number of meals taken by the plains Garos varies in different seasons, and among different occupational groups that exist. The usual diet is rice and curry. The curry is generally cooked with vegetables and sometimes women also cook a palatable curry with pounded rice pura. The Garos relish dried fish, pork, and beef (cooked fresh or smoked). Boiled tapioca or sweet potatoes are also taken. Regarding the methods of cooking, the hill Garos mostly consume boiled food without using any oil or spices. However there is use of salt and large quantities of chillies in their food. Quite in contrast the plain Garos due to frequent contact with other people have a large selection of food and have adopted the method of cooking with spices and oil from them.

Drinks are very important in a Garo household and every Garo is fond of drinking chu (rice-beer), made from millets, maize or rice. Chu drinking forms an important part of all ceremonial occasions. The Baptist
mission however prohibits drinking among its converts. Cow's milk which is relished by well to do Garos in the plains are not consumed in the hills. The tendency of the Christian Garos to drink tea (cha) instead of rice beer will probably, in course of time, cause tea to become the most common beverage of the plains Garos.

(d) Household implements

Garo houses in the Hills contain a very limited amount of furniture. The bamboo floor or perhaps a raised platform of the same material is generally sufficient for all requirements. Sometimes a rough seat hewn out of a single piece of wood may be seen and a cane bottomed chair occasionally offered to a visitor of distinction. However in the plains, furniture becomes important in the Garo house. With the improvement of their economic condition furniture symbolises their social status or distinction more than comfort. To name a few wooden chairs, tables, stools, wardrobe, steel almirah are to be found in many Garo households.

The quality and range of household utensils and implements have also undergone changes with the improvement of economic condition combined with contact with other people. The change from earthenware utensils to metal brings social distinction to the family. Daily wage earners generally use earthen plates for eating but as conditions improve the earthen plates are replaced by aluminium plates. In the same way, at the higher economic level aluminium utensils are replaced by brassware
utensils of the plainsmen and luxury goods such as tea-sets, chinaware plates, glasses etc also enter their houses. The plain Garo generally uses a much larger number of utensils in comparison to the hill Garos. The pestle and mortar with which paddy is husked or rice cleaned for eating is a common implement among both the hill and plain Garos. Plain Garos seem to prefer their use for husking purposes rather than using the husking lever of the local people. There are however instances where by both type of implements were used by a few plain Garos.

Different sized baskets each with a different name are also used for various purposes both by plain and hill Garos. But the shape and materials used for construction of these baskets vary in both the areas. Dhama, the coiled baskets of cane characteristic of the plains is used for storing household goods. The wicker -work baskets are generally used for carrying articles. The difference in shape of the carrying baskets in the two areas are due to the different methods of carrying. In the plains goods are carried in the basket over the head so they are round or square shaped and flat bottomed. But in the hills, baskets are always flat bottomed and conical and carried on the back by means of a brow - band. The baskets for carrying uncleaned cotton are almost seven feet long but still cylindrical and its carrying capacity is around one mound or 82 lbs of cotton.

(e) Musical Instruments

The whole collection of Garo musical instruments is not a large one. It consists of a few drums, bamboo and horn wind instruments, and
metal gongs and cymbals. Special uses are assigned to the different varieties of drums. All the musical instruments are of home manufacture. The favourite tree for making the frames of the drums is the gambil (cureya arborica). The heads are of ordinary cowhide. The drum most commonly used is the dama, a long narrow drum, thickest in the centre, and tapering away at each end. The kram is a larger drum which is used on solemn occasions such as funerals and some annual religious ceremonies. The dama may however be used at any time. The nadik is a small wooden drum about 30 centimetres in diameter and 15 centimetres deep, which serves as a accompaniment for the kram but has no separate part to play. The nagra is a larger drum consisting of an earthenware pot covered with skin. It is sounded in order to assemble the people to the nokma's (headman's) house when he gives an entertainment.

Most of the wind instruments may be classed as either trumpets or flutes. The adil is a small pipe made out of the top six inches of a buffalo's horn, to which a bamboo mouthpiece is attached. The singa is merely the whole of a buffalo's horn, and is capable of producing at most two or three notes. The flutes are the otekra, a big bamboo flute, about a metre long and 3 centimetres in diameter, with only two finger holes. The ilongma and the bangshi are both smaller flutes. The familiar Jew's harp is known to the Garos, and is called gonggina. Instead of being made of iron, it is carved out of a thin slip of bamboo about ten centimetre long and one and half centimetre wide.
Besides the above, the Garos possess a number of gongs, which deserve more than passing notice. These gongs, which are always of the same pattern, are nothing more than ordinary basins with flat bottoms and narrow rims made of brass but for the Garos they have a very great value. A man's social standing is often measured by the number of rangs, as they are called, that he possesses. Of cymbals, the Garos possess two sorts: the kakwa which in appearance are similar to those of Europeans make, and the nengilsì, a smaller kind, in shape resembling two small cups of brass.

(f) Weapons of War and Chase

The principal weapons of the Garos are swords and spears without one or other of which they are rarely seen. It varies from 1 to 1.25 metres in length, has a straight blade about 5 centimetres broad, a blunt arrow shaped point, and from hilt to point is made of one piece of iron. The sword is always carried naked, and is never placed in a sheath or fastened to the body. It is a most useful possession to the Garo on the march, for with it he can clear jungle which bars his way, split firewood besides using it for the main purpose of defence. These swords are purchased from the megams in the Khasi hills district.

A Garo spear is a formidable weapon, for it is provided with an iron head, 30 or 40 centimetres long and 5 or 7 centimetres broad. It is very sharp and is flitted into a bamboo shaft about 1.5 metres long. These spears are used to defend attacks from bears, tigers, and other
wild animals. In big drives for games, spears are invariably used to slaughter pigs. The spears are used only for thrusting and not for casting. Bow and arrow though well known to the Garos are seldom used. Garo ates or choppers, vary in shape according to the locality and the source from which they are obtained. The Garos have two kinds of shield. The sepi is made entirely of wood, or of flat lengths of wood bound together and covered with very thin strips of cane or bamboo, while the danil is made of bear skin or cowhide stretched on a wooden frame. Both are of the same size and roughly oblong, with slightly concave sides and with a gentle curve backwards over the hand. They are fitted with handles made of cane.

(g) Economy

The Garo economy is composed of a good number of traits, some of which are described below:

(i) Hunting

Although their hills are so full of game, the Garos know very little about hunting, and in tracking cannot be compared with many other hill tribes of Assam. They show some ingenuity in setting traps but even with these they do not kill a great deal of game. The use of wasala, a kind of trap was prohibited by the Britishers. There is still in use a trap made by bending down the branch of a tree or a small sapling, to which a noose of cane or string is fastened. The sapling is kept in position by a catch which is released when an animal touches the bait, and either jerks the
quarry into the air with sufficient force to kill it, or renders it incapable of resistance.

On rare occasions, the people of two or three villages combine for a big drive. They then build a long V-shaped stockade and spreading out across country, drive into it all the game they can find. Where the two wings of the stockade meet, several openings are left, at which men are stationed, armed with spears to dispatch the animals as they pass through, while the women line the outside of the stockade, and by beating on it with sticks, and uttering shrill cries, deter the animals from any attempt to break through except at the openings left for them. Large number of pigs and deer can be killed in this manner in a single day.

(ii) Fishing

As Garo villages are nearly always situated on the banks of or close to streams or rivers, it follows that fish form an important item in a Garo’s diet and that the people give a good deal of attention to fishing operations. Most fish are caught when the floods are subsiding. Fishing with the help of a fishing weir (magil) is their favourite method. A strong dam with only a few outlets is constructed across the stream. Into each of these outlets is fitted a basket of split bamboo which tapers away to a point. The water flows through the baskets, but the fish cannot pass, and are caught at the narrow end of the trap. There are numerous other traps which act on the same principle and are used for fishing purposes by the Garos. The largest is named the chekke and smaller sizes of this
trap is called asok. The women use chekke, a basket shaped like a scoop for fishing. They punge it into the water and raise with a sharp jerk to catch small fry that may come their way. Poisoning river by means of using the decoction of various fruits, roots and barks of plants and trees like ruti (*Randia dumetorum*), monbal or makar and the rubok is a very common method used by Garos for fishing. The floating fish are thereafter collected without any trouble.

(iii) Gathering

Gathering as a method of food collection was very popular among the Garos and is one of the main means for procurement of food among the Garos. At present the importance of gathering has dwindled with the practice of applying various methods of farming the required agricultural products and also the easy availability and accessibility of food products in local markets. Nevertheless, the Garos more particularly the women in few areas still gather wild fruits, roots, berries and tubers from the nearby jungles for consumption. Local medical experts also forage for fruits, flowers, roots, leaves, tubers and barks of wild plants and trees and also wild animals to use their various parts for the preparation of Garo folk medicine.

(iv) Domestication

Initially the Garos who were hill dwellers engaged in shifting cultivation, domesticated only a few wild pigs, goats, dogs and birds. With their migration to the plains, the Garos have adopted the farming
techniques of the plains people which necessitates the use of draft animals. So, well to do households now domesticate bullocks, cows, besides pigs, fowls, goats, horses and dogs. The Garos make varied use of animals they keep. They consume the products of their animals: milk and milk products, blood and meat, they use animal hair and hide in manufacturing shelter, clothing etc, they use the animals for transport (as beasts of burden and for riding).

(v) Agriculture

Majority of the Garos of Northeast India are dependent on agriculture to maintain their existence. Women and men equally participate in agricultural pursuits. The Garos live by agriculture. Initially the Garos resorted to horticulture which implies cultivation by gardening techniques without the use of plough or draft animals. The Garos living in the hills have as their sole occupation, jhum or shifting cultivation and very few implements are used for it. They use a hoe made of small iron blade, a short rake made of bamboo and the chopper which is used for various purposes. This process involves the felling of trees just before the sowing season. The trees are then burnt and seeds are sown in the layers of ashes by digging sticks. Jhumming is a hard process of hills cultivation which requires clearance of jungles and sometimes felling of big forests. Utilization of land for shifting cultivation differs from area to area. Shifting plots are usually used for two consecutive years and then abandoned for a number of years according to the length of the shifting cycle. The Garos generally grow rice, which is their staple diet, millet, various kinds of
vegetables and cotton - is also grow as a commercial crops. There are numerous ceremonies associated with jhumming. Majority of Garo families living within the territorial jurisdiction of Assam and Meghalaya have accepted Christianity. But their conversion to Christianity does not prevent them from practicing some of the traditional religious rites and uphold the religious beliefs. Agálmáká or Achiroka is the first ceremony performed at the beginning of the season for the well being of the jhum cultivation. Rongchugátá ceremony is performed by the Garos just before the harvest of jhum paddy. Jamegapa dhá-u-á is a ceremony indicating the reaping of jhum paddy and the uttering of a peculiar sound dhá-u-á by the Garo children. The Wangala festival is the last and the biggest of all the festivals of the Garos associated with jhum cultivation. Wangala, which is celebrated with much fervour is performed by the Garos in their respective villages or by a few villages combined. Excessive feasting and dancing are a part of Wangala celebrations which indicates the end of the Jhum year of the Garos.

Of late, with the rapid development of jhum cultivation, efforts are being made to introduce the system of permanent cultivation among the Garos. The most important of them is the effort to make terraces on hill slopes where fruits like pineapple were grown. But it is pertinent to note here that the Garos are not very keen on this form of cultivation resulting in very low rates of adaptation.

The Garo society principally sustained their livelihood through shifting cultivation. With the passage of time many Garos migrated and
settled in plain areas and came into contact with Assamese Hindus. As a result they have adopted settled agricultural practices. Adoption of settled agriculture greatly improved their economy and eventually the population of the Garos living in plain areas also increased. As draft animals are a necessity in plough cultivation, the plain Garos either use their own or hire from the neighbouring plainsmen. The plough which is an important and indispensable implement for this type of cultivation is used for furrowing. The hoe is also used for digging small plots. The Garos harvest the crop with the help of an iron sickle. In the plains, all lands are cultivated every year. They generally grow rice, jute and mustard in one agricultural year. The yield from the plains land are much higher than that of the hills, the plains field being much more fertile comparatively.

(vi) Weaving

Among the Garos, weaving is a feminine occupation. Womenfolk are usually found working on their looms during their leisure hours. They weave beautiful traditional garments on their looms. At present however the Garos specially in plain areas have started wearing dresses available in the local markets. They have started using the same garments like the neighbouring Assamese caste population due to their easy availability and cheaper rates compared to the hand woven material. It is however pertinent to note here that traditional hand woven dresses still form an integral part of Garo attire during various festivals that are held.
5. **Social Structure**

Social organization among the Garos provide the means by which their society maintains its unity and cohesion through effective control of its members, and hence functions smoothly. The various components of the Garo social system are properly integrated so that they fulfill their recognized or implied functions or purposes.

(a) **Division of Tribe**

The Garos are the linguistic kindred of other speakers of the languages of the Bodo group of the Tibeto-Burman family spread all over Assam, such as the Chutiyas, the Moran, the Dimasa, the Kachari, the Rabha, the Koch, etc. Ethnically the Garos belong to the Mongoloid race like most tribes of northeast India. They call themselves *Achik Mande* which literally means hill man.

There exists certain subdivisions of the Garos based on linguistic differences rather than any remarkable cultural disparity. The cultural variation that may exist between these subdivisions is mainly due to their difference in habitat. The cultural traits of the neighbouring Assamese Hindu population have percolated into the culture of those Garos inhabiting the adjacent areas. The main sub-divisions of the Garos are, viz, the Awes or Akawes, the Chisaks, the Matchi Duals, the Ambengs, the Gara Ganchings, the Atongs, the Rugas, and the Megams. The Akawes or Awes inhabiting the areas adjacent to the plains districts of
Kamrup and Goalpara have absorbed a great amount of Assamese culture. Not very far from them are the Chisaks inhabiting the northeastern side of the Garo hills. Both the Ambengs and the Gara-Ganchings, another subdivision of the Garos inhabit the central and central-western position of the district. The influence of other cultures on them are found to be less comparatively. The Atongs and the Rugas, inhabiting the southern and south-eastern portion of the district, exhibit linguistic affinity with the Rongdlaniya dialect of the Rabhas, inhabiting far away in the northern areas of the district, and adjoining portion of the Goalpara district. The Megams or Lynngams, as they are referred to in the neighbouring districts of the Khasi Hills speak a dialect similar to that of the Khasis, and in many other aspects they are more akin to them inspite of following the same customs of the remaining Garos combined with their physical resemblance to them.

(b) Clan and Sub-clan

The Garo recognize a number of unilateral, exogamous matrilineal descent groups which are referred to as ma’chong or clan (Goswami and Majumdar, 1972 : 44). Playfair classifies Garo clans under three main groups, viz. Sangma, Momin, and Marak. These groups are known as Chatchi. At present however we find two more Chatchi viz. Shira (constituted by the Dalbot clan and its branches) and Areng (constituted by the Nongbak clan and its branches). Each Garo clan is affiliated to one of these five chatchi groups described together as a constellation of clans by Goswami and Majumdar in order to
distinguish them from its cognate, i.e. ma’chong. Contrary to this if the Garo term chatchi is synonymous with that, of a clan than ma’chong will denote a sub clan. Referring chatchi as a ‘constellation of clans’ has been justified in view of the fact that at present all function of clan which are not well defined in a chatchi are found in the ma’chong. Though Playfair has named as many as 127 ma’chongs, the list is not exhaustive. The Garo ma’chong is strictly exogamous and the ma’chong name is transmitted through the females. Earlier members of the same ma’chong were found in and around the same vicinity. At present times also inspite of the inability to trace blood relation among members living far apart, bearing the same ma’chong name as a suffix to their respective names is a clear indication of their consanguinity. Settlement of dispute however necessitates the tracing of actual blood relationship among the ma’chong members.

(c) Family

The Garos follow the matrilineal family structure which indicates the presence of the system of matrilineal inheritance, matrilineal descent and succession and uxorilocal residence. Because of the matrilineal family structure, the children acquire the title of the clan or sub-clan name of their mother only and a married son lives in a separate household from his parents, which may be a separate residential unit or his wife’s parental residence. Among the Garos the households are essentially family centred units. A house or n’ok essentially refers to a domestic and residential unit, the members of which share a common
kitchen. The family also refers to a domestic unit, the members of which may or may not share a common kitchen. The family households among the Garos vary widely in their numerical composition. Both nuclear and joint families are present among the Garos but the number of joint families, more particularly in rural areas, is comparatively higher. Nuclear families, i.e., families comprising of husband, wife, and their unmarried children are mostly preferred among the Garos in urban areas who are exposed to various new ideas and outlook in their lives.

The joint family centred households among the Garos are based on the principle of residential unity, commensality, and common property. Majority of the Garos living in rural areas are of the opinion that the joint family is an ideal arrangement for living, since it helps to increase agricultural yield by the joint efforts of the members and also keeps the family property intact. Irrespective of the type of family that exists among the Garos, each member within a particular family exhibit a sense of belongingness as a closely knit effective group. Mutual support and co-operation bind a Garo family together.

In the light of the aforesaid traits of a Garo family it is pertinent to note that the matrilineal social structure of the Garos does not guarantee a higher or superior position among the womenfolk. The fact that the Garos are a purely matrilineal and matrilocal society, does not elevate a women’s position higher than the one which is enjoyed by women of patrilineal and patrilocal societies. Garo social system concentrates power in the mahari (lineage) which is the group of matrilineally related ‘males’
Among the Garos the sole power and authority lies with the father who is the head of the family and known as *n'okgipa* (owner of the house). As the head of the family he enjoys the right to punish any member of his family for wrong doing. Men and women work jointly for the subsistence of the family. Men’s work is confined solely to hard work which the womenfolk are not capable of doing like cutting down trees, burning the trees for *jhum* cultivation, constructing a house, etc. Women are generally involved in works such as planting and harvesting, and all domestic works like husking of paddy, preparation of rice-beer, cooking food, fetching of fuel and water, etc.

The Garos cannot imagine a family without women. Furthermore a family without a daughter is considered to be incomplete by them and hence such families adopt a daughter of their close relatives. Traditionally the Garos prefer a family full of children, where there is no quarrel between husband and wife. They also never beat or scold their children. In matters of exercising authority over the household property as well as landed property, the male member’s word is final, although a women’s approving consent is sought by the caring husband. The Garo women cannot wield exclusive right over any material possession and has no accession to incorporeal property.

In a Garo family both sons and daughters are treated at par. Selecting a daughter as an heiress or *n'okrom*, which literally means ‘one who stays in the house’ does not bestow any special treatment to her by the parents. Efforts are made to educate both the sons and
daughters in a family. But a characteristic remark described below illustrates a typical attitude 'My sons are bright students, but not so my daughters. My educated sons for whom I have suffered so much in defraying the expenses of their education will earn bread for others' (Goswami et al., 1972: 58).

Women in the family are expected to respect the elderly males regardless of the sib to which they belong. A woman showing disrespect to the elderly in often rebuked as seko pako mande raja (she does not honour the father and the husband). The women in Garo families can never voice their opinion or protest in any matters even those concerning them, and she is forced to accept the decision of the male elders. Such instances of complete subjugation of women in all matters is however gradually undergoing changes due to exposure to modern ideas and thoughts resulting from better education.

(d) Marriage

Among the Garos the smallest kinship group is the nuclear family, and the family is initiated with marriage. They are of the opinion that a marriage is not made by a single ceremony, since it takes a long time for the newly weds to get accustomed to one another and finally settle down. In marriage, the Garos strictly follow the rules of exogamy. In the hills as well as in the plains, the Garo marriage is a contract between the clans, whereby one clan supplies the husband and the other the wife. The parents also look for a suitable mate for their daughter or son. It
must be mentioned here that marriage within a clan is very rare and those involved in such types of marriage is often referred to as madong which is a derogatory remark. However in recent days marriages within the chatchi referred to as backlog is quite frequent. Through marriage a permanent bond is established between the clans of the spouses i.e., the husband and the wife. This bond is known as a'kim, which remains intact even after the death of a spouse since a replacement of the deceased are found among the clan members for a second marriage.

As a matrilineal society, the Garo boys are bound to leave their family of orientation after marriage. Garo marriage thus always tends to uproot a boy much more than a girl. The daughters who are non-heirs also tend to live in their parental house with their husbands for several months before finally setting down in a new residence. The new husbands tend to visit their parents' place at the slightest pretext either with or without the knowledge of their wife and her family. With time and attachment to his new residence and village, visits to his village of birth becomes less frequent. Subsequently middle aged married men visit their parental place only on some unavoidable circumstances and situations.

The Garos are polygamous in the sense that a man can marry more than one woman. Specially in the case of hill Garos such polygamous unions though not objectionable are found only among the rich and prosperous who has the economic ability to maintain more than one wife. In the plains, polygamous unions are not favoured due to the influence of the Hindu caste population. Though forbidden among the
Christian Garos, a man usually marries a second time under a few circumstances.

(i) Norms and Incest

Traditionally among the Garos' marriage is a *mahari* affair. Marriage within a *mahari* a *machong*, even a *chatchi* was strictly prohibited. However, now a days marriage within a *chatchi* is not uncommon among the Garos. Garo adults are aware of the fact that clandestine affairs and pre-marital sexual relations among the adolescents often result in unwanted pregnancies. They believe that such instances are nothing but a sign of succumbing to natural human desires which make them victims of circumstances reflecting human weakness.

The young Garo boys and girls are often attracted to each other during visits to the weekly market or while dancing during village ceremonies. Such light flirtations often results in acceptance of gifts by the girls who are really interested in entering into a relationship with the boys who offers such gifts. This mutual attraction often leads to sexual relations among the consenting couples. A Garo boy seldom initiates negotiations towards marriage since even if he desires so the Garo social structure does not provide him with such liberties, but as per custom he does have recognized ways of suggesting sexual relations and entering into the same. Boys and even men frequently offer gifts and also cash money to their lovers as a token of appreciation for their favours. Girls and even married women, have enough control over money to make such gifts worthwhile.
In Garo society confirming the sexual relations within the limits of marriage is preferred as a ideal behaviour but premarital intercourse or adultery is neither fully condoned nor encouraged. It must be noted here that sexual experience before marriage is a normal affair among the Garos. A premarital affair occasionally serves as a prelude to marriage, but traditionally it is not a desirable way as the marriage proposal should first come from the girl's side. It is difficult for young people to decline the arrangements made by their families unless they can offer sound reasons. The girls other than those destined to become heiress must make their own selection of a suitable mate. As a non heir, it is not mandatory on her part to marry into her father's lineage but while selecting a groom, *chatchi* exogamy should not be ignored. As she minglees with young men from her village as well as those from the neighbouring villages, she suggests to her father and brothers when she fancies a certain boy. Once she selects her suitable mate, her father and brothers make every attempt to arrange the marriage without consulting the boy or his parents.

All Garo marriage are often arranged with the boy whom the girl discloses as her choice for a life partner. In certain cases the Garo girls desiring to enter into marital bond with their loves often influence their parents to seek him as their son-in-law. Such an alliance is often arranged with the parents having no inkling about their ongoing affair and this fact saves their parents from much disgrace in the society.
Preparation for a Garo traditional marriage still begin with arrangements and negotiations by the families and a ceremony which formalizes the union. Unlike the performance of marriage, instances of entering into live-in-relationship without formally gaining recognition through necessary ceremonial functions is also regarded as a satisfactory form of arrangement among the Garos. Such incidents occur very rarely at present due to the impact of modernization and conversion to Christianity.

As per norms of the Garo society, each family chooses one daughter to be their heiress (n’okria) who later stays in her parental house with her husband after marriage and the children born thereafter. It is also expected that the heiress and her family must look after her elderly parents. The marriage between heirs and non heirs are held with slight variations. There seems to be mixed reactions among young men regarding the idea of being married to an heiress. Some are lured by the prospect of inheriting an established household while the others are disillusioned by the thought of the complete authority under the father-in-law.

Garo parent who do not have a biological daughter opt for adoption of one who eventually becomes the heiress. In most cases the daughter of the women’s sister, or female relative is consider as a suitable choice for adoption. Traditionally there are many marriage customs one differing a little from the other but proposals of marriage must always come from the man. A girl of marriageable age expresses
her desire to marry a particular boy of her choice to her parents or close relatives. Once the choice is made clear her parents and relatives waits for an opportunity to get hold of the boy and capture him. This process known as bridegroom capture is considered as the only proper way to invite a man to become a husband. The boy who is to be captured remains ignorant of their motive till the time when he is actually kidnapped and brought before the girl's family. But his family must be consulted if he is to marry an heiress.

The father of the girl takes the help of certain youth of the village who are often referred as brothers of the bride. In most cases they belong to the girl's chatchi though exceptional cases may be there. In groom capturing events married man occasionally take part but young unmarried and energetic males are more involved in this process. All of them work unitedly to accomplish the task. The first attempt of suddenly attacking or kidnapping might not always result in marriage as the captured boy may put up an elaborate display of reluctance and escape from captivity. This leads to much excitement among the boys as they try to recapture the groom. The boy finally agrees to settle down after he has been recaptured for the third time or more. Incase of heirs, a boy is recaptured periodically and brought before the girl. This time duration gives ample opportunity for the boy to think over and make the right decision. It is pertinent to note here that simply running away does not mean that the marriage should not be held. Only if the boy frankly opposes this union the marriage is not performed and he is free to enter into martial bond with any other girl.
Once the boy is captured he is brought to the house of the bride by late afternoon or a little earlier. Till evening which is the auspicious time for the ceremony to be held, everyone drinks rice beer. The ritual is performed by a person other than the father of the bride who acts as the priest. The ceremony is held in the presence of the bride's parents, relatives and friends. The parents of the boy are conspicuous by their absence. The girl's father and the priest sit on one side of the fireplace while the boy sits opposite to the fireplace, against the wall. All this while his captors guard him to prevent his escaping. The men assemble at the rear of the house while the women gather at the front in order to help with the cooking. As per custom, the bride cooks both rice and curry in order to serve the first meal to her prospective husband. A pig is slaughtered only if the girl's family is confirmed about the alliance. The girl offers rice beer to groom who is referred as the 'new man'. This is followed by the slaughter of ceremonial fowls. Three fowls of which one must be a hen and other cocks are put in a basket before the priest. While chanting incantations the priest strikes on the back of the boy and the girl with the cocks and the hen, respectively. Then the priest cuts the neck of the chickens and eventually the entrails of the fowls are studied through divination in order to predict the future of their union. It is pertinent to mention here that even though a few boys run away permanently if a bad omen is predicted, however, there are instances when such a matter could not influence the dissolution of the alliance. After this event the girl cooks the third fowl and serves to the boy along
with rice. The boy might refuse to accept the food if he is not interested in the alliance. The fowls sacrificed are cooked and served to the other guests. Thereafter the captors take the ‘new man’ around the village and also to the bachelor’s dormitory (n’ok pante) and again returns to the girl’s house. The ‘groom’ is taken to the girl’s room where he has to sleep beside the girl under the watchful eyes of his captors lest he escapes. Regardless of the intentions of the ‘groom’ to either continue or discontinue the alliance, to enter into any kind of sexual relation with the girl on the first night is out of question. Those not interested in the alliance sneak out of the house when there is a lapse in guarding him. The girl arouses his captors if she realises that he has escaped. This follows a nocturnal chase and in certain cases the groom can never be caught.

Contrary to this if the ‘groom’ does not escape on the first night, the captors show him around the girls’ fields after a ceremony. This may continue for three to four days. During this time period the ‘groom’ may try to flee. But if the ‘groom’ is not at all interested and also aware of his inability flee than he will leave after disclosing his dilemma and persuading his captors to support him. Due to this fact that captors can never be sure if the boy captured will enter into a permanent relationship.

Those consenting to be the husband finally settle down thus ending the supervision by the bachelors. At this juncture it is considered as a permanent marriage which cannot be dissolved only under legal
supervision. The newly wedded couple visits the husband's parents in his village. On the way back the husband takes his personal belongings and tools. A boy who marries an heiress stays with his wife's family. However, non-heirs couples shift from the parental house of the girl after a few months to a separate plot of land assigned to them.

Among the Christian Garos marriage has taken an institutionalized form. The girl (even though an illiterate) has to send a letter to the boy where she puts up the proposal for marriage. A reply is expected from him if he agrees to the proposal. Consequently the elderly male kins of the girl also interrogates the boys and becomes confirmed about his consent through his formal reply. This procedure of formally asking for the consent of the prospective bridegroom is known as 'singa'. It is pertinent to mention here that in present times, the above mentioned procedure for the solemnization of marriage is found very rarely and only among the song sarik (non-Christianized) Garos. Marriages of Christianized Garos are generally held in the church followed by a feast and merry making. Regarding residence after marriage they follow the traditional rules of Garo matriliny.

Besides the first marriage between a couple, instances of polygamous unions are also regarded as legitimized relationship in Garo society. Found more commonly among the hill Garos it is prevalent and performed among the plain Garos only under certain unavoidable situations.
Traditionally a powerful man may marry for a second time if his first wife is too old. Such marriages take place only after prior permission of the first wife. The first or chief wife is referred to as jik-mongma (elephant wife) and the later wife as jik-gite (concubine). It must however be mentioned here that in case of a son-in-law marrying his widowed mother-in-law, as per custom his mother-in-law will be regarded as jik-mamung. In this type of exceptional situations even though a ceremonial marriage is performed after finishing the last rites of the father-in-law, the mother-in-law is not treated as a wife. The Christian Garos generally do not marry their mother-in-law after the death of the father-in-law as the Christian mission forbid polygynous marriages. In such cases some problem arises regarding control of property if the widow marries somebody else. Among the hill Garos, polygynous marriages indicate that the wives belong to the same clan whereas among the plain Garos, wives may belong to different clans. Wives belonging to the same clan live within the same house but those not belonging to the same clan live in separate huts. Polyandry or the system of a woman having several husbands, is not found among the Garos. Such an occurrence is beyond their imagination and acceptance.

Besides, these types of marriages there has been instances of elopement marriage, more specially among the plain Garos. Garos refer to such unions as seke kata. After some time has elapsed they are accepted as husband and wife. There is another type of marriage referred as stolen marriage by the Garos. This happens when a boy and a girl
have an intimate affair and live together without any ceremony. Such couples though living as husband and wife never had a formal wedding.

(ii) Bride-price

There is no custom of money being paid as the price of the bride or bridegroom. The custom of bride-price or dowry is absent among the Garos. As an affectionate gesture, wealthy parents often give money or other gifts to their sons after marriage. The married sons however do not have the right to demand anything from their parental house.

(iii) Divorce

Divorce among the Garos might occur mainly due to adultery. Cases of divorce due to mutual discontent among a couple or the refusal of the wife to work for the household are also found. Traditionally divorce cases were decided by the elders and the actual divorce was accomplished by the bolseki dena ceremony whereby the husband and wife swear by Mane, the Earth taking some dust in their hands that they have no dealing or demands from one another. The priest takes a sword, a chopper, or a spear provided by the husband and strikes a tree to call upon the son of the Earth to be a witness to the dissolution of the marriage. Such pristine ways of seeking divorce are rarely found nowadays. All divorce proceedings are at present held in Courts. In divorce not arising out of mutual consent, a substantial sum of money is generally claimed instead of accepting the value of dakmanda or a brass gong, a musical instrument used as heirloom, as per custom.
(e) Village Organization

The Garos of the villages reckon kinship in ever widening circles—from the immediate family to the cooperating group and lineage, to the village and village cluster, to the m’achong and chatchi. Ultimately the system embraces everybody with whom the people have any regular contact, though this may be far beyond the boundary within which exact kinship can be treated (Burling 1, 1963 : 240). Over a period of time the Garo villages prospered through the birth of daughters whose husbands stayed in their village after marriage. Garo villages are the products of several stages of expansion and division of the kinship groups, a process that is still in operation. Usually the bond that exist between the people belonging to the village lineage (consisting of several minimal lineages) are more stronger in comparison to their relationship with members of the same sib residing outside the village.

Instances of a man staying with his wife in his parental house are found in a few rare cases. The children born to them are however regarded as members of their mother’s clan and chatchi. Since the children regard their mother’s village as their ‘own village’, they can easily find a spouse within the same village where they reside during the time of marriage.

In view of the above mentioned facts, it can be surmised that the rules of residence of the Garos appear entirely different depending upon whether one considers locality from the point of view of the individual
household or from that of the village as a whole. From the point of view of the household Heir marriages are uxorilocal as well as avunculocal since a man lives with both his wife and his maternal uncle whereas non-heir marriages are neolocal, since the couple always establishes a new and separate household. Considering the village point of view, most common marriages requires that the man live in his wife's village though there has been exceptional cases where the wife goes to live in her husband's village. The distinction between village residence and household residence is of utmost importance to the Garos. Considering the residence of each married couple in both ways, it frequently happens that the boy after marriage shifts to his wife’s village but sets up a new household with her. Such a marriage is uxorilocal with respect to the village but neolocal with respect to the household. All residence patterns have their essential part in Garo social structure as the residence pattern of any particular couple is made with reference to the residences of other people and to strict kinship requirements rather than being based on individual performances. The varied residence patterns of the Garos exhibit qualities which deny the fact that it is a loosely structured society (Burling, 1963 : 216).

In any village at least one man and often more than one man are referred by the term *n'okma*, which generally means 'headman'. As per the lineage structure of the village, only one household is considered to be senior to the other households which 'came out' from it. This house is considered to be that of the first *n'okna*. Eventually when a younger
man from his own lineage becomes his son-in-law and heir, he succeeds to the 'headmanship' after the demise of his father-in-law. According to Burling, the 'headmanship' is thought of as adhering more closely to the house than to any individual person since all the symbols of office go with the house and not with the man. The most important symbol is a drum believed to possess supernatural powers kept only in the n'okma's house and played during festivals (Burling, 1963: 224-225). In villages where there are more than one n'okma, one of them is always considered as the 'first' n'okma while the others are secondary to him. Again since n'okmaship is acquired by marrying into a lineage, the n'okma can never belong to the lineage of which he is n'okma. A n'okma is entitled to possess numerous patches of land that surrounds a village. At one period of time titles to a'king land could be bought and sold among members of the village. Holding a title does not entitled any direct benefit since the rights to the land is same for all the inhabitants of the village.

Attaining the headmanship does not entitle the liberty to direct other villagers. The duties of the n'okma consist primarily of playing a ceremonial role in Garo festivals held annually. Performing sacrifices and reciting incantations for the overall prosperity of the village and its people are a part of his duty. Therefore, it is essential that a n'okma must have required wealth to perform sacrifices. Inspite of the absence of any kind of special privileges, the headman occupies a higher status. Many men are often interested in becoming a headman due to the
higher status and prestige of the post. At times the headman tends to use his position as a means to power. In reality the title holder, i.e., the headman received only one benefit which is financially insignificant, and that involves receiving a minimal amount of money from an outsider in lieu of cultivating a plot of land within the village territory.

Besides, the headman after due consultation of the village elders and the observation of the agricultural cycles fixes the day for observing various village festivals. Beyond this the headman does not have any formal duties or privileges. The subsistence activities of the village are carried on by the members of each household whereas larger groups are organized traditionally for community level works. Thus the organization of the village requires little concentration of the authority (Burling, 1963 : 234).

The village being unambiguously distinct from its neighbouring villages from the physical point of view, it forms an important unit of the society. Firstly a Garo village is a kinship group since residence in the village is based upon descent in a particular matrilineal lineage, or upon marriage to somebody in that group. The village is more easily defined than either the lineage or the co-operating group and it has visible boundaries and is given a name by the people. In Garo society, the village is, therefore, the largest group of which all the members regularly join in cooperative activities, but more extensive organizations are also recognized. Several neighbouring villages may be considered related due
to the fact that from any one of the village the founders of the other 'daughter' villages had moved.

In view of the aforesaid facts splitting of villages is a slow process, and mostly occurs due to the wishes of the converts to live separately. It may also occur when a group of family shift to places accessible to land suitable for better use of cultivation and farming techniques. Inspite of occasional splits and shifts, most village sites are permanent. The village cluster comprising of groups of related and neighbouring villages exhibits much sentimental attachment. Kinship unites the Garo villages to one another, and their bond is comparatively stronger than with those completely unrelated villages. The inhabitants of a Garo village reckon kinship in ever widening circles- from the immediate family to the cooperating group and lineage, to the village and village cluster, to the clan and moiety. Thus the system embraces everybody with whose the people have face to face contact inspite of the fact that they may be beyond the boundary within which exact kinship can be traced.

6. Religion

In so far as religion is concerned, the Garos originally believed in a multitude of benevolent and malevolent spirits, attributing failures, inconvenience, indisposition, etc. to the influence of evil spirits which governs the destiny of man from birth to death. Subsequently they were involved in various religious practices like sacrifices to appease the evil spirits. They firmly believed and attributed the creation of the world and
the control of the natural phenomenon to the unseen spirits hovering around the universe. Technically the traditional religion of the Garos may be termed as 'animistic' and those Garos who are still following the old faith are known as songsarek (Majumdar, 1966: 14). With the passage of time a new religious faith and outlook released certain new forces to cause further changes in society, creating a new religious bond among the converted Garos. Conversion to Christianity also necessitated the denial of most of the time worn customs and traditions of the old society (Playfair, 1975: XVII).

It was in the second half of the nineteenth century that Christianity was introduced into the Garo hills and since then its growth has been very rapid. Conversion involves not only a change of religious ideas or beliefs, it also simultaneously makes its impact felt on other institutions as well (Goswami, 1972: 23). The acceptance and conversion to Christianity ushered in innumerable changes in the life and culture of the Garos through the efforts of the Christian missionaries more particularly the Garo missionaries. Inspite of non-interference of Christianity with the social customs of the Garos as far as practicable, there were certain modifications in the Garo social structure in an effort to blend with the tenets of Christianity.

(a) Crisis Rites

Traditionally the Garos performed certain specific rites and rituals to overcome the different types of crisis in human life, namely, birth,
marriage death, etc., with the exception of the absence of any kind of rites during puberty.

(i) Birth

The religious ceremonies and customs of the traditional Garos related to the life of man begins with his birth. Soon after the birth of a baby in a Garo household, the men build an altar in front of the outside wall of the dwelling house. This altar is built on the left on the birth of a female and to the right if the newborn is a boy. In order to mark the period of pollution, an egg is sacrificed and the midwife returns by way of the stream after she has disposed off the afterbirth in the nearby jungle and cleansed herself by washing off the dirt. On her return and to the shout of the man (who sacrificed the egg) who asks the pollution to leave, she confirms that it has left. The following day, the altar is also thrown into the jungle. Subsequently in the presence of the newborn and the midwife in the cattle shed, the father of the newborn or any other man sacrifices a big rooster. On the occasion of cutting the baby’s hair which is held after a month, the parents sacrifice a pig if they can afford it along with a chicken – mandatory for such an occasion, its blood after sacrifice is smeared over an altar built at the rear of the main room of the house. The cooked meat of the sacrificed fowl along with boiled rice and rice beer are taken to the midwife and the man who performed the sacrifice at the time of birth. This is the last formal site of passage until marriage ceremony (for details see Burling, 1963 : 98-120).
(ii) Puberty

The Garos do not perform any ceremony to mark the period during which adolescent males and females reach sexual maturity or puberty. Boys at this stage tend to wear a turban, and let their hair grow long. They also learn to accomplish the task assigned to them and are eventually considered as adults. Incase of the girls, there exists a few restrictions after the attainment of puberty. They remain under the watchful eyes of their parents and brothers during this period till their marriage is solemnized. During this stage besides learning to do various household activities they also take part in dance during ceremonial occasions. Such events lead to the beginning of many love affairs, which may or may not culminate in marriage. It must be mentioned here that the onset of puberty in girls is not acknowledged with the performance of any rituals nor are there any pollution period observed at this time.

In view of the fact that no rituals are performed at this stage both the converts and the non-converts adhere to this.

(iii) Marriage

Playfair observes very little of a religious nature in Garo marriages with even the absence of the usual religious emblems, which are erected in ceremonies connected to birth and death. The consulting of omens by the village priest is the only hint of the presence of some affinity with religion during the entire marriage ceremony (Playfair, 1975 : 100-101). The traditional marriage ceremony of the non-converts performed in the
presence of the bride, the groom and their respective parents, the ma’chong elders and the priest; is a very simple affair (for details see Playfair, 1975: 66-70).

Marriage ceremony solemnized between the Christian Garos do not perform their marriage in the traditional style. Such marriages are performed in the Church according to the Christian rites in the presence of the Pastor or Priest, the relatives and the well wishers. Garo rites are observed when a Christian boy marries an non-Christian girl. But when a Christian girl marries a non-Christian boy, the Christian rites are performed. The criteria for selection of the rites to be performed at such marriages rests upon the bride’s family members as the marriage ceremony is performed at the bride’s place. The Christian boy married to a non-Christian performs all the traditional religious rites and this causes much disapproval from the Christian missionaries. To be relieved from this frustration the boy again embraces into the traditional fold by denouncing the new religious faith, i.e., Christianity. In more or less a similar fashion a non-Christian boy marrying a Christian girl eventually converts to Christianity (Bose, 1985: 102-103).

(iv) Death

The traditional death ceremony of the Garos entails a huge expenditure which is borne by the mahari members. The funeral ceremony of the Garos is an elaborate process. On the death of a person, the dead body is kept until the relatives can assemble and
arrangements made for cremation. Funeral ceremony is performed amidst animal scarifies brought by rich relatives of the deceased and occasional drinking throughout the night. The dead body is burnt before dawn and a bamboo structure is erected at that spot. The uncalcinated bones are collected by a female relative and kept in a basket. The actual death ceremony referred to as mangona or delnang soa takes place only after the next harvest after the death. The village people and the mahari members assemble for a night-long drinking and also sacrifice animals namely bulls and cows. Before daybreak the bamboo structures are burnt to ashes and the uncalcinated bones are buried. This ceremony brings an end to the funeral procedure.

The funeral ceremony of the Garo converts, i.e., the Christians is quite different from that of the traditional Garos. After death, the clergy blesses the soul for salvation. As far as practicable the dead body is buried on the same day of the death. No burial ever takes place at night and in case death occurs at night, the body is buried the following day. The dead body is carried for burial to the cemetery, in most cases situated near the church. In case the cemetery is situated very far, the burial takes place on the banks of a stream. After burials in a cemetery, a wooden cross is generally placed over the grave. After a month or so a community prayer is held for the departed soul by the family members in the presence of the priest, and other relatives and friends of the deceased. This is followed by a feast that marks the end of the funeral.
(b) High God and Other Deities

Originally as followers of the animistic religion the Garos are surrounded by a spiritual world and hence their belief in a multitude of beneficent and malevolent spirits. Other than me’mang (ghost) the Garos have only one general term, mite, for supernatural beings, which includes beings we call Gods and certain beings which create nuisances. These supernatural beings cause different types of diseases, the symptoms of which indicates which spirit is causing it. Playfair believes the existence of nine principal spirits in Garo society, they are namely (i) Tatara-Rabuga, the creator, made by two lesser spirits, Nostu-Nopantu and Machi. Regarded as the greatest among all spirits and known by eight different names, this spirit strives for welfare of man through eradication of disease; (ii) Choradubi, a benign spirit, is considered to be the protector of crops and is the servant of Tatara-Rabuga, (iii) Nostu-Nopantu is the deity who fashioned the Earth along with Machi at the command of Machi; (iv) Saljong, the God of fertility is represented by the sun and worshipped because without his favour no harvests would be reaped; (v) Goera, the God of strength has the ability to cause thunder and lighting; (vi) Kalkame considered as Goera’s brother is the spirit who holds the lives of all men; (vii) Susime represented by the moon, is regarded the giver of riches who is capable of both causing and curing blindness and lameness; (viii) Asima-Dingsima, the mother of Susime does not have any particular attributes but her name is not uttered for fear of inviting the wrath of Susime; (ix) Nawang, malevolent
spirit, is considered as the devourer of souls who also afflicts man with many diseases while disguising as Maldengong, a mythical animal or as a human being.

In Garo mythology stars, collectively known as Nóringró-Nótingjó rule the seasons and the years as the representatives of the spirits of heaven. As per belief each of these stars were made to figure in some way in the funeral ceremony during the cremation of the mother (Asima Dingmisa) of the moon (Susime). These stars namely (i) Mangripé represented the bearing of the body of the funeral pyre; (ii) Mirontek is the basket of rice from which the mourners were fed; (iii) the stars which set fire to the funeral pyre is the Walsaldó; (iv) Dósadil represents the cock which was sacrificed for the spirit of the dead; (iv) Chapchofe-Nonjé, two sisters in beautiful clothing came to the cremation and impressed Susime so much that she let them roam the heavens together as witnesses of her mother’s death; (vi) Jatokani, the walking stick of Susime’s mother who continued to remain in the sky due to its undying affections and devotion; (vii) Dósutat, represents the two ‘fighting cocks’ at the funeral ceremony; (viii) Askidómé represented the cock’s feathers which were offered at the head of the corpse; (ix) Mengóripé refers to the constellation which formed to commemorate the carrying of a cat on a pole by a few children to the place of sacrifice; (x) Wak-ripé represents the pig which was brought as food to the mourners; (xi) Manganchi, represented the four upright posts between which the wood to be used for cremation was piled up; and (xii) Matma-Jakol refers to the footprints
of the buffalo, brought for sacrifice who broke free and galloped off as it was terrified by the sounds created by the beating of the drums. Besides these constellations the Garos also acknowledge the existence of Pringpang or Morning star and Atampang or evening star which indicates the time of the day. The Garos regard the occasional sighting of the falling star or Dósadil-Mingitir as its visit to its first love and wife i.e., a clod of earth, the memory of whom he could never erase from his mind.

(c) Annual Rites

For their subsistence the Garos are mostly involved in various agricultural pursuits. Originally being jhum or shifting cultivators, the entire process was marked off by certain ceremonies held during a jhumming season. The traditional Garos still observe such occasions with due solemnity to ensure a good harvest. As agriculturists, the Garos firmly believed that appeasement of certain specific spirits who control the seasons through ritual observances and sacrifices is both essential and important for their sustenance and well being. Religious observances starts with the selection of the plot of land to be cleared and cultivated. The first ceremony is performed by sacrificing a fowl after the felling and burning of trees in the selected plot of land. This ceremony known as Agálmáká or Achiroká performed at the beginning of the season to invoke the gods to bring rain and counteract the malicious spirits. During this ceremony a long piece of bamboo is planted in the centre of the field with other scraped piece dangling from it like hairs. Below the piece
of bamboo some boiled paddy and rice, fowls meat, *nakam*, crabs are placed on a banana leaf. All these items are well cooked before they are offered to the gods along with the offering of rice beer which is indispensable in all ceremonial occasions.

The next stage in cultivation, i.e., the sowing of the seed is preceded by the *Gitchipong* and the *Michiltata* ceremonies. The first ceremony involves personal sacrifices offered by each individual whereas the second ceremony is performed collectively where the whole village is involved. The priest invokes the spirit of *Rokime*, the 'mother of rice' by striking the earth with the handle of a machete or axe. Seeds are thereafter sown methodically. Prior to the harvest of jhum paddy, the *Rongchugáttá* ceremony is performed by the Garos. Along with the first fruits, the ears of rice or millet are plucked, pounded between two stones and offered on a piece of plaintain stem. These ceremonies observed for the prosperity of the cultivation and thereby of the people. The *Rongchugala* ceremony is often concluded by dance and musical performances by the Garos.

This is followed by the *Jamegapa* ceremony which signifies the reaping of paddy. Prays are offered to the gods after which the sheaves of crops are carried away. During the ceremony every family arranges for dance and musical performances. The rice grains are preserved till the *Wangala* ceremony which follows after this. Thus when the rice harvest has been fully gathered, the great sacrifice and festival of the year, the *Wangala* takes place. For its celebration a date is fixed by the
N'okma and announced among the inhabitants at a much earlier date to facilitate the cleaning of the village and the households and make other preparations for the festival. Prior to the first ceremony, the villagers are busy slaughtering bulls and cows bought collectively and distributing the meat. During the festival, the youth of the bachelors dormitory entertain men from other villages and offer them rice beer, boiled rice and curry. Women and children crowd around outside and take part in feasting and drinking. The real ceremony of Wangala takes place the following day. It is known as Churugala which means the pouring (rua) of rice beer (chu) as an offering to Saljong. This ceremony is performed by the headman in his house. The ceremonial rites are performed at a central fireplace around which the plaintain leaves are spread out in a square. On the leaves are kept a white squash, a ginger root, an onion and a taro tuber, each cut in half. These vegetables are spread with cracked rice and thus 'shown to saljong'. Before this ceremony none of the vegetables are eaten. Everyone drinks rice beer after it is offered to the gods and the ceremony ends with the beating of drums and gongs. As it is not the main ceremony only a few people attend while the others are busy with the main preparations. Thereafter the n'okma's house is decorated and the posts and beams of his house are marked with finger dots of the paste prepared from rice and water by the womenfolk. The men decorates the ridgepole if they can reach, with rice-flour prints of the whole palm. Eventually all the other houses are decorated in a similar fashion with the help of the bachelors.
The main ceremony called Satsatsoa is performed, the next day. It involves the burning of the bark of Satsat tree which gives a strong odour of incense when it is kindled. Comparatively a larger crowd is assembled at this ceremony which is also performed by the n'okma in his house. A small feast is organized: accompanied by the rhythmic beating of the drums and the gongs by the men. The n'okma carries some powdered Satsat and burning twigs and lights the bark filling the house with fragrance. The n'okma extinguishes the flames and the drummers reduce the intensity with which they beat the drums when a man fires a gunshot outside the house of the n'okma. This is followed by dancing and merry making. The Garos believe that they catch the attention of Saljong by burning of the Satsat and thus seek his blessing for a good harvest. After Saljong has been honoured the Wangala festival reaches its climax. There are no further ceremonial rites performed in the next three or four days which is characterized by feasting on the slaughtered animals, dancing and drinking rice beer. Visitors are entertained with rice, curry and rice beer. The houses are visited in a fixed sequence starting from the n'okma's house. Mostly young people perform group dances to the beatings of the drums and gongs. In certain cases married and older people also take part in dance performances. The dance figures are stylized pantomimes of everyday activities (Burling, 1963: 66). Besides the gongs, a small bamboo flute, a trumpet made from a buffalo horn tied to a long bamboo tube and the n'okma's small sacred drum is also carried from house to house and played to synchronize with the movement of the group dancers. After
much funfair and gaiety the celebrations come to an end. Of all the annual rites and ceremonies performed in relation to the agricultural cycle, the Wangala festival is most elaborate.

Besides these, certain ceremonies are observed annually by the entire village community to safeguard the members from the dangers of the forest, and from sickness and mishaps during the entire coming year. For this purpose the Asongata ceremony is performed. A few stones are stuck to the ground on the outskirts of the village and a goat is sacrificed followed by the sacrifice of a langur or a bamboo-rat in the consecutive months. Before sacrificing, the animal to be sacrificed is fastened by a rope and taken inside each household where the assembled villagers beat the walls of the house in an effort to drive away the evil spirits. After this animal is taken to the asong or the stones that were stuck to the ground and sacrificed with one blow of a machete. Long and sharp bamboo stakes are placed around the dead animal which symbolizes counteracting evil forces which might try to enter from any sides thus warding off sickness and other dangers to life.

(d) Occasional Rites

Besides the above mentioned rites namely the crisis rites and the annual rites performed traditionally by the Garos, there exists a few rites which are performed on certain occasions with specific motives. Such occasional rituals are performed either by the household or at the community level.
For curing chronic diseases Tatara- Rabuga, the greatest of the spirits, is propitiated by sacrificing a bull, a goat, and a fowl in his honour. Worshippers drink liquor and rice during this two day ceremony. It is also pertinent to note here that any kind of sacrifices made to Tatara-Rebuga is accompanied by the sacrifice of Chorabudi regarded as his servant. Besides, sacrifices are also performed in honour of Saljong, the god of fertility during Wangala celebrations (see Playfair, 1975 : 80-117). The Garos offer sacrifices to Goera the God of strength who has the ability to cause thunder and lightening. Such sacrifices are offered at the foot of the tree struck by lightening with the hope that the same situation does not occur to their homes and lives. In addition to this the Garos also sacrifice a pig, a fowl and offer liquor to Susime in an attempt to cure blindness and lameness.

The ritual procedure of appeasement of different supernatural beings is almost the same with variation only with regards to the kinds of sacrifices to be performed. In most of the ritual performances altars are built of bamboo and leaves though the form might depend upon the particular spirit to whom the sacrifice is offered. As per the demands of the individual spirits and the seriousness of the disease, animals sacrificed vary. After killing the animal selected, the priest smears its blood on the altar by reciting various incantations and also pours a bit of rice beer as an additional offering. Thereafter, the priest uses the method of divination to examine the entrails of the sacrificed animals and ascertains the good or bad omens. Ritual performances often bring the
desired effect. In case it doesn't, another ritual is performed as it is thought to be caused by a spirit different from the one which was earlier identified.

Irrespective of the ritual performances used to deal with the supernatural world, there is no denying the acceptance of the fact of the presence of various spirits in the psycho-physical culture of the Garos.