Chapter I

Introduction
CHAPTER I

Introduction

The Garos

1.01 Geographical Distribution:

The Garos are an indigenous people inhabiting the North Eastern part of the Indian sub-continent. They are mainly distributed over the Kamrup, Goalpara and Karbi Anglong Districts of Assam, some parts of Bodoland Territorial Area Districts (BTAD) and Upper Assam, Garo Hills and parts of Khasi Hills in Meghalaya and are found in greater Mymensingh (Tangail, Jamalpur, Sherpore, Netrakona) and Gazipur, Rangpur, Sunamgonj, Sylhet, Moulovibazar districts of Bangladesh.

There are also Garos in the state of Tripura and are found in minority numbers in Cooch Behar, Jalpaiguri, Darjeeling and Dinajpur of West Bengal and also in Nagaland, but unfortunately, many of the younger generations are unable to speak the Garo mother tongue.

1.02 History:

As to the origins of the people, the Garos have a strong tradition. They have a legend among themselves that they had migrated from a place called Torua in the land of Tibet under the leadership of the chiefs Jappa-Jalinpa and
Sukpa-Bongipa in two groups. One group came through the Himalayats, through Nathu La\textsuperscript{1} pass in the present day Indian state of Sikkim and Tibet Autonomous Region in China and first settled in the plains of modern day Cooch Behar. Thereafter, due to hostilities from the then king of Cooch Behar, they moved eastwards to the plains of Assam to the Manas river. There, they were again persecuted and fought with their persecutors. The king of Cooch Behar, on learning of this battle, came to the aid of the persecutors. Flanked on both sides, the Garos had no option, but to cross the mighty Brahmaputra. They crossed it in rafts made of plantain stems, which they acquired by giving the hand of a Garo maiden in marriage to the prince of the area who was enamored by her beauty. Then they moved eastwards along the banks of the Brahmaputra and came to the place where present day Guahati is located, which they called Salaram Mitechak or A-song Kamekha, where they were joined by the other group that came along the course of the Brahmaputra under the leadership of Dikgil Nongsting.\textsuperscript{2} From there, they retraced their steps westward and in the course of this journey they are supposed to have broken up into different divisions. They visited numerous places until they came to a place near present day Krishnai\textsuperscript{3}, where they became prosperous. A Garo kingdom was established in this area with Abrasen as the first reigning prince with his capital at Sambol A·ding in the present pargana of Habraghat, to which he is said to have given his name.\textsuperscript{4} Though no written records exist to
support this theory of migration, there are instances of Garo villages all along the said migration routes. All the way from Cooch Behar in Northern West Bengal, close to the Bhutan border, towards Assam, a number of Garo villages still exist to this day, though assimilations are taking place into the larger and majority ethnic groups. On the other front, all along the banks of the Brahmaputra, from the borders of Arunachal Pradesh, there also exist Garo villages all the way down to the plains of Assam. There are many different versions of this story and with the passage of time and as it is with all oral literature, some details of the story have been lost while there may have been some additions. There also lies the fact that we cannot ascertain the exact details with the passage of time.

In another narration, collected by Dewansingh S. Rongmuthu and published in his book *Apasong Agana* (first published in 1970), Mowel Sangma Gagra of Chenggni village gives a different account of the migration of the Garos. In his narration, he says that in ancient times, a group of the forefathers of the Garos lived in what is now Myanmar, whose former name Burma was derived from the Garos’ name for the place *bormagrim* or land of gigantic trees. They settled and multiplied in what is now Cachar and Sylhet. Then, they migrated to Dakka ron-Bhawal, which are now called Dhaka and Bhowal. They were the first to clear the forests and cultivate in these areas and the land which they left after harvesting their crops were taken over by the
roris (Garo name for non-Garos) or plainspeople, who made partitions, dug wells and canals and converted them into paddy fields. The Garos then moved northwards practicing their slash and burn cultivation and came to settle in what is now present day Mymensingh in a place called Shambhuganj. The first chieftain to settle there was called Monsing and Shambhuganj was derived from the clan that ruled the place, the Chambugong clan. While they were settled thus, there came an invasion of giant mosquitoes, the size of sparrows, the narration goes, which would swarm a sleeping man and suck all of his blood if no one were to stand guard to ward off these monster mosquitoes. To escape these pests, the then ruling chief, Sane, sent his best warriors to the green hills towards the north that could be seen from there to find out if it was hospitable. The warriors returned and informed the chief that it was possible, but they would have to clear thick impenetrable forests and beware of wild animals. The narration actually says,

"Haiwa tangseksek simdimdim a-brirangko chinga gakate re-roroe niba man-jok. Songdongna a-dokde nama, chiringna chigade an-senga; indiba, kilding jakbo gitako tetesa, do-reng noktop gitako goesa, matchamako dingesa, skalmako tatesa uno songdong a-chana man-aigne."
Translation:

“We have climbed and wandered along those green hills. The land is suitable for living, so are the watering places; but, we have to break threads the size of arms, kill eagles the size of huts, fight the giant tigers, exorcise the giant demons before we can settle there.”

In the narration, the “threads the size of arms” were the webs of giant *Nephila* spiders. The chief got word from his warriors that they were willing to take on these difficulties and so, they migrated to what is now the Garo Hills while the descendents of those who decided to stay back still reside in a place called A·bima or Modhupur in Bangladesh.

Web sources place the migratory route even further:

“In their migration from Tibet and southern China, they have wandered all over the face of the earth and their language and culture have traces of Mandarin, Burmese, Bodo-Kachari, Khmer, Hindi or Sanskrit, Persian, etc. Needless to say, the Mandis as a race are very adoptive to new situations, religions, cultures, and environments. According to some theories they are Atharbascan, the same people as can be found in Alaska, Western Canada, and the American Southwest, known as the Dene, Apachi, and Navajo tribes.”
In the book *Apasong Agana*, there is another narration that traces the ancestry of the Garos all the way back to Israel\(^\text{15}\). The narration by Sonaram Sangma Rongrok of Rajasimla, Goalpara District gives in detail of this lineage. Ehera, a descendent of Benjamin, the youngest son of Israel, and his wife Behera, who was a descendent of Judah, an elder son of Israel, along with their servants and their belongings came out of Samaria. They first encamped in a place called Milit\(^\text{16}\) and later on in a place called Sirit. Ehera and Behera had two sons, named Japan and A·chik\(^\text{17}\), who became great warriors. According to this narration, Sirit lies somewhere south of modern day Russia. From Sirit, the tribe of Ehera and Behera migrated to a place called Mojib, a grassland, most probably situated in the Eurasian Steppes. Their son Kimpol was born there. They migrated again to Mirit and from there to a place called Jin, where their son Waib was born. Kimpol and Waib became warriors of great renown and the tribe of Ehera and Behera came to be a great warrior tribe.

Jin was a mountainous country and the wind at night sounded like war cries. So, from here they migrated to the mountains of Chemang. In Chemang was born their sons Bangkuala and Eban. From Chemang, guided by the god *Saka Misi Saljong*, Japan took his people and moved towards the East, where they became a great warrior nation. From there, the rest of the tribe migrated southwards to a place called Naori Chiga Timbori, which meant an inland sea
that did not flow anywhere\textsuperscript{18}. The events described in this narration bring the migration of the Garos to the Tibetan plateau.

Just like the previously quoted source, we can see that the Garos have probably migrated all over the place of the earth until they came to their modern settlement.

\textbf{1.03 Divisions - Geographical:}

The Garos are divided into eleven sub-divisions, according to the geographical location, with variations in dialects and customs. The sub-divisions, in alphabetical order, consist of: \textit{A\textasciitilde beng}, \textit{A\textasciitilde we}, \textit{Atong}\textsuperscript{19}, \textit{Chibok}, \textit{Chisak}, \textit{Dual}, \textit{Gara Ganching}, \textit{Matabeng}, \textit{Matchi}, \textit{Me\textasciitilde gam} and \textit{Ruga}\textsuperscript{20}.

The \textit{A\textasciitilde bengs} are by far the most numerous and wide-spread division of the Garo tribe. They occupy a large part within the Garo Hills. They are predominant in the whole of the West Garo Hills and as far east as the Bogai river. A small colony also inhabits the South Garo Hills starting from Halwa A\textasciitilde beng\textsuperscript{21} to the Khasi Hills boundary, and parts of Bangladesh. The \textit{A\textasciitilde wes} inhabit the whole of the Northern parts of the Garo Hills and the plains at their foot, and along the Assam-Meghalaya border from Kamrup district in the east, to a short distance west of the Jinari river. An important division of the tribe, the \textit{Atongs}, occupy the Simsang valley, and the hills in its vicinity from
Nongalbibra extending all the way to Bangladesh along the course of the Simsang river. The *Chisaks* occupy parts of East Garo Hills, from the southern border of the *A-wes* in the north, to within a few kilometres of the Simsang river in the south; and from the western border of West Khasi Hill in the east, they extend about forty eight kilometres westward. The district capital of Williamnagar lies in the *Matchi* area. Immediately east of the *A-bengs*, in the upper valley of the Bogai river, and extending eastward almost to the Nitai river are the *Chiboks*. There exists a small colony of *Duals* immediately south of the *Chisaks*, who have their villages on the banks of the Simsang river and in the hills close to the south bank of the river. A majority of the *Duals* are found in Mymensingh district of Bangladesh. To the country south of the main range, i.e., the Durama Range which extends all the way from Tura peak towards Siju, and extending from the Nitai river nearly to the Simsang river, is inhabited by the *Gara-Ganchings*. Higher up the valley of the Simsang river are the *Matabengs*. By their language and geographical distribution, they are found to be a mingling of the *A-beng* and *Matchi*.

The *Matchis* inhabit the central valley of the Simsang, to the west of the *Duals*, and south of the *A-wes*, and southward to the northern slopes of the Durama range. The *Me-gams* are also a sub-division of the tribe with a somewhat confusing lineage. A major part of this sub-division resides in West Khasi Hills, where they are known as Lyngam. According to Playfair, they
represent a hybrid fusion race of the Garo and the Khasi. Their appearance and customs resembling the Garos and their language being classified by Dr. Grierson as Khasi. Some scholars are of the opinion that the Me-gams are a sub-division of the Garos because, not only their customs, but also their beliefs are also similar to the Garos. In fact, some of their beliefs are not even found in the Khasi beliefs. As for their language, it can be explained as a form of pidginised Khasi, which the Me-gams, being in such close proximity to the Khasis, developed over time to aid in communication and commerce. This kind of thing is not rare in areas where a number of people with different languages have to co-exist. An example would be the language called Nagamese, which is the lingua franca in Nagaland, where the different sub-divisions of the tribe speak different dialects. Nagamese is a pidginized form of Assamese. To the south of the Chiboks, in a village called Rugapara on the banks of the Bogai river are found the Rugas.

According to Playfair, there are two other sub-divisions of the tribe. The Kochu and the Atiagra. He describes the Kochu thus:

"In the north-western hills, to the west of the Jinari river, there is a small division of the tribe called Kochu. These must not be confounded with the Kochs or the Atongs, who are also known as Kochu."
Though the Kochus share similar clan divisions, they consider themselves to be separate from the Garos. While the majority of the Garos have adopted the Christian faith and a small minority hold on to the indigenous religion, a majority of the Kochus are Hindu.

Of the other sub-division, the Atiagra, Playfair has this to say:

"The Atiagras form another small and unimportant section of the Garo tribe. They live to the south of the Kochus and bear the same relationship to the Abengs that the Kochus have with the Awés."^3

As such, in the present day, no mention of the Atiagras can be found. They have probably been assimilated into the larger sub-division of the Abengs.

1.04 Divisions – Clans:

Apart from these geographical divisions, the Garos are further subdivided into various exogamous sects. The main ones Sangma and Marak are distributed throughout the geographical divisions, irrespective of their differences. Another sect, which is mainly confined to the Awes is Momin but now they have also spread over all Garo Hills due to inter marriages and as office workers, business establishments, etc. Two more minor groups that
exist are Shira and Areng. Playfair mentioned another group called the Ebang, who were originally Momins and have probably assimilated back to the mother clan. This could probably be the reason why it is non-existent today.

The last sub-division of the tribe is the ma-chong or clan. In the written form, the Garos indicate as an initial before writing the surname Sangma or Marak, etc. Since the exogamous sects are large, these clans further subdivide them into divisions of kinship. While Sangma and Marak have distinct clan names, Momin shares some clan names with both Sangma and Marak, all the clans of Areng are Sangma in some areas and Shira has only one clan, Dalbot, which are also Sangma in certain places giving rise to the theory that both the Areng and Shira sects are probably Sangma in origin and due to whatever circumstances, became the clans they are today.

1.05 Divisions – Religion:

In the present day, the Garos have acquired yet another division, that of Christian denominations. Christianity began in the Garos with the entry of the American Baptist missionaries and was followed by the Catholic missionaries. Since then, as is the case all over the world, there have been, rivalries and misunderstandings cropped up between the two of them. Though most of the misunderstandings have been cleared, it is only in terms of marriage that the problems exist. It is harder in many cases for a couple from different Christian
denominations to get married than a couple whose clans share a kinship with each other, which would actually be forbidden according to customary laws.

1.06 Language

In the introduction to the book The Garos, J. Bampfyde Fuller\textsuperscript{29} cites:

"The Garos are of the stock known as the Tibeto-Burman, which drifted into Eastern India and Burma across the Plateaux of Tibet. Their language still retains some similarity with Tibetan: and some of their ideas, such as the sentimental value they attach to gongs, are identical with those prevailing in Tibetan villages. It is more curious still that their language in its general construction, and in a few survivals of vocabulary, should show traces of affinity with Turkish, supporting 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."\textsuperscript{30}

The language is called \textit{Mande Ku·sik}, ‘the language of man’ or \textit{A·chik Ku·sik}, ‘the language of the hill man’. The language can be divided into various dialects and named according to their usage by the names of the geographical sub-division, namely, \textit{A·beng}, \textit{A·we}, \textit{Atong}, \textit{Chibok}, \textit{Chisak}, \textit{Dual}, \textit{Gara Ganching}, \textit{Matabengi}, \textit{Matchi}, \textit{Me·gam} and \textit{Ruga}. In her book \textit{Influence of English on Garo Poetry}, Caroline R. Marak\textsuperscript{31} cites from G.A. Grierson’s \textit{Linguistic Survey of India}\textsuperscript{32}: 
“Like many Tibeto-Burman languages, Garo is a true agglutinative language that is; simple, monosyllabic words are incorporated to form a compound word to express compound ideas. Prefixes, suffixes and infixes, attached to the root words denote the relationship of a word to others in a sentence and modify the meaning of words. Some of the affixes are capable of being used as words with independent meanings. In some compound words, such as *micron* (eye), the original component parts are becoming unrecognizable as individual words. Changes in pronunciation and inaccuracies in spelling have been responsible for obscuring the component words.

The Garo language shares other characteristics of the Tibeto-Burman tongue. Glottal checks are present in Garo, but there are no clearly accented and unaccented syllables unlike in Indo-European languages. Some other characteristics of the language are abundance of word-pairs, prefixes, suffixes and infixes, verbs and terms for individual objects. The observation that all the Tibeto-Chinese languages once belonged to the class of languages very picturesque and poetical, having an extraordinarily large stock of concrete and characteristic terms for individual things, but they are quite unfit for acting as mediums of high thought, not being able to denote abstract ideas free from all accidental properties, may be applicable to Garo.”

### 1.07 Occupations:

The Garos are a predominantly agricultural community, and follow the slash and burn practice of shifting cultivation or *jhum* cultivation of their forefathers. With the advent of Christianity and education and the work done by the Government and various other organizations in order to safeguard the environment, they have gradually started adopting other means of cultivation like plantations of cash crops like cashew nuts, betel nut, rubber, etc and other forms of sustainable agricultural practices.
Since the life of the villages revolve around agriculture, a majority of the rites and rituals are also based on agriculture, like *Wangala*, the harvest festival of thanksgiving and one of the major festivals of the Garos. With the widespread prevalence of Christianity coupled with the disappearance of shifting cultivation, this has also become rare with only a handful of villages still practicing it. The only exception is the 100 Drums *Wangala* Festival which takes place every year in late October or early November, which is becoming bigger event every year. It is a festival which has popularized the *Wangala* dance, not as a ceremonial thanksgiving, but as a centre of attraction of Garo culture.

After the attainment of the state of Meghalaya, the option for professions like Medicine and Engineering also became open to the meritorious Garo students and there have many who have chosen these fields. During the nineties, there was not much scope profession-wise due to lack of information and apart from agriculture in the villages, almost all the Garos were confined to Government jobs, teachers, engineers, doctors, contractors and businessmen. All that has changed during the early nineties with globalization and the information age making its way to the Garos and since then there has been no looking back and the Garos have exploded into the
world choosing a wide variety of professions taking them to places their parents and grandparents would never have dreamt of.

1.08 Oral Traditions:

Traditionally, in all old cultures of the world, all the cultural material and traditions were transmitted orally from one generation to another. This oral transmission of cultural material is called oral tradition. Oral tradition, however, should not be confused with oral history. In oral tradition, the messages and testimonies are transmitted from generation to generation in speech or song generally taking the form of folktales, sayings, ballads, songs or chants, while oral history is simply the recording of personal memories and histories of those who experienced historical eras or events and lacks the richness inherent in oral traditions. It is also distinct from orality which is thought and its verbal expression in societies where technologies of literacy, especially writing and print, are unfamiliar to most of the population.

Storytelling and poetry started so long ago in ancient time that no one can precisely even presume when or how they derived. But one thing is for sure that our ancestors did not live to be just a variety of living thing and build up into human being until the power for rhythmic language and narration had progressed in them. In fable the world over, these rational powers are said to
be god-gifted and divine. They are at the very least requisite to any sensible explanation of human race.

For many millennia the only tool of rhythmic words and narrative recognized in any part of the world was the tongue men were born with, not the stylus or the pen, for writing was not invented until too late in human evolution for it to reveal anything about the origin of speech. So for long ages the only way any knowledge could survive from one generation to another was through oral tradition. Rhythmical speech was the world's first great medium of communication for complex ideas, and there were certainly media men of astonishing skill long before anyone on earth knew how to write.

**What is Oral Literature?**

One of the most important developments in this century in both the popular and academic understanding of culture has been the wide growth of awareness that only a tiny percentage of man's total creative achievement has depended on literacy. Writing is at most a comparatively recent invention, and while it is useful for keeping records of all sorts, it is a cumbersome and inefficient means of cultural communication, even with the help of printing.

Despite their mechanical clumsiness and incompetence, writing and printing are unquestionably two great gears of progress. But they are not basic
possessions of human nature. The more basic and most characteristic cultural property of men everywhere remains their inherent power of speech. Verbal words are the final source of explicit statement, and any decay or reduction of the arts of speech immediately erodes the value of explicit traditions. We live in an era when, moreover, other potentially enlightening innovations based on electrical recording and electrical broadcasting of speech has only begun to be used and valued.

A great fraction of existing words in any language is short-lived, and is working for simply passing reasons. But a assured section of verbal statement is continuing, whether or not any data is made of it in writing or otherwise. It expresses ideas of such proven, lasting utility that special, poetic styles of speech exist in every tongue to guarantee the memory and continuation of those fundamental thoughts in by oral traditions. Oral literature is the material recorded from oral traditions in every age and in every language.

It has been defined as follows:

“The genres of oral literature cover spoken and sung expression. They may be further divided into the two large groupings of folk narrative and folk song, and other such small genres such as proverbs, riddles and beliefs or superstitions. Folk narrative is an umbrella for a wide range of oral prose traditions.

Oral literature comprises of folk speech, as distinct from formal or standard speech, and various traditional kinds of expressive utterances. Prominent among them are proverb or folk saying,
embodying wisdom in pithy phrases; the riddle, an enigmatic question paired with a deceptive answer; the tongue twister, a nonsense sentence difficult to pronounce because of its string of assonances; the toast, a convivial expression voiced as a drinking salutation; along with other forms involving a special use of language. Beliefs or superstitions are sometimes expressed as wise sayings, although they may also appear in tales and customs."

Oral literature is, ‘in fact, the traditional knowledge and beliefs that have been transmitted by word of mouth since time immemorial. It is the way of cultures with no written language in preserving their history and traditions. It consists, as does written literature, of both prose and verse narratives, poems and songs, myths, dramas, rituals, proverbs, riddles, and the like.

"The most obvious characteristic of oral literature is that it is oral. In spite of certain borderline cases it normally stands in direct contrast with written literature. The latter exists in manuscripts and books and may be preserved exactly as the author or authors left it, even though this may have happened centuries or millennia ago. Through these manuscripts and books the thoughts and emotions and observations and even the fine nuances of style can be experienced without regard to time or distance. With oral literature it is not possible. It is concerned only with speaking and singing and with listening, thus depending upon the existence of a living culture to carry on a tradition. If any item of folk literature ceases to exist within the memory of man it is completely lost." 

Oral literature is one of the main constituents of folklore.""Oral literature, also called as verbal art or expression literature are ‘spoken, sung
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and voiced forms of traditional utterances. Chants and prayers, poetry, both lyric and narrative, songs, proverbs, ballads and riddles are included in oral literature.

1.09 Oral Literature of the Garos

The Garos, like all ancient tribal people of the world without written language have a rich cultural tradition of oral literature. With the advent of education and the written word, this tradition has been gradually dying out. Over the years, few people have tried to collect and preserve those traditions, the foremost among them being Dewansing Rongmitu Sangma and others like Harendra W. Marak, Mihir N. Sangma, Llwellyn R. Marak, etc, but due to poor connectivity problems and the access to modern recording equipment being non-existent, they were unable to collect much of it and most of the oral literature have died out with the older generations.

One of the main reasons that oral traditions are dying is because a couple of generations lost interest in it and with the advent of education, it only worsened the problem. It is only recently that the interests in oral traditions have resurfaced among the Garos and there is a race against time to collect and preserve them because the sources in the villages are gradually dying out of old age. The younger generations in the villages having little or no interest in them while the new religion portraying the old traditions as
unimportant. Garo oral literature has a number of genres like epic, lyric and narrative poetry, folktales, myths and legends, ballads, folksongs, proverbs and riddles, prayers and chants.

They include:

- *Katta Agana* or *Katta Doka* or *Saling Ring-a*, *Ajea* or *A-beng Balsala*, *Doroa*, *Cherasola*, *Daradoka*, *Rada Ring-a*, *Gogaedoka*, *Koredoka* or *Korebima*, *Gelo Ring-a*, *Damik Ring-a*, *GoseRing-a*, *Serejing Ring-a*, *Arerea* or *Rere kal-a*, *Nanggorere Ring-a*, *Gonda Doka*, *Ahoma*, *Mangtata* or *Grapa*, *Aemarong Krita*, *Asong Kosi Tata*, *Songading Krita*, *Akrita*, etc.

*Katta agana*, *Doro*, *Ajea*, *Dani Kabe*, *Katta Saling* 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 *Doroa* consists of verses regarding gods and goddesses and the sacred items in their religious rituals and ceremonial performances such as, *Gana*, *Nokdonggaa*, *Nokpante Nokdonggaa*, *Mikchi Sokchi Dina*, *Jaringa*, *Dakgina*, *Amua*, *Den-bilsia*, *Miching ra-on.a*, etc. It can be both lyrical and narrative. In *Gana* ceremonial performances it is again sub-divided into *Munina Doroa*, *Danilna Doroa*, *Mil-amna Doroa*, *Spina Doroa*, *Kramna Doroa*, *Kotipna Doroa*, *Rangna Doroa*, *Adilna Doroa*, *W-a-gen.a Doroa*, *Nadena Doroa*, *Jaksilna Doroa* and *Wantina Doroa*.

A poem known as *Dani* is another kind of sacred poetry, which may be recited, and chanted only during certain appropriate occasions and ceremonies. *Ajea* and *Doroa* are sung on ceremonial occasions and social gatherings and 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 post-funeral ceremonies. Folk songs are rich in imagery and reflect the life and activities of the people. There is another kind of epic called the *Serejing*, which tells the story of two lovers, Serejing and Waljan in the form of a musical drama. In its entirety, the performance of this musical takes twelve to fourteen nights.

### 1.10 Rites of Passage

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 the important and 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 ceremonial events, existing in all historically known societies that mark the passage from one social or religious status to another.

### 1.11 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 transition of
an individual from one stage of life to the next, from birth to childhood, adolescence to adulthood, to the stage of being married and finally to death and 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 at the birth of a child is called *A-tilla Amua*, literally, ceremony of the courtyard, while *Do-sia*, is roughly the equivalent of a marriage ceremony.

"*Do-sia* 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."[^39]

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'.[^40]

The performance of these rites is accompanied by chanting of verses, singing, dancing and playing musical instruments.

Collections and anthologies of Garo oral poetry, verses and songs have been published from time to time. Research has been conducted 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, Pagitchamni
Kuringa Vol I & II by C.A. Sangma, A·chik Golporang (Garo Folklore) by M.N. Sangma, A·chikni Kwandik by A.C. Momin. Playfair, in his monograph, The Garos, has included a number of folktales and Kabes or dirges.

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, the researcher have done 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. 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.
1.12 The Topic of the Study

The study has been entitled *Rites of Passage in the Garo Oral Literature*.

1.13 Justification of the study

There are many interesting rites of passage conducted by the Garos in almost every stage of their lives, a detailed and systematic survey and recording of which has not yet been undertaken. The detailed features of these rites of passage are not known nor understood by most of the modern Garos as they are mainly practiced by those still adhering to the indigenous religion of their forefathers. As a result they are in immediate danger of being lost in obscurity, and the interest and need was felt by the researcher for learning and preserving these dying traditions.

A few books and articles have been written on some of the rites and rituals, but no detailed and thorough study has been made and recorded in the form of a book or any other form. Most of the books have mostly dealt with the chants and incantations, but gives no description of the ritual as a whole, thereby leaving the reader with the thirst of knowledge of the complete ritual. The changing trends in society, necessitates in depth research on the fast disappearing traditions.
As the younger generations of Garos go out to the world, they are no longer able to gain knowledge or give their time inundated as they are by the internet, satellite television, media mobile. They are no longer interested in learning from their elders. The traditional beliefs and superstitions of the Garos are seen in the various incantations used in the rites and rituals, and with the dying out of the older generations, many of these incantations are lost. So there is a need for immediate action to preserve the wealth of our oral literature. The preservation of nuances of the ancient traditions for future generations, would be a greatly help for Garo society.

1.14 Methodology

In the present study, both Historical and descriptive survey methods have been used. Here the researcher has collected necessary data from the research journals, books, magazines, priests, village elders, and knowledgeable people from the selected sections for this study.

In the performance of the rites of passage, songs and chants invariably accompany rituals. Regional differences in the rites of passage as contained in the oral literature were enquired into; for this purpose, the scholar collected additional data from various sections of society. The researcher studied all the
available published verses and poems relating to the rites of passage. The pieces were translated to English.

The data collection included field trips and interactions with people who are well versed in oral lore relating to rites of passage and most of the firsthand data was collected from those who have learned it the traditional way and have performed the rites of passage ceremonies in their lifetime.

The study included three divisions of the Garos: the A-beng, Matchi and the Atong in some aspects only but mainly concentrated on Abengs sub-divisions due to accessibility and by their geographical distance, comparisons were made of the differences if any in the ceremonial practices with regards to the sub-division and geographical location.

**Information Collection:**

Ten to fifteen years ago, this study would have been much easier, because at that time, in all the three Districts of the Garo Hills, many interior villages were still practicing all the rituals, ceremonies and festivals with great respect for their gods. But today, Christians have become a majority, and the traditional rituals and ceremonies are not strictly followed as in the past. There is an evident change in the society which is moving from tradition to modernity with even the adherents to the indigenous religion adopting
Christian ways and the Christian lore mixing with the traditional lore.\(^{41}\) Much of what is traditional is being left behind for the more Christian and the more modern way of life. This is one of the reasons why collection of authentic data and documenting them has been an uphill battle. Now, even with the strong influence of Christianity, people have become aware of the importance of an identity and the need to salvage whatever remains.

In these rites of passage, one can observe the rites and rituals that connect human beings to the divine in their transition from one phase of their life into the next. Moreover, many beliefs and superstitions are also connected with these transitions.

The researcher could not personally witness these rites of passage due to the fact that these events do not occur at any time and furthermore, like mentioned earlier, due to the vast reach of Christianity, these rites are seldom conducted and if they are, they are few and far between and most of them have been diluted. The researcher has done the next best thing, i.e., taken first person accounts from people who have been through these rituals or conducted these rituals in their lifetimes. Recording in digital voice recorders and cameras, documenting written records through interviews, collecting traditional oral literature and getting their translations done has been the groundwork accomplished during the field trips. Digital cameras, digital
recorders and written interviews were also used. Considering the importance of chants uttered in the rituals as they have immense collections of superstitions, beliefs and practices; they have been incorporated into the study.

1.15 Structure of the Study

This research thesis is divided into five chapters; the first chapter includes the Introduction, the second chapter deals with Rites and Rituals at Birth and Puberty, the third chapter with Rites and Rituals during Marriage Negotiations and Ceremony, while the fourth chapter focuses upon Rites and Rituals during Funeral and Post-Funeral Ceremonies finally fifth chapter or the Conclusion that places the rites and rituals in perspective.
Endnotes:

1 Located in Sikkim, India and Tibet Autonomous Region, China. 
27.386448°  88.831190°E

2 Playfair, Major A. The Garos, 1998 (2nd Indian Reprint), pp. 8; Rongmuthu, Dewansingh S. Apasong Agana, pp. 188-193

3 A place in Goalpara district of Assam

4 Playfair, Major A. The Garos. P. 10

5 The scholar’s observation on various journeys by road and from many interactions with people from those areas.

6 Part of this village is in Bangladesh (25.15°N, 90.8°E) and part of it is in South Garo Hills, Meghalaya, India.

7 Rongmuthu, Dewansingh S. Apasong Agana, pp. 184

8 The capital of Bangladesh.

9 A place in Bangladesh. Location: 23° 10' 0 N, 90° 46' 60 E

10 24° 46' 0 N, 90° 28' 60 E

11 Rongmuthu, Dewansingh S. Apasong Agana, p. 184-187

12 As the Garos call themselves in Bangladesh

13 Athabaskan or Athabascan (also Dene, Athapascan, Athapaskan, or Athapaskes) is a large group of indigenous peoples of North America, located in two main Southern and Northern groups in western North America, and of their language family. The Athabaskan
family is the second largest family in North America in terms of number of languages and the number of speakers, following the Uto-Aztecan family which extends into Mexico.


14 Rongmuthu, Dewansingh S. Apasong Agana, p. 228

15 The places mentioned in the narration cannot be ascertained because the names of places change with the passage of time.

16 The ancestor from whom the Garos derive their name.

17 An inland lake

18 Atong comes after A·we because “·” – the raka – is also a part of the Garo alphabet denoting a glottal stop.

19 Playfair, Major A. The Garos, 1998 (2nd Indian Reprint) p. 59-62

20 The A·beng part of Halwa village is called Halwa A·beng, while the other part is called Halwa Atong, the Atong inhabited area.

21 This river is called Simsang in Garo Hills and Someswari once it flows into the plains of Bangladesh.

22 Sir George Abraham Grierson, (b. Jan. 7, 1851, Glenageary, County Dublin, Ire.—d. March 9, 1941, Camberley, Surrey, Eng.), Irish
linguistic language scholar and civil servant who conducted the Linguistic Survey of India (1898–1928), obtaining information on 364 languages and dialects.


25 Personal observations

26 Playfair, Major A. The Garos, 1998 (2nd Indian Reprint), pp. 60

27 Ibid., pp. 61

28 Ibid., pp. 64

29 Fuller, Sir Bampfylde. (1854-1937) former Lieutenant Governor of Eastern Bengal and Assam

30 Playfair, Major A. The Garos, 1998 (2nd Indian Reprint), pp. xxxi


33 Marak, Caroline R. Influence of English on Garo Poetry, New Delhi: Scholar Publishing House (P) Ltd. p.15-16

Chapter I

35 Ibid., p.311


37 Rongmuthu, Dewansingh Shangma. *The Epic Lore of the Garos.* Guwahati: Gauhati University Publication Department, February 1967, p.15

38 Ibid., p15


41 E.g., the Biblical story of the creation of man from Genesis Chapter 1.