Mutual Privileges to Atomistic Rights and Values

It has been observed earlier that each of the akhings that comprises Garo settlements in the hills, formally belongs to a particular mahari, and its constituent households are given an usufructuary privilege in respect of akhing resources. This egalitarian dispersal of privileges is embedded in the Garo scheme of social balance as administered by the central institution of a'kim with its satellites.

But the degree of egality is not absolute. It is to a certain extent mutually exclusive. Unused land of the akhing is of the nature of free goods. These having been distributed under the auspices of nokma, and a plot cleared and jhumed by a particular household, the household generally lays its hands on the same plot every time the area is taken up for cultivation.

As regards the exploits of other resources, all the households including that of the nokma enjoy a common privilege similar to that of people's fishing in the open sea for individual consumption. But whenever a man plants a tree, it becomes his own (a'lot) or of his household; should a tree that has grown of itself be needed for firewood and other domestic uses, any household might chop it down without being guilty of trespass.

Land improvements incidental to its clearance and cultivation or a flow of its enhanced productivity incidental to plantation prefers an appeal to the Garo's sense of continuing possession. The accretion of
value that a household feels to have obtained by investing its own labour on land thus creates a realm of preferential or mutually exclusive privilege of using a particular plot or a plant or tree on the land.

No over-right (like that of a landlord in relation to his tenant) in respect of the use of land and other natural resources seems to have existed between the nokma and his akhing members, because a nokma household is treated like any other ordinary household of the akhing for the above purpose. Moreover, no provision for imposing levies on the land-produces seems to have existed anywhere in the hills as a custom. A nokma arranges only for work-levies as and when necessary for common benefit (vide ante P. 74-76).

But the preferential use-privilege works itself out within the limiting condition that no household would be allowed to sell or transfer away any part of akhing land beyond the akhing mahari's ownership and control. A nokma with the help of mahari elders has to preserve and guard the latter feature as a system.

A household, however, gets an access to an alien akhing (one not belonging to mahari of any of its couples) on payment of an a'wil fee (mostly in kind in the early days) which indicates the existence of an over right of the akhing nokma in relation to that household seeking settlement in his akhing. But once allowed and established, the domiciled household stands at par with others as an accredited member of the akhing.

For the first time among the Garos, a stratum of over-right has been brought into existence in the hills by the British rule, and the same.
continued in various ramifications through the national administrations. On successive occasions they have waved wedges into the traditional mahari ownership and individual use-rights, and thus promoted a few forces of fission and fusion in addition to the internal ones for a change.

By imposing house tax, the British authority usurped the natural rights of the Garos to holding settlement in their own areas. Land revenue was not, however, imposed on them, but the alien authority excluded about 139 square miles of land in 18 patches out of different akhings for creating the state forest reserves between the years 1883 and 1888 and declared the other forest areas as unclassed state forests. By Garo Hills Regulation of 1882, power was also taken over by that authority to regulate the use of forest resources on competitive bids, licence and payment of fees and royalty. Mahols (periodically saleable rights of exploitation of natural resources) in respect of elephants, lac, agar, bamboo and others were created and periodically sold. Garos' right to extract forest resources was abridged and acceded to 'strictly for domestic uses and not for sale, trade, mortgage or gift' (Jacobs 1940: 5; Kar 1970: 70).

On the other hand, the British authority defined for the first time in the history of Garo land tenure the boundaries of all akhings and prepared their records with respective sketch maps and 'genealogical trees' of the nokma households, allowed payment of a'wil fees to the nokmas and noted the variety of rights that had emerged in respect of land tenure. Amathe and aginap areas were recorded in the akhing map as and when created. Except in few cases these were not given the status of an akhing; the authority only recognised the transaction between the
concerned parties (Amathes of Akhings, iv/50(I); iv/50(3); iv/50(7) and iv/50(17) approved by the D.C. on 4-11-1927, 21-12-1927 and 12-3-1927 respectively). Many areas of the no man's land being held by a group of households were recognised as akhing, and the head of the pioneer household of the area was made nokma (Songdong A'chee mana akhing: I/6(2) Jetragri akhing approved by the D.C. on 22-4-1925). Again as a pocket of alien rights in an akhing came up mostly in the later part of British rule. Previous to the preparation of akhing maps, akhing boundaries were uncertain and the transfer of border-lands for money was also rare. These used to be occupied either by force or on gift. Now that the akhing areas are demarcated and enforced by a higher authority, transfer of small areas on the akhing border can take the form of regular transaction.

Distribution, division, sale, mortgage and gift of the small areas of akhings as well as amalgamation of areas into akhings, all are kept noted in the relevant Akhing records with the result that the concerned groups and persons are not to suffer any longer from uncertainties of the tenure-rights or of spatial jurisdictions.

The British Authority also had carried out certain measures that made them the ultimate owners in respect of akhing lands. On certain pretexts a few akhings were found to have been converted into 'Khra' (area without owner, subject to government disposal) and a few forcibly divided and distributed among beneficiaries of their choice. In 1925, Dodi Marak purchased a part of Chigitchakgri (Mouza I, Laskar elaika G) from its nokma, Khadia Sangma and applied to the D.C. Caro Hills, for recognition of the area as a separate akhing. The D.C. approved the same (vide order No. 15/T dated 16-10-1925) directing Dodi to construct his houses within that area. On his failure to do so within 10 years, the D.C. derecognised his akhing (vide his order No. Rev. 559 dt. 28-8-1935).
In another case, one Apitok Sangma was murdered in Chokpot area, and the D.C. passed a death sentence to three persons of that akhing, excluded a part of it to give away to the widow of murdered recognising it as akhing (Bibraeri) Jangnal Agitak of Darengri as a son-in-law went there to head the akhing as a nokma on behalf of her widow mother-in-law of Rangsa mahari. No specific rules or criteria were followed by the British administration in recognising a gifted area, an amathe or aginap as an akhing or in derecognising one already approved by it as akhing at an earlier date.

At the close of British rule, there were about 1322 akhings over 60 laskar elakas of 4 hill mouzas of the district. In a significant number of them, several nokmas with respective genealogical trees of their households as inheritance lines were recorded as joint nokmas of each akhing. As illustrations, we find 86 akhings with two nokmas, 21 with three nokmas and 2 akhings with four nokmas (i.e. nokma households) in Mouza-I, whereas in Mouza II, each of the 46 akhings has two nokmas, and 15 akhings have three nokmas each. Similar illustrations abound also in the other two hill mouzas.

Ideally, an akhing has to have one nokma household (the oldest or the major household of the akhing), whereas the British administration departed from this customary rule by recognising more than one nokma on great many occasions, and thus fissioned the traditional authority of the nokmas. This might be because the British authority wanted to encourage a fission of the former as a part of their 'divide and rule' policy (Chapter 2: part I).
Since 1952, legislative and executive administrations of the aspects connected with land tenure, land revenue, succession of nokmaship, and of the customary rights and practices, among others, were vested with the Garo Hills Autonomous District Council. It validates all transfers of lands and acts in respect of akhing's land-tenure as a liaison authority between the state government and other organised bodies on one side and the nokmas and the akhing-mahari on the other.

It has also been entrusted with management of unclassed state forests covering an area of about 1870 square miles spread over all the akhings of the district. The District Council exploits the forest resources on silvicultural principle and on royalty payment-permit-coupe system, and allows the akhing members a free access to forest products only for domestic consumption and not for profit. It has retained the basic features of forest administration as were under the British rule.

Over a period of two decades, the District Council has also placed about 301 square miles of the above forests under progressive plantation/regeneration/afforestation schemes. The species used for the purpose are of commercial value (mostly teak and sal) and are not subject to indiscriminate chopplings for individual households' consumption. The areas on which these valuable species stand over a long period till maturity cannot, therefore, be used by the akhing people and the concerned areas are obviously alienated from mahari ownership and individual use-rights.

The District Council has also dented in the traditional right of the nokma by modifying a traditional practice. By the District Council
Forests Act of 1958 and Awil Fees Act of 1960, the Council took over the power of realising awil fees themselves instead of by the nokmas, and sharing only 25% of the same with them. In case there are more than one nokma in an akhing, the awil fee is distributed equally among them. Rest of the amount realised from within an akhing are initially credited to District Council fund and subsequently spent for the collective benefits of the concerned akhing in consultation with its Nokma.

Even with regard to the social uses of akhing lands for shifting cultivation, District Council has imposed certain restrictions. By the Jhum Regulations of 1954, measures have been provided for the selection and allotment of jhum lands, restriction of jhum in watershed areas, fixation of jhum cycle, and other restrictive practices. Although these provisions could not be rigorously followed in the absence of other dependable alternatives of livelihood till recently, the legislative import of these provisions has materially effected a depreciation of the social rights of use over land in all akhings.

In 1963, the Land Reforms Branch of the District Council was started apparently to rationalise the lineage ownership-social use complex/situations of akhing lands. These lands are being surveyed blockwise and documents of title (patta) issued to the heads of households possessing the lands brought under survey. The attached table indicates the progress of survey and settlement that had been started since 1973.

In the surveyed areas, lands of the following categories are marked as khas or sorkari (not under private ownership, but subject to council's right of disposal) in the block survey maps.
### TABLE NO. 5:1
SURVEY AND SETTLEMENT OF HILL AREA LANDS BY GARO HILLS DISTRICT COUNCIL

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Number of villages cadastrally surveyed</th>
<th>Number of villages non-cadastrally surveyed</th>
<th>Total area* settled with cadastral survey</th>
<th>Total area surveyed with non-cadastral survey</th>
<th>Total area surveyed but left unsettled</th>
<th>Total area surveyed</th>
<th>Number of pattas issued</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1973-'74</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>3597 B</td>
<td>994 B</td>
<td>5218 B</td>
<td>9810 B</td>
<td>744</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>4 K 18 L</td>
<td>3 K 3 L</td>
<td>- 11 L</td>
<td>3 K 12 L</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1974-'75</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>1468 B</td>
<td>1512 B</td>
<td>3791 B</td>
<td>6772 B</td>
<td>634</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>3 K 11 L</td>
<td>- 7 L</td>
<td>3 K 5 L</td>
<td>2 K 3 L</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1975-'76</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>81</td>
<td>3330 B</td>
<td>2570 B</td>
<td>5211 B</td>
<td>11,112 B</td>
<td>1000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1 K 3 L</td>
<td>4 K 12 L</td>
<td>- -</td>
<td>- 15 L</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>93</td>
<td>137</td>
<td>8396 B</td>
<td>5077 B</td>
<td>14220 B</td>
<td>27,695 B</td>
<td>2378</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* B = Bigha  K = Katha  L = Lessa
1. Area of lands, except dok, left unused since a long time because of various shortcomings and other reasons (Jongdi, Rangkrik, Asirake).

2. Water catchment areas as declared by the Executive Committee of the District Council.

3. 50 metre distance on either side of State public works Road or District Council Roads (vide Council notification No. CF 120/JSR/72/5296-5356 dated 11th October, 1972).

4. Lands on both sides of the hill streams, 10-50 metres wide depending on the size of the streams.

5. Common paths in the midst of agricultural fields (matchu rama, rama).

6. Places of common worship.

7. Small hillocks surrounded by flat lands that have already been surveyed.

8. Areas once used but in which the right of settlement except that of use is now denied by nokma and akhing members.


10. Radius of 400 metres of any water source or catchment area declared as such by the Executive Committee of District Council.

11. Area covered by sal and other valuable trees.

Since the start of / operations there has been an increasing demand for the settlement of homestead plots (basti) mostly in the
adjacent areas of flat lands. But there have been certain objections also against settlement of lands by the District Council.

At Dadengri in Mouza III, the survey party of the Council was requested by the nokma and his people not to carry out survey of the flat lands fit for settled cultivation. The office-in-charge of land reforms branch of the Council reports that the village has not larger patches of flat lands compared to the labour resources of the existing households. Hence there is no scarcity of land that could persuade the people to ensure a permanent provision for land through Council settlements. If the lands are settled now, all the households would be required to pay land revenue on them and the surplus/beyond the current necessity of the household would be taken away by the District Council. These were some of the apprehensions that denied the coverage of lands by the Council's survey party. In another case, the Nokma of Nengkhongri in Mouza I allowed survey and settlement of land, but only with few families of his akhing, and denied the same in relation to others who are mostly non-kins or distant affines of his household.

 Instances like these are very few, and found in areas with comparative plenty of lands or of households not closely related to nokma-household. Elsewhere, settlement operations have been carried out without any opposition from the nokmas. The District Council is following a policy of least resistance in regard to settlement operations in the hill mouzas, and only responding to demands of the people as and when made for the same. But it has been able to control transfer of land from the tribal to the non-tribal or among the non-tribals to a large extent.

The Garo Hills District (transfer of land) Act of 1955 prohibits
sale, mortgage, lease, barter, gift or otherwise transfer of land by a tribal to a non-tribal or by a non-tribal to another non-tribal except with the prior sanction of the Executive Committee. The position of the District Council has been strengthened by the 'Transfer of Land Act of 1971' passed by the Meghalaya State Legislature. It has empowered the Chief Executive Member of the Council to restrict and control transfer of lands most effectively.

By Garo Hills Autonomous District (Land and Revenue) Regulation of 1954, the District Council adopted the provision of the Assam Land and Revenue Regulations of 1886, and the rules made thereunder as are relevant for the purpose of administering land tenure, assessment and collection of land revenue and other related aspects. This Regulation extends over the whole district, and the block-survey-areas are brought under its operation as and when these are settled with individual possessors. Added also to these are some of the provisions of the Garo Hills District (Jhum) Regulation of 1954 that have made the District Council the ultimate dispenser of the order in respect of all aspects of the tenure, revenue and the uses of land and also of the forests within the district. Thus section 8 of the latter Regulation empowered the Executive Committee 'to settle the culturable plain waste land in any akhing amongst the permanent residents thereof on the merits of each case and taking the recommendations of the nokma concerned into consideration. In the event of the nokma and his people unwilling to accept land settlement by the District Council, its authority can also settle such land 'with any other suitable person permanently resident in the district' if he undertakes to bring under permanent cultivation such a portion of land to be so settled with him. Section 9 of the above Regulation has gone far beyond its section-8, and empowered the Executive Committee to
allot and settle lands in favour of any other permanent resident of the district, for purposes of terrace cultivation and horticulture, notwithstanding any objection of the concerned nokma, if the akhing members are unwilling to go for permanent form of land-uses on the concerned land. Those plots so settled would also be subject to assessment of land revenue according to the adopted provisions of the Assam Land and Revenue Regulations of 1886 or the rules in force in the district from time to time.

Nokmas were, however, entitled to acquire lands up to the maximum of 10 bighas free of land revenue under section 10 of the said Regulation and they were given a statutory duty to enforce compliance of the District Council's order in respect of regulation of jhum and of other wasteful forms of land-uses.

In addition to the District Council, the State government have also contributed to the fissioning of traditional ownership pattern in a large measure. Unprecedented expansion of administration in the post independence period needed increasing areas of land for establishment of administrative headquarters, development blocks, demonstration farms and a host of office complexes. Every time land is needed, it is acquired either on compensation or on gift or other considerations, and the result has been either a modification of community rights over land or an alienation of ownership from the akhing-mahari. To illustrate a few of the features of such modifications we may take up the works of the State Soil Conservation Department in relation to land-uses in Garo Hills. Following tables would indicate the extent of land involved in different schemes, and the consequent process of alienation.
TABLE NO. 5:2A

AREAS (IN HECTARE) UNDER VARIOUS CASH CROP DEVELOPMENT/DEMONSTRATION SCHEMES

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Cashew nut</th>
<th>Black pepper</th>
<th>Coffee</th>
<th>Para rubber</th>
<th>Tejpata</th>
<th>Lemon grass</th>
<th>Horticultural plantation</th>
<th>Fodder/Pasture development</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>138.00</td>
<td>53.09</td>
<td>43.5</td>
<td>41.45</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>78</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

TABLE NO. 5:2B

HECTARES: LAND DEVELOPED FOR PERMANENT CULTIVATION BY S.C.DEPTT. (INCLUDING TERRACE)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Area covered</th>
<th>Number of households receiving individual share of land</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1974-75</td>
<td>946</td>
<td>473</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1975-76</td>
<td>490</td>
<td>245</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1976-77</td>
<td>430</td>
<td>216</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
from the common to the individual ownership.

TABLE NO. 5:2

AREAS (IN HECTARES) UNDER AFFORESTATION SCHEMES OF THE S.C. DEPT.,
Govt. of Meghalaya

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>36.00</td>
<td>63.69</td>
<td>125.00</td>
<td>65.00</td>
<td>200.00</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

All the above schemes have been implemented in different akhing areas. Lands have been taken over by the state from the concerned nokmes on condition that the concerned areas would be handed over to the akhing people after the maturity of each scheme. They were also engaged as wage-labourer in the implementation of all schemes so that the akhing people as future owners may acquire the art of maintaining the gerdens and/or of settled farming later on. Under jhum control scheme, the department gets the terraces prepared by the akhing people on wage payment and provides for tilling arrangements, seeds and manures on a sliding scale for about 3 years and distributes the terraced plots among the constituent households of the akhing 8 2 hectares of land (not every where) per household. The District Council is to grant bettas to those households according to provisions of the Gero Hills District (Jhum) Regulation of 1954. Incidentally it may be noted that the District Council has also taken up the power to regroup villages into 'one bigger or permanent village' for purposes of stability and development through the above schemes. It is apparent, therefore, that all the
above measures of the State have directly encouraged the Garos to break their communal ownership into individual household ownership of land.

In certain areas like Siju, Chigejanggri, Kharijora, Galwanagri, and Naringgri/Wagigitok, dwelling houses were constructed for the villagers to ensure a fixed settlement for them. Irrigation facilities, link roads and drinking water supply have also been provided. In other areas like Darengri, Bonegri, Dombugittim, villages had settled over a fixed site since a long time, and the latter group of facilities were only provided by the government. All these measures of the state have stopped the shifting nature of human settlements that had continued so long in response to shifting cultivations, and brought to all the households a taste of individual family ownership.

Earlier, akhing lands were subject to jhuming and hence floating occupations by households for the repetitive transience of purpose. While replacing jhum by settled land-uses, the radical measures of the District Council and the State departments have promoted for each of the households of a concerned akhing not only a permanent possession of plots but also placed it on a legal basis, and ensured the scope of fulfilling individual economic objectives.

The endogenous forces are also not at rest. Rather these have tended the people to the threshold of such a change. Increasing lack of productivity of jhum activities and the progressive shortage of land as a result of population pressure persuaded the people to bring under use all available valley-bottom lands. The settled plough cultivation practised in them led to permanent possession of those flat lands in the hills (as in Wajadagri, Amendağri, Dadengri areas).
In certain cases family rights over land emerge in a special manner. Under shifting cultivations Garos change their plots every year. Sometimes, certain plots fall to the lot of a family or it may manoeuvre a hold over them which are not abandoned afterwards because of their unusual fertility, locational advantage or nearness to water-source. This family continues to cultivate them for years together and becomes owner in a limited sense. No one may drive the family off the land even though the radical ownership is deemed to remain always with nokma as representative of the akhing-mahari. Patches of even lands between the hills are generally brought under such a special ownership.

In the event of non-availability of flat lands as in Darengri, Rongkhongri and other areas, people reoriented the use of jhumed areas raising selected cash crops like ginger as on both sides of the Tura-Gauhati road between Asanangri and Bajengdoba, pineapple as in Bagmara and south-eastern Hills, oranges as in Resubelpara and arecanut as in Rongkhongri and Darengri areas. In certain areas, however, several cash crops were found to have been raised. Whenever land is found suitable for a particular crop and facilities for its marketing are available, a region or an area tends to specialise in the raising of that crop.

Out of this growing trend of regional specialisation, hitherto absent in Garo economy, has arisen a feature of special import of the ownership in the making. A household continues to cultivate the same plot for years together, once it is brought under any of the above cash crops. This concentrating possession is very rarely contested by the other co-residents of the akhing. Several reasons are responsible for such a compliance. All the households are similarly circumstanced in a
deteriorating jhum economy, and have equal access to secular external factors like market and other infra-structural facilities. Land is still found in communal ownership and use, and the state of technology required for the production of above cash crops can be met by similar traditional experience once oriented towards a market. Majority of the households are, therefore, found developing similar economic enterprise and hence, a mutually sensitive but not conflicting interest pervades their initial attempts. Kinship bonds, not yet weak out of secular market mentality, sustain the force of tolerance in the initial stages of change.

Of the two essential features of ownership, the right of possession and of disposal at will, the former is formed of the concentrating privilege of continued use, whereas the latter arises partially out of the continuous sale of the products of land. The frequencies of cash and credit transactions on cash crops of the lands under such a constant use generally bestow a public sanction to the right of possession of the lands by the concerned household.

But the position in respect of lands under orchards and plantations is a little different from that of lands under other crops, and favourably disposed to household ownership. Plantations of orange, cashewnut, arecanut and the like have a longer gestation period of their own and the standing trees have also a longer life. Both these features could be extended to any length of period over plots by regular regeneration which could be obvious of plantations as a source of income for subsistence. Traditional recognition of rights over planted trees could, therefore, be easily wielded into rights of permanent possessions by simply expanding the scale of plantations. This is what has exactly
happened in Darengri in relation to arecanut and banana plantations. In a similar way households of Resubelpara and Rongkhongri, for example, have acquired a permanent hold over their respective plots through orange and arecanut plantations respectively.

Garos are not as much interested in the sale of land itself as in the regular disposal of its products. They need the latter more than the former because it is by selling the products of land that they can meet their recurring budget deficits or their demands for essentials. In this formative period of change, land still appears to them primarily as a source of livelihood and not of profit, and hence, deserves to be retained by them with a rather intensive exploitation. Now the District Council is encouraging settlement of lands, villagers are found applying for the same in increasing numbers so that their right of possession may soon be converted into right of ownership.

It may be noted as an example that two plots of about 14 bighas have been settled as garden area (bagan) in favour of two persons (pattadar) in Darengri. In Danakgri akhing, 115 bighas of land were settled as homestead plots (basti) with 19 pattadars, and 77 bighas as garden with one pattadar (ex-chief minister of Meghalaya, a Garo) whereas in Rongkhongri, 10 bighas of flat lands fit for wet cultivation (rupit) were settled with another pattadar. Demands for settlement of lands are found to have been made by the people of Asanaggri, Alagrri, Okhanara, Dengnakpara during the period of our enquiry in the office of the District Council.

Ideally this sponsored pattern of ownership could be designated as household or family ownership because of certain reasons. Of the two
types of pattas generally issued by the District Council, as were
done under the British rule in plain mouzas, a permanent patta, renew­
able for every decade, entitles a holder to sell, mortgage or gift
away a part or whole of the land held under it, whereas an annual
patta renewable every year, does not give the holder any of these
rights. Lands held under it can only be inherited from the preceding
owner for purposes of use. Annual patta is thus a document of posses­
sion by a person of a plot of land recorded therein, and the use­privilege in respect of that land gets stuck up with the household of
the concerned pattadar. Since the Garos have still maintained the basic
feature of matrilineal descent, and multilinale inheritance is yet
to assume an all pervasive form, lands held under annual patta in the
name of the household head are for all practical purposes kept within
the orbit of traditional descent pattern. The areas now being surveyed
in the hill mouzas are settled mostly under annual patta and hence,
would be ideally subject to inheritance by the chosen inheritress of
the household. There is, however, no bar to converting an annual patta
into a permanent patta, and the concerned landholders can acquire the
gifttable or transactable rights over those lands. Till then, the own­
ship is to lie with the settlement holder and the use-privilege is
enjoyed by the whole household since a Garo rarely stays a bachelor for
living independently of any household.

This household ownership of land is brought to a sharp relief in
Darenfri too. All the households did not only try to occupy as much
land as was possible to manage but also ensure their respective right of
possession over them. They have fortified the boundaries of the occupied
plots with costly barbed wire (Rajan laskar, Altington Agitok, Zeplin
Rangsa), or by raising stone-walls (Pubon Rangsa, Sonali Arutok) or by well knit wood and bamboo structures or hedges (Cryston Rangsa, Jepperson Rangsa, Rangan Dangu). The primary task of a household after clearing a plot, whether for jhum or for plantation, would be the erection of fencing around it. To the Garos of Darengri, fencing thus not only fends off damages by animals and encroachment of neighbours but also demonstrably fortifies a household's right over lands so fenced in. A number of cases with regard to boundary disputes are lying with the Laskar, and a few with the District Council Court. It suggests that the Darengri villagers always try to guard their rights on land quite jealously.

Elsewhere also is found the same trend. The Soil Conservation Department of the State reclaimed about 100 hectares of land and handed them over to the households of Mongalgri in 1976-77. But the villagers do neither use the reclaimed lands themselves nor part with the respective family's right over plots for any other project of the said department. Each of the 50 households retained their share of distributed lands in tact.

In Darengri, the rising sense of family ownership of plots has led to the rise of a new residence pattern and a village lay-out different from those of a traditional village. Most of the households have established their respective residential units within or in front of their gardens, and thus created not only a privacy of residence but also of the landed possessions. They no longer share a common courtyard with unilinear residence-units as are found in a traditional village. Absence of a unilinear lay-out of huts or houses is also found in Rongkhongri, Resubelpara, Darengatchotchigri and other villages specialising in plantations or gardening as a dominant source
of income. This is, however, not the sole reason behind such a change in the village layout, but is certainly one of the remarkable reasons bearing on the emergent ownership pattern.

With the progressive increase of households within the akhing, mahari ownership may be fissioned into family ownership of lands. Every agate marriage provides a horizontal extension of the female line of the nokma household but keeps ownership of land confined to the akhing-mahari. On the other hand, the settlement of wives of its sons and of other females (of, say, migrant households) not belonging to akhing-mahari brings about a vertical proliferation of the owning and inheriting rights of those alien females. Mahari ownership and use-rights are not disturbed till the land resources of the akhing donot run short of the traditionally set needs of each household. But once those needs are changed or expanded and the land becomes scarce as an object of domestic possessions, these alien females then act as the potential source of descent lines in respect of those possessions, and consequently, the mahari ownership of akhing lands stands fissioned.

In Darengri, all the 53 households have got their principal females from the following maharis:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Agitok</th>
<th>Bölware</th>
<th>Rangsa</th>
<th>Chambu-gong</th>
<th>Rangmity</th>
<th>Sku</th>
<th>Chada</th>
<th>Dopo</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>19</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>53</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Each of the households has raised arecanut gardens on the akhing land formally owned by Agitok mahari. Ownership of the plots held by the households of those 19 principal females who belong to that mahari, does not pass out of the akhing mahari. Uses of those plots are only accentuated through the suspices of a few members of that mahari. But the households of those thirty four (53-19) principal females who belong to maharis other than the Agitok, have alienated the plots of akhing land now being occupied by them as garden, from the ownership of the akhing mahari, and placed their respective plots on the separate inheritance lines originating from each of those principal females.

The akhing-mahari is expected to raise objection against such a process of alienation. But the traditional authority has already suffered a division in the institution of joint nokmaship and is rendered weak by a host of other factors (vide Chapter 2).

When asked whether prior permission of the nokma was sought for converting lands into arecanut and banana gardens, and thereby alienating lands into family possessions, every household-head answered in the negative advocating reasons of their own advantage. Bolwari and Rangsa husbands of the Agitok females assert that nokma's permission is not necessary because their wives are from the akhing owning mahari. Rangsa and Bolwari wives of the Agitok males speak of the similar rights of their husbands over the same akhing lands. Principal male or female born of Rangsa, Bolwari, Chamburong and Rongmity mothers settled earlier in the village claim Darengri as their native village (biaptang: Dongnapa atchis, born to live on), and hence feel that they need not go for nokma's permission for permanently occupying any plot of akhing land. Principal females of Dopo and Sku maharis belong to the present
generation and came to Darengri as wives of the Darengri born natives (dongna atchia), and claim to have derived land owning rights from them. None of the females of non-Agitok origin ever likes to think of the traditional ownership of the Agitok mahari over the akhing lands. All of them accept it as equally their own because such a thinking serves them well.

The Caros' journey from the state of communal ownership to that of the individual rights and uses does not stop at the state of household ownership. A network of factors are again at work for a further fission.

Unilineal descent is one of the characteristics of Garo inheritance pattern. But in a number of cases at the akhing level it was found that the same akhing had been divided among husbands of several daughters of the original nokma-household. Such instances abound in the later period of British rule (vide Records of No. II/14(55), Rongbretgri akhing, and of No. II/14(50) Achapara-Dapdalgri akhing, and No. II/10(12 & 12a) Dangnakpara akhing). This kind of fission on common consent of Akhing-mahari had started much earlier but was brought to notice during the preparation of akhing records since the last twenties. According to wishes of the concerned mahari-elders, Darengri akhing was entrusted without division to two nokmas, husbands of two sisters, since 1897. Absence of any decision in respect of succession of the predecessor nokma before his death, recurrent quarrel among the households of sons-in-law (chavari), creation of a new village under the initiative of any son-in-law on a desolate part of the akhing, repayment of loan given to a nokma by his brother/sister-in-law are some of the reasons usually found to have caused a division of the akhing among the consanguinel
sisters at the cost of traditional principle of unilineal descent. Sometimes a part of the akhing was gifted away by the nokma-household to a mahari-member in recognition of any special service to it or to the akhing-mahari (vide records of II/12(12) Nokdanpara akhing and the D.C.'s order dt. 18-6-1925). All these instances generally broke up the traditional norm of matrilineal inheritance of the landed property.

Existence of several nokmas for the same akhing and the official recognition of joint nokmaship in a large number of cases suggest that the break-up of the traditional unilineal descent has been accepted by the ever growing society.

Ideally, a son is not to receive any share of the properties of his mother's household, and is to accept what is inherited for him by his wife. But there are cases of sons getting a part of akhing as a gift from the parents, and these are duly approved by the British administration (vide record of No. II/12(8) Dambagri akhing; the D.C., Garo Hills, ratified the deal on 29-10-1924). As a matter of fact, the unmarried son or daughter may grow a small arecanut orchard in that part of the mother's land known as a'tot which may ultimately pass on to the respective persons because of continuous rights of use and possession. Ultimately such plots pass out of the akhing-mahari.

As regards household properties the situation is not dissimilar to that of akhing level interests. In Darengri, for example, Rojan Laskar distributed among his sons a few of his arecanut gardens before his death. Dijendra Agitok could inherit a few gardens from his mother at Darensatchotchigri; his cousin granny also gifted away another garden
to him out of affection (Kasae ongimin bagan); Rickchang Bolvari has likewise gifted away another garden to his son, Themong, on the occasion of his marriage.

A son can acquire ownership over land by taking advantage of a traditional custom. Whenever any flat land or a plot fit for settled uses is allowed as a'tot to an unmarried son, personal possession in contrast to that of the household stands conceded to him without any alleged effect on household interests. He continues to enjoy the privilege and possess the plot as his own even after his marriage. Thus Desin Agitok of Darengri developed a garden as a bachelor, married a female of Chada mahari of Pharamgri and started living at Garobadha for service. He continued possessing the garden, selling its fruits and earning incomes out of it regularly till today.

This trend has possibly started with the extension of the base of ownership of the household properties. In a traditional village, household ownership extends over family heirlooms, its house, utensils and petty equipments of every day use, a few movable properties, domestic animals and the like. Nowadays, gardens and landed properties and a variety of sophisticated goods like wrist watch, wall clock, radio, cycle, camera, costlier garments and guns are added to the list.

Sophisticated goods like wrist watch, pen and camera attain utility in personal possession and handling, and are generally acquired by a son mostly out of his own earnings (a'tot). Parents do not object to their using the same after marriage and carrying them to his wife's household. Accordingly, individual rights over them are also recognised.
In respect of certain items of property like the guns, very popular among the Garos, right of possession is primarily personal under the licencing system of the Government. A son can carry the gun, if held by him as a licence holder, to his wife's household as his personal property.

Use of lands for settled farming and the entry of sophisticated goods in the Garo society coincide with the growth of their economy, western education, social and spatial mobility of the people since independence with consequent depreciation of traditional bonds and the predominance of the males in economic enterprise. All these have an impact on the society's attitude towards the sons.

Nowadays parents are found occasionally distributing a part of family property among their sons. But such a distribution has not yet assumed a regular feature of the Garo inheritance pattern. Whenever a son gets a part of parental property he does so not by way of inheritance but by way of gift, such gifts being more frequent than before, and subject to degrees of filial relations. This feature has partially served in developing multilinear inheritance among the Garos.

Family or household ownership of land has obtained an aura of individual ownership through repeated transactions of the land and its produce. Possessors of plain lands (apal) of Amendagri, Dombagri, Samandagri frequently kept their respective lands mortgaged to a number of household-heads of Darengri under various conditions of borrowings. Cases of outright sale of possessory rights over such plots are also by no means rare now-a-days. Dens Singma of Samandalgri developed arecanut garden in Darengri while serving there as chaparikgipa, and enjoyed the rights of its possession for about 20 years and sold away the same to
Mrs. Sonali Sangma of Darengri for Rs. 900/- in 1974. Ranseng Agitok Sangma of Darengatchochigri sold his garden to Capt. Sangma (ex-chief Minister of Meghalaya) for Rs. 3000/- in 1968. Ranseng's wife and the son, the present Bolwari nokma of Darengri, did not object against this deal. While carrying out such deals, mahari members are not found to have been consulted in Darengri. Cases of land-transfers of this kind are held between members of two different villages or akhings as well as among members of the same village, and persons of different maharis within the village are also involved therein.

While carrying out purchase, sale or mortgaging of gardens or their fruits a person hardly bothers to distinguish between the trees and the lands on which they stand. Rather, people's diversified searches for a livelihood in the changing situations lead them to involve land in monetary and credit transactions. The continuous series of harvests from a piece of land gradually forms an institution of 'private rights' on land, and the credit transactions over them generally lead to the rise of a concept of 'private property' in respect of that piece of land. All these also incidentally indicate that the people did not wait for the formal grant of ownership over land (patta) by the District Council but moved ahead in creating the institution of private property and the trend of multilineral inheritance.

Parallel instances of the disintegration of communal rights in land have been found among some of the highlanders of Mesoamerica. Sierra Populoca of Mexico developed private property in land initially by planting and inheriting coffee plants, whereas Chimaltenango people of Guatemalan highlands got the private rights in land imposed by the state when Guatemalan Government abolished communal ownership of land in 1877. While private property in land was externally imposed in Guatemala, and
the Sopuloca got it as an internal development in Mexico, the Garos here promoted the same out of both the endogenous and exogenous factors. In their search for alternatives on the decline of traditional sources of living, they have instituted private possessions of land by cultiva-
tions of valley bottom and terrace lands, cash crop productions and permanent gardening. British Government modified earlier the traditional system of over-rights on land, and the national administrations (State and the District Council) carried it further and upheld private property in land by their Acts, Rules and practices. Besides, the ever increasing monetisations of land based activities have invested private possessions of land with public recognition among the Garos.

The cumulative effects of the people's urge for a better base of livelihood and the response thereto of the District Council and the State have contributed towards a structural change in the traditional land tenure system in the hills. It has been expressed in the political centralisation of over-rights in the District Council on the one hand and the atomisation of community rights into private ownership of land on the other.

Such a rise of atomistic rights also incidentally coincides with the change of the traditional value system of the Garos. It has happened in the wake of increasing monetisation of livelihood activities, and socio-political forces. Earlier, the Garos used to attach either use or the prestige value to all the goods produced or procured in their society. Prestige was acquired either by liberal distribution of consumers' goods during different ceremonies or by ostentatious display of durable goods on certain occasions (as in mortuary ceremony). As observed earlier, purposive saving for investment or the rolling of stored up
values for their successive increases in future has hardly been a pronounced feature of their production activities.

With land as communal resources, labour-commodity-consumption (L-C-C) has been the traditional formulae of people's livelihood, but the same has been interfered later by the introduction of money (L-C-M-C where M is money). Increasing dependence on market mechanisms for a livelihood has to go with households' provision or accumulation of marketable goods, else the amount necessary for their living would not be forthcoming. Production has thus to be oriented towards earning of exchange values. Since such values depend on factors mostly outside the domain of a single household, a household has to develop 'self-centred' economic interests for its survival and growth. The problem becomes more acute on the decline of traditional sources of livelihood.

Market relations that are external to all households can not be sustained if the idealised reciprocity is to be maintained for long and on all occasions under the tradition. As market behaviour and kinship behaviour are never compatible in a single relationship (Bohannan: 1955: 60-70), the accentuation of one would lead to the depreciation of the other. Reciprocal relations between households then results in 'closely calculated balanced exchange of labour services' and/or money values, and 'dakchakani' or traditional mutual help reduces itself remarkably.

This feature is evident in a gradual loss of collective action or aid even in the midst of kinship relations in Darengri. Majority of her households have constructed their residential houses not by mutual labour exchange of the kins and neighbours but by wage labour, outside masons and carpenters. Dakchakani in different economic pursuits has been the
least among the means of labour procurement in the village (Chapter 3: part I). Economic autonomy of the households has been consolidated by their attempts at diversification of occupations that are no longer solely based on communally held lands. Even thereon, they have developed atomistic trends of ownership. Relations of households drawing sustenance from the secular service and trade sectors are carried beyond the confines of clan dictates and the village, and are involved in all individualistic motives and practices usual to a modern money economy. Traditional intensity of economic cooperation and exchange within the community have thus yielded place to growing atomisation of social ties and structure.

This departure from traditional bonds and values has also been worked out at the social level. Villagers, mostly the literate and educated ones, have promoted a number of secular and religious associations for organising public welfare. Besides the committees of the church and other allied religious services already mentioned (Chapter 2) they have organised the following committees:

i) Executive committees for High English, Middle English, Lower Primary and Nursery Schools of the village in which representatives from other villages, are also found.

ii) 'Darengri Water Supply Committee' for assisting Public Health Engineering Department of the Government in its relevant works in the village.

iii) Darengri Terrace Development Committee for selection of terrace-sites, distribution of terraced plots, and/advising Government of all related features of the projects; to be converted later to Field Management committee.
iv) Village Development committee to look after maintenance of Village roads, water points of natural streams, control of cattle against damaging of gardens and jhumlands.

v) Cooperative Weaving Society to run a weaving school by the women of Darengri.

vi) Darengri Mahila Samity, organised by the women of the village, to look after weaving school, hygiene and sanitation of the village, and advise the Rongram Development block authorities on development of the area.

vii) Darengri Youth Club for the welfare of the growing generations.

viii) A Football Tournament Committee to run an annual tournament on a 'challenge shield' donated by a fellow villager.

ix) Defence Committee to organise 'night watch' against stealing of arecanuts and bananas from village gardens. Continued only for a short period and occasionally revived as and when necessary.

Villagers have also a representative each on the village council and the Advisory Board of the Rongram Development Block. Development, recreation and religion are thus covered by the above committees for the formation of which clan affiliations have never been considered a qualification for membership. An enquiry into the successive Executive Committees of these associations and institutions reveals that these have been staffed predominantly by members of the maharis other than the akhing mahari, and all the important office bearers hail from either the immigrant households or from the immigrant members of the older households. Incidentally, households on higher levels of income are more
represented on all the committees than their poorer counterparts in the village.

While some of the associations or committees are sponsored by the formal political institutions of the state (Advisory committees of the Development Blocks, Terrace Development Committee etc), others are organised by the villagers themselves, and they transcend the boundaries of the village or the confines of local causes and services. Functionally, Committees of the church, B.Y.F, Youth Choir, Schools and the Football tournament cut across village boundaries, clan organisations, and imported both social and spatial mobility in the village society. Accordingly, norms and values of the participants depart from the traditional ones. No longer is the consolidation of respective maharis a primary object of the village members, nor is the mahari responsible for functions, status, rank and available opportunities of individuals and households in an akhing. It is not by birth but by individual manipulation of socio-economic forces that a village member or his household can now achieve a rank or status in the society.