ABSTRACT

The main thrust of the thesis: Rites of Passage in the Garo Oral Literature – is an attempt to examine the rites and rituals conducted by the Garos in almost every stage of their lives.
Chapterisation

Chapter I : Introduction
Chapter II : Rites and Rituals at Birth and Adolescence
Chapter III : Rites and Rituals during Marriage Negotiations And Ceremony
Chapter IV : Funeral and Post-Funeral Rites and Rituals
Chapter V : Conclusion
CHAPTER I

Introduction

The Evolution of an individual’s status in a community almost always constitutes a passage into a new and elevated social realm of existence. Such changes have the sanction of the elders and are often marked by elaborate initiation rites and rituals as a kind of proclamation conferring upon the individual a fair measure of rights, on one hand and social duties and responsibilities on the other. Marking off events like birth, adolescence, marriage, death and afterlife, rites of passage are ritualistic milestones that serve a biographical purpose.

Evolving over prolonged periods of time, most communities must rely on a suitable medium to bequeath their folklore, customs and traditions to successive generations. Among the ethnic Garos, these traditions, rites and rituals were until very recently passed down from generation to generation by word of mouth. The narrative may take the form of verse set to music, lyrical role-playing or simple ‘story-telling’ depending on the occasion, but they are all characterized by graphic depiction, liberally embellished to aid the mnemonic process.
In the absence of a written script, the Garo rites of passage have not been documented and much of what is practiced comes from what is best described as ‘oral literature.’ It is in these narratives, interwoven with mythology and myth that places such as Balpakram – the Garo “hereafter” – or the land of zephyrs has its origin. Regardless of their genre, epic stories that speak of bravery and warfare, chivalry and virtue, chicanery and morality, form a valuable source of the ethnic documentation.

Since compilations of Garo oral poetry, verses and songs recorded and published from time to time have been coloured by religious and other influences they do not therefore present an accurate and dispassionate picture of the composite culture. The objective of my undertaking this project is to systematically and scientifically document material on various aspects of oral literature with regard to rites of passage along with empirical data recorded by scholars of yesteryears who did not have the benefit of modern day tools and technology.

The study incisively analyze regional differences wherever there is in the observance of rites of passage and attempt to attribute probable cause for such divergences. While existing works on the subject have provide good starting
leads, additional data from extensive interviews of elders, especially in the rural areas where traditions are still passed down by word of mouth, helped present a truer and more comprehensive canvas.

The first chapter is an attempt to give an account of general introduction of the Garos as a people and a description of all the various aspects of Garo society. An account of the present day geographical distribution of the Garos has been given and a small account of their history has been touched upon with reference to various books. Attempts have been made to divide the Garos according to their geographical location with differences in dialects and some rituals, their clans, and religion. A small part has been dedicated to the predominant occupation of the Garos. Apart from this, the various technical definitions associated with the understanding of this study have been touched upon.

Rites of passage are rituals or ceremonies signifying an event in a person’s life, indicative of a transition from one stage to another, as from adolescence to adulthood. The same can also be explained as ceremonies that mark important transitional periods in a person’s life, such as birth, puberty, marriage, having children and finally death. They usually involve ritual activities and teachings designed to strip individuals of their original roles and prepare them for new
roles. Rites of passage are ceremional events, existing in all historically known societies that mark the passage from one social or religious status to another.

Rites of Passage of the Garos: The Garos have inherited literary traditions from their forefathers, which are oral as they are passed on by word of mouth in the absence of a script. They have also inherited rites of passage which mark the passage of an individual from one stage of life to the next, from birth to childhood, adolescence to adulthood, to the state of being married and finally death to afterlife. They perform rites of passage to mark the birth of a child, the arrival of adulthood, the occasion of marriage and death. A ritual performed before the birth of the child is called Darechik Amua, ceremony performed at the back of the house, when the mother is in labour pain, while Do sia is roughly the equivalent of a marriage ceremony.

‘Dosia is the recognized and official form of marriage among the heathen Garos. It is likewise the most common and honourable form of all the forms of marriage.’

Funeral rites are performed at the death of a person, while the post funeral ceremony called Mangona is performed for the final release of the spirit of the dead to travel to Balpakram, 'the land of the spirits'. Mangona can be described as 'a ceremony performed for the benefit of the departed soul.' The performance of these rites is accompanied by chanting of verses, singing, dancing and playing musical instruments.

**Oral Literature of the Garos:**

In Garo oral literature, transmitted by word of mouth, there are a number of genres like epic, lyric and narrative poetry, folktales, myths and legends, ballads, folksongs, proverbs and riddles, prayers and chants.

Katta agana, Doro, Ajea, Dani, Kabe, Katta Sailing constitutes poetry. The epic poetry called Katta Doka or Katta Agana is a long narrative poem about traditional cultural heroes and heroines. A class of poems known as Doro consists of verses regarding gods and goddesses and the sacred items in their religious rituals. It can be both lyrical and narrative. A poem known as Dani is another kind of sacred poetry, which may be recited, and chanted only during certain

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appropriate occasions and ceremonies. Ajea and Doro sung on ceremonial occasions and social gatherings make up secular poetry. Legends and myths occur both in prose and poetry. Folk-tales are most often told in prose narrative. Kabe is a dirge or song of lamentation sung at the funeral and the post-funeral ceremonies. Folk songs are rich in imagery and reflect the life and activities of the people.

Collections and anthologies of Garo oral poetry, verses and songs have been published from time to time. Several works have been done earlier in connection with the rites of passage of the Garos. Some of these books are A'chik Aganbewalrang (Original Tales of the Garos) by H.W.Marak, Apasong Agana by D.Rongmuthu, Pagitchamni Kuringa Vol I & II by C.A.Sangma, A'chik Golporang (Garo Folklore) Part I,II,III by D.K.Sangma, Pagitchamni Kubisring by M.N.Sangma, A'chikni Ku'andik by A.C.Momin. A.Playfair, in his monograph, The Garos has included a number of folk-tales and Kabes or funeral wails.

However, all these publications mentioned above do not contain a systematic study of oral literature of the Garo in connection with the rites of passage; therefore, it has been my Endeavour to do a systematic research on
different aspects of oral literature regarding rites of passage as practiced by the Garos.

It is in the oral literature that the thoughts and emotions of the singer and beliefs of the society behind the ceremony are expressed. The mother sings about her son or daughter in Dingdinga or lullaby, which in various ways brings out expectations from a child. The lullabies show differences of attitude of the singers towards boys and towards girls. Similarly, the funeral songs of lamentation for boys and for girls are different, though the basic pattern remains the same. Religious beliefs, linking the living with the dead and the pain of separation are expressed in the lamentations. In the dirge the spirit of the dead is instructed in minute details how to proceed to the land of the spirits. The deeds of the deceased person are recalled, the love that the relatives bear him/her is stressed. The dirges reveal what the society thinks of the origin of life and the role of an individual in the society and life after death.
CHAPTER II

Rites and Rituals at Birth and Adolescence

The second chapter is an attempt to give an account on all the rites and rituals at birth. Wherever possible, the scholar has tried to give original accounts not yet found in any published or unpublished works. Verses recited at the altar fixed at the threshold of the house for the purpose of performing rituals at the birth of a child and during the naming ceremony has been studied in detail. The thrust of the study has been on the accompanying songs of the father and of the mother. Lullabies sung by the mother, and other members of the family has been studied.

Regarding the rites of passage at adolescence, the materials collected by authors like M.S. Sangma, M.N. Sangma, A.C. Momin and S.R. Sangma has been studied; and effort has been made to get more materials from various sections of the society.
The following topics have been covered in this chapter with possible appropriate explanations and commentary:

**Re-chu Ana:** Re-chu Ana literally means to spread out a plantain leaf. This topic touches on the Garos’ belief in the predestined fate of man at the time of his birth. It touches on the folklore of the origin or discovery of this belief and the rituals associated with it. The tradition goes that at the time of birth, the living spirits of all living and non-living things spread out their webs to see to whose lot will fall the fate of the newborn. The Garos’ have a ritual at the time of birth that exorcises these spirits.

**Darechik Amia:** This topic touches on the rites performed to safeguard a pregnant woman against miscarriages and pre-term babies. According to the Garos’ belief, a deity called Darechik can make a baby be born before term, resulting in miscarriages or pre-term babies. This topic deals with the rituals and rites connected with the appeasement of this deity every time a pregnant woman falls ill during her pregnancy.

**Ma·mri Chinabak:** Ma·mri Chinabak is one of the names of the creator, the supreme being in the Garo pantheon. According to the tradition, it is believed that since he is the creator, he can also be the destroyer. The same was the case of a
foetus. Since he was its creator, he could also be its destroyer. This topic deals with the rites and rituals connected with the appeasement of this deity. This ritual was conducted every time the pregnant woman fell ill during her pregnancy.

**Cutting the Umbilical Cord:** This topic deals with the rituals associated with the cutting of the umbilical cord of the newborn. It is during this time that the newborn will be named, before any of the spirits mentioned in Re·chu Ana could name the baby and claim its fate for themselves.

**Do·magipa Doka:** After the birth of a baby, if the placenta remains inside the mother, it could prove fatal to her. This topic deals with the rites and rituals connected with the appeasement of the deity Me·chibram who is believed to be holding the placenta back.

**A·tila Amua or Dakara Amua:** This topic deals with the birth ritual. The rites and rituals are directed towards the creator Dakara (another name for Tattara Rabuga) appeasing him for the safe birth of the baby. The entire ritual has been elaborated along with the chants starting from inside the house and ending on the courtyard of the house. This ritual contains the following parts: the birthing ritual, conducted at the time of the birth of the baby; the Chi Rugalani, or the water pouring ritual – this is an offering of water for Tattara Rabuga, poured on a
plantain leaf spread out inside the house; the Mi Tinani, or the rice portions ritual – this is an offering of rice placed in portions on the plantain leaf; the Chu Rugalani or the rice beer pouring ritual – this is an offering of rice beer poured over the rice portions placed in the plantain leaf; the A·tila Amua or the courtyard ritual – this is conducted outside on the courtyard of the house.

A·siroka: This topic deals with the exorcism ritual after the birth of the baby. After the birth, the priest takes a bath and then brings a broom and a pot of water and exorcises the defilement and pollution or marang, that may have been present at the time of the birth.

Kni Rata: This topic deals with the hair cutting ceremony and the naming ceremony. The rituals and rites associated with it are also covered with explanations and commentary. The ritual exorcises the baby for the first time since birth and a ritual is conducted for the deity Tongrengma who is supposed to strike the baby and make it mentally retarded.

Kalkame Den·paka: This topic deals with a ritual associated with shaving off the baby’s hair. It is observed so that the baby can grow up to be strong. The Garos believe that if this ritual is not conducted, the baby would be malnourished and its growth stunted.
Lullabies: This topic deals with the lullabies that are sung to babies either to make them sleep or to quiet them down when they cry. There are also songs sung to a child which in various ways brings out expectations from a child.

Adolescence and the System of Nokpante: This topic deals with the adolescent life of a Garo, and the life in the Nokpante. It elaborates of the complex educational institution of the Nokpante which was essential in teaching the young men everything that they would need when they set out to make their own lives. The Nokpante was also essential in building a strong society with strong moral and ethical foundations.

Therefore, it has been found that the Garos in their pristine society observed a series of rituals and ceremonies to invoke the blessings of the spirits concerned at birth and puberty of every individual.
CHAPTER III

Rites and Rituals during Marriage Negotiations and Ceremony

This chapter is an attempt to give an account of the rites and rituals at marriage and negotiations for marriage called Chawari Singa; which is the actually the interview of the prospective son-in-law. The poetry called Doro is sung during the negotiations by both the parties. It is characterized by highly metaphorical language, a feature that is inherited from the past. Study has been made on the chants uttered by the priest solemnizing the union of bride and groom during Dosia or marriage ceremony. The following topics have been covered in this chapter:

Types of Sons-In-Law in Garo Society: This topic deals with the two types of sons-in-law in Garo society, the chawari or the normal son-in-law and the nokkrom or the son-in-law married to the heiress. It also touches upon the different practices associated with the powers and functions of these sons-in-law

Marriage Negotiations: This topic deals with the marriage negotiations that goes with the marriage system of the Garos. It touches upon the various aspects and the practices associated with the marriage negotiations. This topic contains the
doros mentioned earlier, which were a part and parcel of the negotiations for a nokkrom.

**Dosia:** This topic deals with the official marriage ceremony of the Garos. The topic contains descriptions and explanations of the various aspects of this type of marriage. This kind of marriage does not have any religious elements and is conducted by a kamal or priest with three chickens. The only element that relies upon the unknown in this type of marriage is the divination on the married life of the couple done with the entrails of the chicken, called do·bik nia. It also contains a case study to further elaborate some of the aspects of marriage.

**Marriage by Capture:** This topic deals with marriage by capture, in which the groom is forcibly captured and married. Though this practice is no longer prevalent, the researcher has attempted to explain the various aspects of this form of marriage from whatever sources that could be garnered. The researcher has given an example from Burling to elaborate this type of marriage.

**Chasenga or Proposal through service in the boy’s family:** This topic deals with chasenga, one of the aspects of the Garo marriage system. In this type of marriage, the girl comes and stays at the boy’s house and cooks and cleans and
does chores in the house helping out her prospective in-laws and at the end of which, if the parents are satisfied with her conduct, she gets to marry the boy.

**Chadila or Offering of food:** This topic deals with char-dila, a form of marriage proposal given by a girl to a boy she likes. In this type of proposal, the girl cooks some food and sends it off with a friend to the boy she likes while she follows behind. If the boy eats the food sent by her, then it meant that he had accepted her proposal.

**Tunapa or Secretly sleeping with one’s beloved:** This topic deals with tunapa, a form of proposal in which the suitor, either a boy or a girl, steals into his/her intended and lies with her. If accepted, they get married.

**Chame Jika or Wooing/courting the Lover with songs:** This topic deals with chame jika, a form of courtship in which the boys and girls of the village sing songs of love to each other at the end of which, if they find each other compatible, the courtship ends in marriage.

**Seka or Elopement:** This topic deals with seka or elopement. The boy and girl run off with each other against their parents’ wishes.
Onsonga or Providing replacement: This topic deals with the practice of on-songa. In this kind of marriage, when the spouse dies, the relatives of the deceased have an obligation to give a replacement in place if the departed. Often, someone from the immediate matriliny is preferred and only when no one is available, a search is widened to include distant clan members.

Mother-in-law Marriage: This part deals with the much misunderstood topic of mother-in-law marriage. When the father-in-law dies, if a nokkrom has been chosen, then the mother-in-law is referred to as jik or wife, but it is not a marriage in the true sense of the word.

Child Marriage: This part deals with the topic of child marriage. This happens only in the cases of on-songa. When there is a vast difference between the surviving wife and the replacement husband, he is given a choice of marrying his wife’s daughter. This practice is called on-chapa.

Christian Marriage: This topic deals with the nuances of Christian Marriages among the present day Garos and the traditions that they still adhere to. The Christian marriages are Christian only in the ceremonies while in all else, the age old practices are still adhered to.
**Do'ki Rama:** This deals with the topic of do·ki rama, a tradition followed the day after the marriage, in which the new son-in-law sits idle.

**Gitcheng Godapa, Greng Gitaka:** This deals with the topic of gitcheng godapa, greng gitaka, a tradition of the duties of a newly married son-in-law. The traditions of how the new son-in-law has to undertake certain tasks that though may not be to his liking, he is obligated to do.

**Nokde:** This deals with nokde, the house that the chawari builds when he and his family has to move out of the ancestral house of his wife. It is a custom that a daughter who is not the heiress would have to move out of the house with her husband and family and stay in a separate house as and when they are able to marry.

The Garos in the pre-Christian society adopted various types of marriage negotiations for the two types of sons-in-law. Likewise, they had various forms of marriages, but whatever form was adopted, it was finally solemnized by do·sia ceremony. The Christians on the other hand still follow some of these marriage negotiations, such as the initiative taken by the girl’s family in the negotiations. Similarly, the Christians still practice some of the traditions associated with marriage, with only a change in the ceremony.
CHAPTER IV

Funeral and Post-Funeral Rites and Rituals

This chapter is devoted to the study of the rites and rituals performed during the funeral and post funeral ceremonies of the Garos. Death is another transition that is of extreme importance in the Garo existence, but it is not the end because of their belief in rebirth. Thus, there are a lot of elaborate rituals in the funeral and post-funeral ceremonies of the Garos. The focus of the study is on chanting of verses, and singing of dirges called Kabes which is an essential feature of the funeral ceremony. The poem Jaragata means, literally, to recall the spirit to the family of his/her origin. It is recited in a ceremony to call back the spirit of a dead man to his mothers’ household. The scholar has studied the different types of Kabe, sung at different stages of funeral and post-funeral ceremonies. The post-funeral ceremonies, lasting from one to three days, take place a few months after the cremation. The traditional belief in the journey of the soul to the land of the spirits and the belief in rebirth have been examined while inquiring into the rituals, Kabe and Jaragata. The following topics have been covered in this chapter:
**Kima Songa:** This topic deals with kima songa, the practice of putting up memorial posts in memory of the dead.

**Me-mang Gisi, Gro Gisi:** This deals with the topic of me-mang gisi, gro gisi, the repayment of the debts of the deceased.

**Tokari Pita:** This topic deals with the custom of tokari pita, a tradition practiced during a funeral. In this tradition, the tokari, a place to keep the mil·am is slashed during the funeral.

**Me-mang Dila:** This topic deals with the tradition of me-mang dila, or leading the spirit of a dead man back to the place of his birth. This happens about a month after the funeral.

**Jaragata:** This topic deals with the tradition of jaragata, an elaborate ritual in which the soul of a dead person is led back to its home in so that when the time comes to be born again, it won’t lose its way.

**Me-mang Rakkia:** This topic deals with the tradition of me-mang rakkia, or keeping the soul of the departed. In this tradition, some rice and curry is kept aside for the departed.
Crossing Over: This topic deals with the Garo belief in crossing over to the land of the dead with some references to Greek mythology. The Garos belief in the way to the land of the dead and how they can cross Nawang, a demon that blocks the way to the land of the dead.

Kabe: This topic deals with the funeral dirges. Attempts have been made to elaborate these as much as possible. Kabes are sung according to the relation of the departed to the singer and are different for different relations.

The researcher has found that the Garos had a number of elaborate rituals related to death and the afterlife. The amount of material collected show that death is an important part of the Garo worldview and death is by no means the end because of the belief in rebirth repeating the cycle and each time being born to the same clan.
CHAPTER V

Conclusion

In this concluding chapter, the scholar has made an endeavor to find how different rites of passage are connected to each other. Efforts have been made to find out what the poems, chants, verses and songs express about the traditional world-view of the Garo community, what light they throw on the rituals, and their literary qualities. The findings of the previous chapters has been summed up and recorded. This has been done through the findings of the study of oral literature which accompanies the different rites of passage. Attempts have been made to place the rites of passage in perspective and to analyze the place of the oral tradition keeping in mind the rapidly Christianizing worldview of the modern Garo community.

From the foregoing chapters, it has been found that the Garos in their old society had already adopted elaborate customs and practices for every stage of a man’s life with due solemnity and earnestness. Most of these customs and practices are invocations for blessings from the concerned deity while some are social practices without religious tinge.
The first chapter deals with the introduction of the Garos in general and the various aspects needed to understand the topics dealt with in the following chapters.

The second chapter deals with the rites and rituals involving birth and adolescence with a string of ceremonies all interconnected to each other and without one a man’s life would be incomplete.

The third chapter contains descriptions of elaborate rituals deals with the marriage negotiations and the marriage ceremony. It also includes the various practices associated with it.

The fourth chapter deals with funeral and post-funeral rites. The chapter deals with how the Garos belief in rebirth fuels the funeral and post-funeral rites.

The fifth and concluding chapter deals with the reasons behind the erosion of Garo culture and the much needed intervention required to halt the process and preserve the remnants of the Garo culture.
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