A social custom is a kind of social necessity. It is one of the important fields of folklore. It is also one of the quite well known methods of social control. Social custom is based on traditional beliefs. Customs which contain magical and sacred potency may be termed as rituals.\(^1\) Customs enlighten man in his social life. From his very childhood man forms the habit of obeying them and he follows them without raising any hue and cry. He comes into possession of these customs when they come down to him in the form of his social heritage or inheritance and it is these very customs which he bequeaths to his successors.\(^2\) The ambit of social folk customs includes the following aspects, e.g., (a) belief and religion, (b) festivals and celebration, (c) games and recreation, and (d) folk medicines.

(a) **Beliefs and Religion:**

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\(^1\) Dorsan, R. M. (ed.): *Folklore and Folklife: An Introduction*, p. 3.

Beliefs: A belief pervades attitude and action to enter the stream of conscious thought. The most widespread manifestation of a mental attitude is in the shape of beliefs. Religion is a system of belief and symbolic practices. Rightly does observe M. J. Herskovit, “Religion may best be defined in and identification with a greater force or power”.\(^3\) E. Durkheim has also observed, “Religion is a unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things, that is, thing set apart and forbidden”.\(^4\)

Beliefs ensure that the rituals will be observed. However, it may be kept in mind that the conception of nature of the supernatural differs from society to society and people to people. For some, the supernatural may be constituted of ghosts and spirits. For others, it may be an impersonal power which pervades everything in this world. For still others, it may be manifested through a pantheon of anthropomorphic gods and goddesses.

The Koches believe that the soul exists in human beings

\(^4\) Durkheim, E.: *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* (English trans., 1947, p. 10.)
and animals. It stays in the heart of creature. Like the other Hindus they also believe in the immorality of the souls, life hereafter, heaven and hell. They believe that when a person dies, the soul does not get peace unless the final ritual of the deceased is performed properly. They also believe in re-birth.

The Koches believe in worship of gods and goddesses like Mahadeva, Durga, Parvati, Lakshmi, Saraswati, and other gods and goddesses. They are worshiped on various occasions and times. Among them, Lord Mahadeva is a very popular folk God for the Koch community.

**Omens:** Omen means a sign of some future events. The Koches being superstitious people believe in the various types of omens, good or bad, and follow them accordingly before undertaking any work or journey. Howling of an owl within the compound of a house indicates a bad omen, one may die soon. If a vulture falls on a house, it is regarded as a bad omen. While starting on journey, if one sees the full water of a pitcher, it is a good omen. If a person comes across a funeral procession while starting on a journey, it is regarded a bad
omen. The Koches believe a journey or any work should be started on a lucky day. They also believe if the bee or dove builds a nest in the house, it is regarded as a good omen. A shrill sudden cry of an owl in the twilight is regarded as a bad omen.

**Religion:** Religion means certain beliefs, rituals and ceremonies. It is a great force and exists in all societies in one form or the other. The hold of religion in the past was very strong. But with the advancement of science, its hold is decreasing day by day. It is institution which has grip over the people in all civilized societies. In fact, it is very difficult to trace the origin of religion in any single institution or factor. Fear impersonal character of nature, belief in supernatural power, rites and ceremonies, etc., all combined together are accountable for the origin of religion. Difficulty in tracing religion primarily arises because it is as old as man himself.

Religion is the recognition of superiority—moral and physical, of the collective over the individual. It is advice to secure mental and physical stability in an individual's life.
Rightly does observe M. J. Herskovits, "Religion may be defined as belief in and identification with a greater force or power."\(^5\)

Traditionally the Koches, like other tribes, are animists. Their religion is based on the belief on supernaturalism. They believe the spirits and ghosts which are always hostile to human beings. For them all sorts of sickness, death, calamity and misfortune are caused by the spirits living around them.

Religion plays a vital role in the life of the Koches. They have been following the Hindu's rites and customs since a long time and it is not yet definitely known when the process of such acculturation or Hinduisation began in the social life of the Koches.

(b) Festivals and celebration:

Festivals mean a joyful celebration. It is the external expression of social behaviour. The meaning of festival indicates a season of social mirth when series of performances of music, plays, feast or like, honorary celebrations of historical

\(^5\) Herskovits, M.J.: *Op-cit*, p. 223
events, birth or death of a hero or god are enacted by a community. Festivals are associated with religious observances. We may quote here a comment made by William H. Hendelson, "Festivals held by the primitive people consisted of collective magic or religious rites for propitiation of evil spirits and invocation of friendly supernatural powers. The development of agriculture was accompanied by new festivals, also consisting of magical religious rituals, in connection with seasons."

It may be mentioned that most of the festivals current in different cultures of the world developed out of magico-ritual practices. Rituals current among the primitive cultures were based on magical beliefs. Most of the societies, whether primitive or modern, have their own festivals and these are celebrated in one form or the other.

Festivals celebrated by the Koches are influenced by two different trends of religious rites and social usages. While some of their observances and festivals have been influenced by the

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neighbouring Hindu Bengali or the Assamese, others are the reflection of their own traditional beliefs and customs. The Koches have been following the Hindu rites and customs since a long time.

The Koches celebrate different festivals in the different season round the year. Most of the festivals current among them are associated with agriculture.

(c) Games and recreation:

Games: The activity that come in voluntarily and gets delight is termed as play. Play is a pleasant social control for both children and adults. It is a symbol of unity among the human beings. Observes Robert A. Georges, "Play is a form of expressive behaviour common among all human beings and manifested overly in all cultures. Like language and religion, play is a complex phenomenon that cannot be defined succinctly."7 Play makes a person flexible and exercises important influence on man's emotions and sentiments. Play has several characteristics which can readily be isolated. First,

7 Georges, R. A.: "Recreation and Games" in Folklore and Folk life: An Introduction, p. 173
play is voluntary in that it does not directly satisfy biological needs associated with survival. Another characteristic of play is that it is separated from reality in time and space, therefore, its goals and sources of motivations are intrinsic.\footnote{ib id, p. 174}

Generally games differ from other play activities in that they involve competition between at least two persons, explicit or implicit rules which specify the kind of human interaction permissible and which the players are familiar with before the activity begins, are also required as is a specific method for determining winners and losers.\footnote{ib id, p. 175} Thus boys play games that require hunting, attacking, running, defending or play at soldiers, hawkers or railway guards and in games require group competition, co-operation, discipline and other social behaviours which will stand them in good stead in adult social life. Girls playing with dolls and kitchen utensils, they practice being a mother, nurse or teacher. Play thus becomes a preparation for the life we are to lead in mature years.\footnote{ib id, p. 180}

The Koches of Garo Hills are generally cultivators as well
as daily labourers. Games and sports are played during their festivals and sometimes also on ordinary occasions.

**Recreation:** Recreation is an opportunity to refresh and amuse one self, serious living call for effort and concentration and leads to fatigue. Sometimes children and adults want recreation to refresh themselves. All play is recreation and relaxation turning away from serious business of life. It does not directly satisfy biological needs associated with survival. Apart from these, recreation is not related with the production of wealth or goods. As long as there is no competitive interaction, the past time can be called recreation. Says R. N. Sharma, "In the recreational group a person under goes socialization and learns the methods of behaviour towards other people."

The life lived inside dormitories is of a light hearted type where all seems playing and recreation. The existence of dormitories has been found among the tribal communities except the Koch in India.

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11 Sharma, R. N.: *Op-cit*, p. 185
Generally the Koches are residing in the rural and the hilly areas. They relax themselves only after coming from the fields. The men and the women sit around the hearth snapping stories and gossiping about the fields and crops, and the prospects of the coming harvest, thus removing the fatigue due to the day’s work. When they meet with friends and relatives the inevitable subject of crops always comes up for discussion amongst them apart from some family matters or other matters.

Sometimes they sing in chorus while working in the field or sing simple melodies while thrashing the crops, which seems to dispel the fatigue due to hard labour and weariness from the body and mind.

Generally the young men in the Koch community frequently go during their leisure time for hunting the wild animals and the birds in the forest or fishing in the nearby ponds or river.

Though the Koches have to undergo through the rigorous stress and strain of nature which makes their life hard, yet their hearts are full with hope and joy and they are satisfied with what they have. The Koches are the wards of the nature and
find music in the winds, streams and woods which fill their mind with much delight.

(d) Folk medicine:

Among most of the tribal communities the folk medicine is common. Folk medicine is generally interpreted as the ability to cure various diseases with the use of herbal medicine as well as charms and incantations by the village medicine man. The medical aids are primitive.

The practices of healing various diseases among the non-elite folk which have been transmitted traditionally and almost orally may be termed as folk medicine. Folk medicine is more or less related derivatively to the academic medicine on our forefathers.¹²

Folk medicine is an integral part of a religion of a tribal dimension. Untoward natural events, inadequate technical means and situation full of danger and uncertainty lead to belief in the folk medicine. Tribal believe in folk medicine because it

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fits in with their culture and way of thinking.

The ambit of folk medicine includes two branches i.e., (a) natural folk medicine and (b) magico-religious folk medicine. The first variety carries the ideas of man's earliest reactions of his natural surrounding and involves the seeking of healings for his ailments in various herbs, plants, minerals and animal substance of nature. This category of folk medicine may rightly be called natural or herbal medicine. The second branch of folk medicine i.e., magico religious variety is also known as occult folk medicine. It includes *mantras* or charms, incantation, holy words and holy action with a view of curing diseases.\(^{13}\)

\(^{13}\) Ibid, p. 192