Chapter III

Rites and Rituals during Marriage Negotiations and Ceremony
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3.01 Introduction

When the Garo crosses from adolescence to adulthood, the time comes for him/her to get married. Marriage is a complex ritual and does not end in just the marriage ceremony itself, but certain other elaborate steps have to be taken only after which the couple can live as a husband and wife. Even before the ceremony, there are a lot of issues that need to be considered. First of all, are the negotiations with the family of the groom for his hand in marriage. In bygone eras, this was usually the case when the prospective groom for Nokkrom or a man marrying the heiress.

Most of the marriages were and still are being arranged by the woman’s family and the man would have to go and live in his in-laws’ house after marriage. Sometimes, it would so happen that both the man and the woman would be forced into the marriage. The ceremonies are more or less the same in all the areas though in modern times, Christian customs have been adopted, while still retaining some of the traditional customs.
Dr. Milton S. Sangma, in his book *History and Culture of the Garos*¹, has listed a number of forms of marriages. They are:

1. *Dosia*
2. Marriage by capture
3. *Cha-senga*
4. *Cha-dila*
5. *Tunapa*
6. *Chame Jika*
7. *Seka*
8. *On-songa*
9. Mother-in-law Marriage
10. Child Marriage
11. Christian Marriage

Though these are given as the forms of marriage, *cha-senga*, *cha-dila*, *tunapa* and *chame jika* more proposals than forms of marriage.

### 3.02 Types of Sons-in-Law in Garo Society

There are two kinds of sons-in-law in Garo society. Since it is a matrilineal society, the line of inheritance goes in the female line and the child will also take the mother’s name. Generally, the youngest daughter inherits the house and the property of the parents, though in some cases, the daughter who will take care of the parents in their old age will inherit the property. The two
kinds of sons-in-law are *chawari*, the husband of the daughter who will not inherit the property, and *nokkrom*, the husband of the daughter who will inherit the property, the heiress, and look after the parents in their old age.

When a marriage of a woman is to be fixed, it is usually her male relatives, the maternal uncles and elder brothers and cousins, called the *chra*, who usually go to the prospective groom’s house to ask his parents. Even if the parents give their consent, sometimes the prospective grooms are unwilling. If such was the situation in the case of a *chawari*, then the *chra* will try again for about six or seven times that year to convince him. If he still remains adamant, then they will pass him over and go on to the next prospective groom and so on until they get a willing one. If it were the case of a *nokkrom*, the one who will stay in the in-laws’ house and take care of them, then they can reserve him for three to five years. Usually for a *nokkrom*, the prospective groom is the nephew of the woman’s father. This is usually done to keep the inheritance in the family, and also because since he is a close kin of the father-in-law, in their old age, he will not abandon them. This was a kind of safeguard against the debilitation of old age. Sometimes, the nephew is reserved$^2$ by the uncle for his daughter even if he is still a child. If the woman’s father does not have any nephews or if they have all got married, the next preference is the next closest kin, like second or third cousins and so on.
Even if there are no eligible men in those ranks, the next choice would be any eligible bachelor of the same clan as the woman’s father.

In the period of reservation, if the man happens to have an affair with another woman, or if the woman has an affair with another man and they get caught, then the guilty one has to pay a fine. This is called bar-a sakki kotip sakki or “the cloth and turban as evidence”. When a man has been reserved for a woman, the woman will keep a piece of his clothing with her. This is called bar-a sakki kotip sakki. Until the man has been released from reservation, the woman will keep the piece of cloth with her and in that period, if the woman should have an affair with another man and gets caught, then she would have to pay for that bar-a sakki kotip sakki. If on the other hand, the man has an affair with another woman during that period and gets caught, the other woman will have to pay the woman who has the bar-a sakki kotip sakki.

There is a fine. If the man cannot be convinced to marry the woman and his cloth is returned by the woman, then he has been released and after that, whatever indiscretions he may have, will not have any consequences, except for societal ones. This is why the woman keeps his cloth, as evidence that he has already been reserved for her in the event of any indiscretions. After the fine has been paid, it is not that the guilty party can walk away, but it depends on the clans of both. Even if the clan does not allow, if they both like
each other, then they could elope and the clan would not be able to do anything. So, after the fine has been paid, they can walk away. If they should listen to their clans, then the man can say that he will break off with his lover and go with the one who has already been betrothed to him. The guilty party has to pay a fine for the *kotip sakki bar-ra sakki*, which is called *a-kim* or the invisible bond that binds the two clans of the married couple. Before monetary system, the fines were paid in kind, such as gong, *mil-am*, etc. With the advent of the monetary system, fines were paid in currency.

3.03 Marriage Negotiations

Since the marriage of an heiress was a notable event, the prospective son-in-law had to be someone the girl’s parents could trust to take care of them in their old age. As such, there were elaborate customs that had to be followed before he could be taken in as the *nokkrom*. Before everything, the girl’s parents and other male relatives will go to the boy’s house to seek for his hand for the girl. This is called *chawari sing-a*. Usually, a *nokkrom* had to be one of the girl’s father’s nephews, either close or distant. The following is a song called *Demechikna Se Sandiani* or Searching for a Husband for the Daughter. It is sung by the father of the girl who goes to his *ma-nok* to ask for his nephew as his son-in-law. It goes:

*Ajinganga anga in
Ajing anga ai!*
Atcha nanggo, nanggo
Atcha nanggo, nanggo
Angade do·ma gita bilbajok
Do·ma gita bilbajok
Matma gita jokbajok, sokbajok
Grong dagongobamo
Amana gitingnasa bilbaa
Ja de jatengoba
Ja de jaranoba
Damilna ra·ninasa jokbaa
Angade a·ni bolmandalni
A·ni bolmandalkosa su·songnaa man·paja
Chini bolgipokkosa dilgatna changpaja
Gitingkodemo, angni gitingdrangko
Angni ra·nidrangko
Kambekode noknade gatjajok
Ja·pang janenade changjajok, changjajok
Angademo ja·pang karameongjokbamo
Angade kambe do·tekmeongjokbamo oe
Chameana donongjok
Dimbraana gatongjok da·ning,
Angni gitingdrangnamo
Angni ra·nidrangnamo
Angade dongatangming rikilming gujiajokona
Kawatangming kawiming a·bachengamo a·bachenga,
Gitingna ja·riarisamo
Ra·nina jajokarisa angade
Songgabatarongjokone
E·toriarongjokne,
Dipana ja-reangeming
Snana jajokangeming.

Translation:
Ajinganga anga in
Ajinganga ai!
Atcha nanggo, nanggo
Atcha nanggo, nanggo
I have come flying like the do-ma
Flying like the do-ma
I have reached, escaped like the buffalo
With huge horns
Came flying for my mother, the banyan tree

Here, the father of the girl likens himself to the do-ma, the migratory duck (line 5). He says that just like the migratory bird returns to the place where it was hatched, every year, he has returned to the place of his birth. The words do-ma and matma or buffalo are used as terms of endearment for boys. Here, the man compares his mother to the banyan tree, a tree that gives shelter and food for its denizens. The line implies that he has returned to his roots.

When the moon is bright
When it is winter
I have escaped for the damil, the ra-ni
I am of the earth, of the jathropa tree
I have not been able to plant the earth’s jathropa
I cannot bring the water’s white wood
The banyan tree, my banyan trees
My beloved ma·nok
The top has not been taken to the house

This custom of looking for a prospective groom for the heiress usually takes place during October and November, before a·galmaka (line 10). The damil and the ra·ni signify his ma·nok, or the relatives of his matrilineal lineage. Since he is the son, he will be settled anywhere, and from there, he has returned to the place of his birth to look for a groom for his daughter (line 13). Line 14 implies that he doesn’t have a nokkrom yet. White wood means the gambari tree. The line means that he has not found a good man for her. Meaning his return to his roots (line 16). If he had a son-in-law, his household would prosper just like the tree tops grew higher (line 19).

I can no longer strengthen the trunk
My trunk is diseased
I am not going any higher
I have come because there is someone eligible
I have come because you have so many,
My banyan trees
My beloveds
I have come for an agreement
To start with my beloveds
I have come from far for my banyan tree
Returned to my beloveds
I have crossed different lands
I have returned
I have come home
Where I was stung by the ant

He is unable to lead the household anymore (Line 20). Like the vegetables die out because they have acquired a disease (line 21). Meaning the eligible bachelors (line 24). Meaning that he had returned to the place where he grew up, to his mother’s house (line 34).

The next is his sister’s, i.e., the prospective groom’s mother, reply. It is called Depanteko Chawarina On·sona Mangijani or the Inability to Give the Son’s Hand. It is called thus so that the man might not have any expectations of his nephew, his son-in-law. It goes like this:

_Do·mani Dira dobao magna_  
_Matmani a·ging gabao nengramo_  
_Achria rongnangja_  
_Nang·ni ama waridrango_  
_Gripchia dknangja_  
_Nang·ni giting a·jadrango_  
_Pan ja·gi dilgata_  
_Bako dilgatnok do·mana?_  
_Nokgil sawe su·songna_  
_Bako su·songnokmo matmana?
Gualirinokai do·ma
Walpilarinokai matma,
Chong jakrimiloba
‘Bao chong cham·gnok?’ ine
Do·made gualgnok, do·made,
Bokja kramchioba,
‘Bao bokja enggnok?’ ine
Matmade walpilgnok, matmade.

Translation:
Your fatiguing climb is for naught
The buffalo’s climb is tiring
Through difficult terrain
To your mother, the deep pool
The impenetrable forest
To the land of your banyan tree
Training the betel leaf vine
Which can we train for you?
Planting the sawe⁵ behind the house
Which one can we plant?

The Garos usually used to stay in hilly areas, so here, it signifies that he
had climbed uphill (line 1). Comparing his mother to a deep pool. Meaning
that he has returned where he is surrounded by his own kith and kin, it is as if
he had waded into a deep pool (line 4). He is surrounded by his relatives (line
5) His mother’s village (line 6). To take to his home, like training a vine or
creeper to climb a tree (line 7). Who can we give you? (line 8). Who can we
give? (line 10)

We will forget, do·ma
You will have to return, matma,
Even if the harpoon is inconvenient to use
Saying, ‘Which harpoon will be worn out?’
You will forget, do·ma,
With a bundle of clothes,
Saying, ‘Which bundle will be opened?’
You will have to return, buffalo.

He’ll have to return empty handed (lines 11 and 12). But if you want we will have to send someone, even if he is of no use for you (line 15).

Then, at last, the sister will give her son to her brother as a son-in-law.
The next song is called Depanteko Chawarina Watatani or Sending Off the
Son to his In-laws. It goes like this:

Songchigita drina
Do·ga gita balbangna nipile do·mana
Mamatangni bimanggita ong·jaoba
Pan ja·gi dilgate donrikonga
Nokgil sawe su·songe rorikonga,
Songchi gita dria
Do·ga gita balbanga,
Mamatang gita ha·aijawa
O·gito gita ma·manjawa,
Mamatang gitade sokjawa
O·gito gitade man·jawa.

Translation:
Like pillars in a row
Hinged like a door, for doma
Even if his form is not like his uncle’s
We are training the betel leaf
Planting the sawe behind the house
In rows like pillars
Hinged like a door,
He won’t be as wise as his uncle
He won’t be as wise as his father-in-law,
He will not reach his uncle’s status
He will not be able like his father-in-law.

Even if he is not upto your expectations, we are giving him to you (line 4). In the last four lines, the boy’s mother is asking her brother, the girl’s father not to get his expectations up.

The previous portion was in verse form. The following is a part of the same thing in prose form.

The girl’s father will ask:
Angade kal·e cha·na rimi cha·na amjaongjok. Angnade gri angjongko on·na nangchongmota. Angni jomani salo, saani salo, sa nirokgen, sa amugen, sa samra sampilgen?
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Translation:

I am growing old and unable to till the land nor look after myself. My nephew has to be given to me. Or else who will look after me or treat me when I fall sick or grow weak?

The father or the mother of the boy will reply:

*Kam gong:jaoba, a:sel sapjaoba na:songtangtang mamasa gisie nerie cha:naode rimangbo.*

Translation:

Even if he is lazy and does not know any work, it’s up to you. If you want to quarrel and stay then take him.

After all the negotiations are complete, only then can the marriage be solemnised. Usually Chawari Singa or marriage negotiations take place at night and goes on till cock crows.

**3.04 Do:sia**

*Do:sia* is the official marriage ceremony of the Garos. Of this Playfair has to say this:
“There is very little of a religious nature in Garo marriages. No sacrifices are offered up, nor are any of the usual emblems of religion erected as in ceremonies connected with births and death. The nearest approach to anything of a religious nature is the consulting of omens by the village priest, to ascertain whether the wedded couple will be happy and prosperous or the reverse.”

The ceremony itself is not too complicated. Three chickens are required for the ceremony. A hen for the man and a cock for the woman and a red rooster called a do-rasong or rooster of destiny. The ceremony is performed by the kamal.

The kamal first takes the cock meant for the woman and slaps her on the back with it and intones the following:

*Dera dedera*  
*Songde amira,*  
*Mini chawariagita*  
*Mini jakgitokagita,*  
*Badagonggita,*  
*Chagongbone*  
*Bibakbone*  
*Amikanaming*  
*Askinaming*  
*Do·siongane*  
*Do·dokongane*  
*Iahai!*
Translation:
Like my own child
From my mother’s land,
Just like the hand was asked for before
Just like the hand was tied before,
Like the badagong,
Stand tall
Be strong
For so and so,
For so and so
This rooster is being killed
This rooster is being sacrificed
Here it is!

Line 1 and line 2, the priest mentions just like his child from his mother’s land. This is because usually, dosia was performed when the son-in-law was supposed to be the nokkrom and the custom for the nokkrom is that the nokkrom had to be the nephew, the girl’s father’s sister’s son. So, the nephew would indeed be like his own son and that, too, from his mother’s land, i.e., of the same matrilineal lineage as himself. This is the reason that in most villages, there have been only two clans in a household for generations, the wives of one matrilineal lineage and the men also of one matrilineal lineage. Line 3 and 4 refer to the time when the girl’s parents went to the boy’s parents to ask for his hand in marriage with their daughter. Badagong is a vine, the married life of the to be married is being compared to the vine that
entwines itself to trees and plants that it is nigh impossible to separate and just as the vine is, let them in their married life be inseparable. The “so and so”-s in line 9 and 10 will be substituted with the names of the persons getting married.

After saying these words, the kamal will rip off the head of the cock with his bare hands and throw it to the middle of the house. After the cock has stopped its flapping about, the kamal will take the hen meant for the man and slap him on the back with it and intone the following:

Amikanaming,
Askinaming
Dira dedera gita,
Songde amira gita,
Mini tikkniagita,
Mini jakgitokagita,
Badagonggita
Ka-pakongane
Iahai!

Translation:
For so and so,
For so and so,
Like my own child,
From my mother’s land,
Just like it was fixed before,
Just like the hand was tied before,
Like the badagong
The yearning
Here it is!

Then the kamal will rip off the head of the hen and let it go. After the hen has stopped flapping, what happens and where it lands is observed. Does the cock killed for the woman face the man? And in the same way, does the hen killed for the man face the woman? These things are also taken into account. If the hen killed for the man faces the woman, then it is believed that the man likes the woman. In the same way, if the cock killed for the woman faces the man then it is believed that the woman, too, likes the man. After this has been observed, the entrails will be checked for divination. The intestines will be picked up and divined. It is believed that if the intestines are full, then the couple will have good fortune and if the intestines were empty it would be the other way around. After the entrails have been looked at, the dorasong will be killed. While anyone who knows how to perform the ceremony can be the kamal, only experts can kill the dorasong. This is because the dorasong has to be cut in such a way that blood does not spray all over. The blood has to be allowed to spill only on a single piece of wasi. The kamal, or whoever it is that will cut the dorasong, will hold the atte on the ground with one foot on top of the wasi flooring and cut off its head. Then he will allow the blood to flow and collect in a single piece of wasi. It should be such that the blood
does not spray here and there. If the blood should flow and collect in a single piece of *wa-si* then it is believed that the married life of the couple will be peaceful. If the blood should spray all over the place, then it is believed that they will have a tumultuous married life. After the ceremony, the chicken will be cooked, the *do-rasong* separately. The man should not eat the chicken whose entrails were used for divination. It is something that should not be done. The woman’s side will offer it to the man anyway, but he should not eat it. Instead, he can eat the *do-rasong*.

After the divination, the intestines used in the divination for the man will be burned in the fire and it is believed that if the intestine bursts then the man is sharp witted. If it just burns, then the father-in-law is smarter.

That evening, since both the man and the woman would be unwilling, the man would try to run away. Even if they like each other, the groom will run away. This running away is a sort of precaution against future quarrels. Even if the groom likes the bride, he must run away at least once or twice, because if he does not run away, but stays on the day of the marriage, should there be any quarrel between the husband and wife in future, the husband would be able to say anything as the wife can then say that she did not really like him in the first place, but he had come subserviently. So, it is a must that the groom should run away once or twice. Every time the groom runs away, he
will be brought back by the male relatives of the bride. Since the ceremony has already been performed, it will not be repeated again. Instead, they will eat and drink rice beer. When the groom runs away, the bride is also supposed to run after him with a *kerang* on her back. Then, the groom will bring her back. Sometimes he escorts her back to her house.

**Case Study:** According to the source, Bhimsing M. Sangma of Sadolpara village in West Garo Hills, he, too, ran away from his wife. He ran away, his wife followed. He escorted her back to her house, drank some rice beer, ate food cooked by his wife and then came away again. He says that even though the groom may not like the bride, he should at least keep her dignity and escort her back to her house as a gentleman would do. The dislike should be kept within himself.

On the night of the ceremony, there is something called *tudila*, which is done by the male relatives of the bride to safeguard against the groom running away. What will happen is that the bride and the groom will have to lie together side by side and the male relatives of the bride will surround them in such that the groom cannot run away. The doors will be locked and the heavy wooden mortars used for pounding rice will be pushed against them. They will hang bells on the door such that if he tries to run away, the bells will alert them. The new groom would have to be very clever to run away undetected, it
was a kind of testing of wits. In days past, the men used to keep long hair, sometimes the groom would tie the hair of two or three persons together such that even if he was detected, he could run away easily while they tried to untangle their hair. These become anecdotal incidents that can be related later in some family gatherings among the male members.

After the groom runs away, the bride will follow him with a *kerang* on her back. The groom will welcome her into his parents’ house, eat together because since she is new at the place, she might not be comfortable. This is done whether he goes back to stay with her or not. This is done so that she can tell others that even though he did not come, he treated her well.

In some areas, on the other hand, the groom will take his portions of food and take it up to the tree top. When the groom is eating, the bride will try to make the food fall by hitting it with a stick and when it falls she would eat it. Then the groom would come down and because he is starving has the food with her. If this happens then it meant that they were destined for each other.

### 3.05 Marriage by Capture

When a girl has attained a marriageable age, if she wants to marry a particular boy, she tells her parents or any of her relatives of her intentions. As soon as her male relatives come to know of her desires, they would watch the
movements of the boy and once the opportunity arose would abduct him and bring him to the house of the girl and confine him alone with the girl for more than one night. In the course of his capture, if he should struggle and make quite a ruckus, then it was considered a good sign as he would make a good husband. Robbins Burling, in his book *Rengsanggri*, describes one such event of bridegroom capture that he witnessed during his stay in Rengsanggri village. He recounts:

"I was sitting in Rengsanggri one afternoon when three shy-looking youths from another village wandered in and inquired where they might find Unon. Everybody chuckled, and somebody replied that he might be out in the fields, and suggested that the boys go there and look for him. The boys walked out in the direction of the fields, until they came over the crest of a hill from which Unon could be seen cultivating in the company of half a dozen other people. Here the boys split up, so as to close in on him from all sides. Unon did not realize his peril until one boy was almost next to him. He started to flee but was caught, and after a brief struggle he recognized the uneven odds, surrendered, and let himself be led calmly to Waramgri, where a girl was waiting, hoping to become his bride."

A single foray did not usually lead to a marriage because the boy would invariably run away. He is then pursued by the male relatives of the girl and brought back. If he runs away a third time, then the girl’s relatives will let him go on the account that he really doesn’t like the girl. Even if he likes the girl, it was a mandatory custom for him to run away at least once. The capture of the
bridegroom can take place anywhere including the marketplace and other public areas, not only in secluded spots and the abduction will not be interfered with by anyone from the boy’s village.

3.06 Cha:senga – or proposal through service in the boy’s family

It is said that where ever a woman goes she carries a mortar and pestle with her. This is to say that where ever she goes, she helps out with the household chores. Men do not do this, but a woman had to do it. If she would not do it then this happened. If she went to her in-laws’ house, and she did not do an ounce of work, it would mean that she did not like her husband. That is why, even if she did not want to, she had to do it. In the case of the marriage, after the bride followed her groom to his parents’ house, she would do the household chores like cooking, cleaning, washing utensils, etc. This showed to her in-laws’ that she was hardworking and would keep their son happy. This is called as cha:senga. This for usually took place when the groom in question was the son of the girl’s maternal uncle. When they are alone, then they will talk and during the course of their talk, they find that they like each other, then the bride will stay on for a month at her in-laws’ house. Even if they find that they do not like each other, she will stay for at least a week and help out with the chores. If she has stayed on for a month, then the husband will return with her back to her house, because he has seen that she will make a good wife, and settle down in his in-laws’ house. It is not that the man follows the woman, but
he goes with her. If he’s not exactly ready for married life, or if he wants to take some time, say about a year, he can tell the woman that he cannot come that year and if she waits, then he will come next year, but definitely not that year. It could be that he has some unfinished work or has something that he wants to do for his parents and if his plans have not been fulfilled yet, then he can make the woman wait. If he tells the woman that he will come the next year and cannot come this year, then the woman will wait for him. That is if she likes him. Though the man himself has said that he will come, he won’t just come on his own. He has to be dragged away from his parents’ house. The woman or her male relatives will have to come and get him. Even if he likes the woman very much, he won’t go by himself. This time, there won’t be any ceremonies. Just drinking rice beer and eating.

The rice beer is fermented in a pot called dikka for about a week or more. It is taken out of the dikka by means of a gourd, called the pong. The first liquor that is taken from the pot is called bitchi, after which it is diluted and after a time it is taken out to drink. This diluting and drinking can go on as long as it is good to drink. If the brew is strong, then one pot can be used for a night. Now, when the man has gone to the in-laws’, and if rice beer was drunk at the time of bringing him there, then he will be ordered to take the dikka, throw away the residue and wash it. If the man happens to feel like relieving himself, then the father-in-law will sneak off to check if the faeces is dry or
wet. If the faeces is dry, then it is believed that his management of the household would be good, but if he happens to have loose motions, then he would amount to nothing. These things were also taken into account in the old days.

3.07 Cha·dila – or offering of food

According to Dr. Milton S. Sangma, this kind of proposal is mostly practised among the Matchis. In this form of proposal, the girl cooks some rice and sends it to the man of her choice, from among the boys at the nokpante or bachelor’s dormitory, through her sister or any of her female relatives. She herself will follow at a safe distance so as to be out of the danger of being embarrassed should he refuse. Should he start eating, the girl will come out of hiding and eat with him, the news of which will be conveyed by her to her parents. They would then initiate the negotiations with the boy’s parents and the marriage would be arranged.

3.08 Tunapa – secretly sleeping with one’s beloved

In this form of proposal, the boy or the girl may be a suitor. The suitor would approach the sleeping party as he/she lies sleeping and lie with him/her when everyone else in the house will be asleep. If the suitor is accepted, then they sleep together a while and go to the girl’s house before the break of dawn. After the negotiations, marriage is arranged.
3.09 Chame Jika - Wooing/courting the Lover with songs

During certain festivals, such as Wangala, Mangona, etc., pairs of boys and girls would exchange rice beer, betel nuts and tobacco and chant rhythmic songs with words of wooing until in the end they decide to either marry or part. This process sometimes used to go on for more than one night. This process is called Chame Jika.

3.10 Seka or Elopment

Seka or Elopement takes place usually when they are not allowed to marry, for one reason or another. The boy and the girl will run away together and go from place to place. After that they return and stay in the girl’s house and they live as husband and wife.

3.11 On'songa – or providing replacement

When a husband dies, his younger brother or nephew is made to marry the widow, and in the absence of these two kin, his nearest relatives are made to marry her. This arrangement is called On'songa. It is to provide a continuation of relations between the two clans. Since the widow was almost always too old for the younger man, he was compensated for with the offer of the daughter along with the mother in marriage. This custom was called
On-chapa. If it was the wife who died, then it was the younger sister, the niece or the nearest relatives of the deceased who would have to take her place.

Case Study: In our travels to conduct research, we came across 87 year old Singjan Ch. Momin of Nabokgre village in East Garo Hills. Why his case is worth noting is because he has had three wives from the same clan, but of different generations. When his first wife died, a substitute was given to him by his wife’s clan. The new wife happened to be his first wife’s niece, i.e., his wife’s sister/female cousin’s daughter. He had children from the second wife and when she died, he was again provided with another wife, who also happened to be the second wife’s niece. So, we see that he had three wives of the same clan but three different generations. The third wife is younger than the second wife’s daughter. To the second wife’s daughter she’s both stepmother and younger cousin and for the second wife’s grandchildren, she’s both step-grandmother and aunt. This is sometimes the case and in this way, kinships in Garo villages can be very complicated and could be the topic for another research.

3.12 Mother-in-law Marriage

This happens usually in the case of a nokkrom. When the father-in-law dies, his widow lives on with her daughter as long as she lives. After this time she will also be referred to as the jik, the Garo term for wife. This is mainly
because she is the true owner of the property and the heiress can only inherit when she dies. According to the close observations by Burling, it is this terminology that has given the misconception in anthropological circles that they actually married their widowed mothers-in-law. Even the Garos also maintain that this is their custom, but Burling, upon closer study, found out that these widows rarely, if ever, had sexual relations with their sons-in-law. It was only an arrangement so that her heiress would take care of her as long as she lives. The son-in-law slept exclusively with the daughter, his original wife.

3.13 Child Marriage

There was no law that regulated the age for marriage, though there were instances of girls and boys marrying at the age of 11 or 12. Usually they married only after puberty. Dr. Milton Sangma cites that this was mostly prevalent in the on-chapa form of marriage, though there has been instances of child marriage outside of the on-chapa form of marriage.

3.14 Christian Marriage

Christian marriages were conducted in accordance with the provisions of the Christian Marriage Act, 1872 (Act No. XV of 1872) after the Garo Hills District (Christian Marriage) Act was passed in 1954. Though Christian marriages are the vogue these days, many of the traditions are still being used.
Even if the ceremony of the marriage has changed, many of the old traditions are still being followed. When it is seen that a boy and a girl are in a relationship, if the parents and the elder male relatives of a girl like the boy, then it generally happens that they will first ask the girl if she really likes the boy and wants to marry him. If she replies on the affirmative, then the boy will be called to the girl’s house on some pretext or the other, like inviting him for dinner, etc. When he has thus come to the girl’s house, he is taken unawares and the maternal uncles and other male relatives of the girl will ask the boy of his intentions, whether he intends to marry her or if it is just something he is just in it for passing his time. This is called *sing-sruka*. After this is over and the boy has also returned a positive answer, the girl’s relatives will then go to the boy’s house and inform them and fix a date in which they can come for the *chawari sing-a*. On the fixed day, the girl and her relatives will come to the house of the boy bearing food and gifts. The *chawari sing-a* itself is just a formality to get the two families acquainted with each other and to fix the date of the marriage.

A Garo marriage is a big affair nowadays. From the girl’s side there will be preparations because the marriage has to be borne by the girl’s family. The expenses will not be borne by the family alone, but help will be extended from all the relatives and friends either monetary help or in kind. Some will give pigs, chickens, vegetables, etc. while others may give rice. The work will
start from as far as a month before the wedding. This was because previously, there were no halls that could be hired out and the reception had to take place at the girl’s home and since there were also no caterers, the relatives and the friends would pitch in to help out with the work.

On the day of the ceremony, the girl’s family will send some vehicles to pick up the boy and his family and relatives. This is called chawari rima, or going to bring the son-in-law. Some of the girl’s relatives will go along with the vehicles to pick them up. The boy’s family will receive these relatives, give tea and snacks and after a prayer will board the vehicles.

The ceremony either takes place in church or in the girl’s house with the priest officiating, wherever it is more convenient for both parties. The wedding cake is usually cut where the reception will take place. After the ceremony, there will be a feast where the boy’s family and relatives will be served food first. After everyone from the boy’s side has partaken of the feast, after staying a while, the boy’s family and relatives will depart, leaving the boy with a prayer and some advice.

After the marriage, on the evening of the same day, the boy’s younger brothers and cousins will bring his luggage and he is obligated to give them
any gift that they ask of. This is usually monetary or material. This practice is called *dosimpak cha·a*.

The obligations of the newly married do not end at the ceremony, but it just starts there. They are indebted to all the help that they got during the marriage from their friends and family. Even the gifts that they got have also to be repaid. These debt repayments do not have to be done immediately, but it has to be repaid only when a marriage occurs in the family of the person to whom the newlyweds are indebted to.

### 3.15 Do·ki Rama

As we have seen earlier, that after marriage it was mandatory for the man to run away from his wife’s house at least twice. When the man has come to his wife’s house of his own accord, it is called as *do·ki rama* or “putting out the chicken excreta to dry”. The next day after the man has come to his wife’s house, he will not do a single piece of work, the man will remain idle, this is called *do·ki rama*. Both the husband and wife will not do any work but will spend it with each other, while the in-laws will be busy in their own daily activities. The wife will take him on a tour in and around the village. She will show him the family’s jhum fields, show him places of interest, places which are sacred, places which are considered to be bad and other such things. She
will show him where the village gets the water, etc. In this way, the family starts.

### 3.16 Gitcheng Godapa, Greng Gitaka

When the man has started to live in the in-laws’ house, then he has to do the honours of mixing the brew in the *dikka* and pouring it out. For example, if some relatives of the wife visits, then the newlywed would have to do it. Even if it takes the whole night, he would be relegated the task of mixing and pouring out the brew to any visitor that his father-in-law chose to bring. Usually, in the old days, when relatives visited from far, the revelry would go on for several days, imagine the predicament of the newlywed husband, who would like to sleep in the arms of his new wife, but is instead duty bound to his task of mixing and pouring out the brew. He would have to do it even if it takes the whole night, or even if he’s tired, because, as the elders in the society amusedly say, it is for such tasks that a man brings home a son-in-law, to help his father-in-law. This is called *gitcheng godapa*¹⁹, *greng gitaka*²⁰. When a man leaves for his in-laws’, his relatives advise him to help out his in-laws’ and tell him to always try to do what his in-laws like. So, even if the new husband is unwilling, feeling sleepy, tired, etc., even before it has hardly been two days since he has come, somebody will be asked to visit and he has to do his duty of mixing and pouring out the brew. This is why he has been brought to his in-laws’, to help out. This is the custom of the Garo. If a man should
refuse to do so, then it is said that he is not sociable with his in-laws, that he
does not adhere to the custom of *greng gitaka gitcheng godapa*\(^2\).

The origin of *greng gitaka gitcheng godapa* is this – the Garo society in
villages are very close knit and every household in the village will be present
for funerals, helping out the bereaved family, this is called *gro nanga* or to be
indebted. On those occasions, because a neighbour or a relative or anyone has
helped out the family in either cash or kind, the Garos have a custom where
they are indebted to the family of that person and they try to repay that debt
when any such occasion occurs in the family of the person who has helped.
This custom is still prevalent even among the Garos living in the towns
regardless of their literacy or social status. In the villages, whenever a person
dies, cattle are slaughtered for a feast for those who have come for the funeral
from near and far. It is an obligation of the family of the deceased. The task of
cutting the meat falls on the men folk, this is the origin of why the term *greng
gitaka* is synonymous to helping out.

When a new son-in-law comes, since he is from another village, he
would not be accustomed to the lands that belong to the village. So, when the
time comes for claiming the land for jhumming, it is usually done by the
father-in-law. According to the customary laws, the *A·king Nokma* or the
village clan chief is the caretaker of the lands that belong to the village. There
are no forms of ownership of land as such but can only be claimed for agricultural purposes or for homesteads. If the father-in-law claims a plot of land for jhumming this year, then the next year, he will claim a bigger plot to accommodate for the new son-in-law and as long as he stays with the in-laws, the plots for jhumming will be claimed by his father-in-law. Only when he starts to stay separately will he have to claim it for himself. If he happens to be the son-in-law of the A-king Nokma, then his father-in-law will do it for him as long as he (the father-in-law) is living. If he is the nokkrom then, too, the father-in-law will do it for him though he (the son-in-law) will have to do the work of cultivating and the father-in-law may stay at home and give the orders. The size of a plot of jhum cultivated land depends on the number of people in the family and accordingly, they cultivate.

3.17 Nokde

A nokkrom will always stay in his wife’s ancestral home. The ordinary chawari and his family, however, can stay with his in-laws for a maximum of two years after which it is not according to the customs to stay on. For example, a man goes to his in-laws house this year and this year he has worked in the jhum fields along with his wife. They may have separate jhum fields, too, but they will be staying with the wife’s family. The next year, this son-in-law has to build a house for himself and stay separately. This is the custom, and if he’s unable to do so, he and his family can stay on for a
maximum of two years after which it is against the society’s norms and is not
good for the man’s dignity because it shows his uselessness in supporting his
own family. So, the men, generally try to come out of the in-laws house in one
year to show that they are not useless and can support their own families on
their own. This custom is called nokde rika or building a separate house. There
are also certain rules associated with this custom.

A house is usually built of wood and bamboo with thatch roofing and is
changed every few years. When a house is built, mature trees are usually used
for the pillars and the beams. In the case of nokde rika, however, mature trees
cannot be used, only young trees. Thus, the first house after taking a wife is
built with young trees. It is called asi namja or taboo.

In the village, when a house is being built, the other members of the
village help out and so, the house owner will have to bear the cost of food and
drink, especially when the thatch roofing is being put up. When a nokde is
being built the first time, all the expenses will be borne by the father-in-law,
whether it be rice or cattle, everything including any amount of rice beer.
Since all the expenses are to be borne by the father-in-law, mature trees are
not used for the pillars and beams and only young trees. Only when the house
has to be rebuilt will the expense be borne by the son-in-law and only then can
mature trees be used to build the house. If a man lives in the house that his
father-in-law built all his life and does not try to rebuild his house and stays in it even if it is dilapidated, then again it shows that he is not able to support his family.

Although there are traditional ways of saying during marriage negotiations, there is not much of religious colour in the wedding ceremonies. However, it is found that all forms of Garo marriages are finally solemnised by Do:sia marriage ceremony which is the only traditional and official form of marriage.
Endnotes

1 Sangma, Dr. Milton S. History and Culture of the Garos, New Delhi: 1981, p.197-202

2 The term “reserved” is used because though it may seem like a betrothal it is not exactly a betrothal because the man has not promised to marry the woman.

3 The ancestral home of the father of the girl, i.e., his mother’s home.

4 Expressions, usually meaningless

5 The sago palm

6 Father’s sister’s son

7 Playfair, Major A. The Garos, p. 101

8 Wa-si is the split bamboo belts used for making the walls of the traditional houses. This wa-si are woven together to make sturdy walls and partitions. They are also used for flooring.

9 Atte or atte-mande is a curved, multipurpose chopper with a bamboo handle used by the Garos. It can be used as a machete, a farming implement, a kitchen knife, etc.

10 A wicker basket made of bamboo used to carry things. It is carried on the back with a belt made of bark slung across the forehead.


12 Ibid. p. 83
In the old days, there were no water closets and people generally used to do it in the nearby forest.

Sangma, Dr. Milton S. *History and Culture of the Garos*, p. 200

The word suitor is used for both the male and the female for want of a better word

Burling, Robbins. *Rengsanggri, Tura*: p142


*Gitcheng godapa* – it is the act of mixing the brew in the *dikka* with water. The unmixed brew is very strong as it has a high alcohol content. It is usually first extracted out of the *dikka* with a gourd, called a *pong*. After it has been extracted, water is poured into the *dikka* to make more brew, a dilution of the first extract and then extracted after a while and so on. This act is called *gitcheng godapa*. The following extracts can be drunk after a few minutes with each extract containing less alcohol than the previous content. If the original brew is very strong, then extracts from the same *dikka* can be drunk for a number of hours.

*Greng gitaka* – it is the act of chopping the bones while cutting meat.
The order of the words are interchangeable

Beef is usually the choice meat