



Performing the Garo Nation?

Garó Wangala Dancing between Faith and Folklore

In recent decades, Wangala dancing has gained prominence as an important cultural expression of the Northeast Indian Garó community. In 2008, a Wangala performance was included in the annual Republic Day parade. Photographs of Wangala dancing have come to play an important role on posters circulated by politicians and on calendars produced by organizations that call for greater political assertion of the Garó community. Beyond these relatively new uses, for adherents of the traditional Garó religion, Wangala dancing continues to be linked to the most important post-harvest festival. In exploring how Wangala dancing has developed into a powerful mediatized expression of the Garó community, this article examines how national- and state-level performances continue to be linked to village-level celebrations.

KEYWORDS: Wangala dance—Republic Day parade—authenticity—folklorization—indigeneity

THE FIFTY-EIGHTH Republic Day, 26 January 2008, was celebrated under a crisp blue Delhi winter sky. Political and military leaders, as well as a crowd of thousands, cheered as an immaculately performed parade that wanted to display the military might and cultural diversity of the Indian nation passed them by. In India, the Republic Day parade is an annual event, and ever since 1950, it has been held to commemorate and acknowledge the adoption of the Indian constitution. As with any constitution, it defines the relationship between the Indian state and its citizens, and the parade acts as an expression of the power, endurance, and perpetuity of that state.

The Republic Day parade takes place in New Delhi, on the main Rajpath boulevard. This is at the heart of the “new” city, built in the 1920s and 1930s as the capital of the then British raj. The parade starts at the presidential palace, passes main administrative buildings, and ends at the national war memorial at India Gate. Lined all along the boulevard are stands that are only accessible to ticket holders. At about the midway point, the parade passes the Indian president, cabinet ministers, and other dignitaries. With them is also the head of a friendly state, referred to as “the chief guest.” In 2008, the chief guest was the French president Nicolas Sarkozy, accompanied by some of his ministers. The streets surrounding Rajpath are all under close surveillance by security personnel, and every member of the audience is frisked upon arrival. The parade takes a good three hours, from 10 a.m. until about 1 p.m.

In 2008, notwithstanding the abundance of police and military personnel, the atmosphere was relaxed. For those who attended, Republic Day was apparently an enjoyable day out, although this is not at all self-evident; many people in India are either indifferent to the parade, or reject it for the patriotism and militarism that are so central to it. In the more troubled parts of India, such as the Naxalite-dominated areas in the center, Kashmir, and contested parts of the northeast, Republic Day celebrations are often boycotted by groups opposing the Indian government. Attending local Republic Day celebrations, which is obligatory for civil servants, then translates into an expression of loyalty towards the Indian state.

The Republic Day parade is organized by the Ministry of Defense and is dominated by the military. Contingents of each of the main divisions of the army, navy, and air force participate. Many of the men (women are a minority) march along in

colorful and otherwise rarely seen ceremonial uniforms. Some are on horse or even camel back. The parade also showcases the latest military hardware: combat tanks, artillery, and mobile rocket launchers. Trucks with huge ballistic missiles, believed capable of carrying nuclear warheads, catch the eye. The navy presents floats with truck-sized cardboard models of battle ships and submarines. All the military hardware steadily crawl along, accompanied by servicing personnel, who salute to the dignitaries seated at the rostrum. Air force planes conclude the parade with a noisy fly past of helicopters, bombers, and jet fighters in tight formation.

Whereas the military part is generally considered the most spectacular and is emphasized in the excerpts shown to television audiences worldwide, the parade encompasses many civil participants as well. The middle part of the parade features floats representing each of the states and union territories. In 2008, some of these had a patriotic theme, such as the sacrifices made by the people of Haryana in the 1857 First War of Independence. Others seemingly avoided politics, such as the float of the troubled state of Kashmir that was dedicated to a tulip garden. Other floats presented cultural festivals, culturally relevant historical buildings, and so on.

In 2008, the last section of the cultural program consisted of a “children’s pageant” in which various groups of students from different parts of India performed a dance. Again, some of these had a patriotic theme (such as the national tricolor or the contribution of women to building national unity), whereas others were based on folkloristic dances deemed characteristic for the ethnicity the particular group of students represented. One of the groups consisted of more than a hundred college students from the Garo community, who performed a “Wangala dance.”¹ The Garo are categorized within the Indian administrative system as a “tribal” community.² Dressed in bright clothes, wearing ornamental jewelry, and with cocktail feathers in their hair, the Garo students submitted to the expectations of the general Indian audience about “tribal” people as exotic and “other.” This perception was further strengthened by the description of the Wangala dance in the program booklet of the REPUBLIC DAY PARADE (2008, 38), which emphasized both its presumed social significance and its authenticity:

Wangala dance is part of the Wangala festival, which is the most important of all festivals of the Garo.... This festival is also used as an occasion for selecting brides and bridegrooms. This dance festival is the most colorful and spectacular among the Garo community. To the tune of rhythmic sounds of native musical instruments, the students... are presenting the Wangala dance.

For most Garo, Wangala is primarily an element of folk culture, and they assume that it was previously important in a religious sense. Nowadays it is “imagined” by the vast majority of the Garo to be synonymous with Garo tradition, as it comes to them in the writings of local folklorists and historians. The claim made above that “Wangala dance is part of the Wangala festival, which is the most important of all festivals of the Garo” neglects the changes in the religious and social landscape that have occurred over the last hundred and fifty years. It willfully locates Wangala dancing and consequently the Garo community as a whole in a timeless past.

In 2008, as the youth groups proceeded along the boulevard, each was granted a couple of minutes to perform in front of the dignitaries. The Garo students had exactly two minutes and fifteen seconds. To ensure that their performance would fit into the tight schedule and the music to which they danced would be audible all along the boulevard, a studio prepared a music track that was broadcast on a sound system. Wangala dancing normally involves an equal number of men and women. Each of the men (or boys) participating carried a heavy wooden drum. Considering the distance they had to walk during the parade, real drums were not feasible, and each of the men carried a fake instrument made of paper and Styrofoam so that they could perform in time with the drum track.

The Garo troupe consisted of more than a hundred students, mostly drawn from colleges in Tura, the political and administrative center of the Garo Hills. Most of them had little prior experience with Wangala dancing but spontaneously enlisted when they heard of the event. For most of them, it was a chance to travel outside Northeast India during the long winter holiday, which in Garo Hills lasts from before Christmas until well into January. Their coaches were college lecturers, most of whom were experienced Wangala dancers. The troupe came to New Delhi about a month in advance of Republic Day in order to rehearse and prepare. They were housed in Gandhi's former ashram, which implied—much to their regret—a month of strict vegetarianism.

Before they left for Delhi, the coaches of the Garo dancers had composed a six-minute drum track, but the choreographers hired by the organizers of the Republic Day Parade made it clear that this was far too long given the time allotted. Normally, the steps and movements of Wangala dancing are not very fast, probably since anyone who wants to should be able to join in. Here, the rhythm was sped up to meet the expectations of the nationwide (and even global) audience that the parade is meant to cater to. In addition, this made it easier for the performance to fit into the narrow time slot.

The Republic Day parade's choreographers insisted that the Garo dancers leave out any movements that might possibly offend the dignitaries ("all movements must look decent," they said, according to the Garo). Normally, certain steps require the dancers to spread their legs, but the Delhi choreographers considered it unacceptable if they would do so when facing the president of India. Also, for reasons of decency, the length of the girls' sarongs had to be increased, so that these would cover their knees. However, the Garo refused to go along with another attempt to "chasten" their performance, which was to replace the cocktail feathers in their headdress with plastic ones. The choreographers of the Republic Day parade wanted them to do so, since they feared that Maneka Gandhi, a cabinet minister and animal rights activist, might take offence at these.³ A compromise was struck, resulting in the Garo dancers using fewer feathers than they would have liked.

The 2008 Republic Day parade (and thus the Wangala dance performance) was broadcast live on Doordarshan 1, the main channel of the broadcasting corporation of India that can be received nationwide. With the growth of commercial television in the last two decades, Doordarshan has become less popular, but it

still reaches an audience of millions. The Wangala dance performance also featured in other news media. The day following the Republic Day parade, the front page of the national daily *The Hindu* carried an article with the title “Military Might, Cultural Heritage on Display at Republic Day parade” (PANDEY 2008). The article included a large photograph with a caption titled “Showcasing Culture.” It showed the troupe of Garo students as they walked down Rajpath during the parade.⁴ But what was the “culture” being “showcased” for the eye of the nation? How did the performance of the Wangala dance on Republic Day relate to other settings in which this dance is or has been performed?

In interviews I conducted about one year later with the Garo coaches, one of them mentioned that he considered the adjustments made by the Delhi choreographers so radical that what resulted was at best “modified Wangala dancing.” Another felt that the performance as part of the parade could no longer be called Wangala dancing. Rather, he said, it had become “a showpiece.” In his opinion, the performance during the parade was only a distant reminder of what is presumably “real” Wangala dancing. I showed a video recording of the TV broadcast to the coaches, and a senior Meghalaya civil servant, who happened to be present during the interview added the following: “This is not Wangala dancing, it is not original. It has nothing to do with Wangala dancing.” Another person took on a more pragmatic stance, saying that he appreciated the dance performance for its innovative character, which allowed it to cater to the tastes of the entire Indian audience of the Republic Day parade.

In this article I argue that when Wangala dancing shifts stages and is revamped to suit new contexts, this triggers new interpretations. But rather than supplanting the meanings associated with preceding contexts, new ones continue to depend on earlier ones. In the popular appreciation of Wangala dancing, the relationship between what is considered “real” or “authentic” and what is “derived” is of relevance. Whereas people consistently grant what they consider “authentic” more merit than what they consider “derived,” these “derivatives” are instrumental in the attribution of value to the “authentic.”

WANGALA DANCING, ICONIC FOR THE GARO COMMUNITY

The Garo are a community of about 850,000, two thirds of whom live in the Northeast Indian state of Meghalaya. In Meghalaya, being Garo is understood as being of Garo descent. Garo are matrilineal, which means that having a Garo mother translates to acquiring a Garo surname. Just as important, being Garo implies being a speaker of Garo, a language belonging to the Tibeto-Burman family of languages.

The Garo community, as commonly defined in terms of descent and language, has never been culturally (or even linguistically) uniform. Rather, it has been thought of as consisting of large subgroups characterized by distinct cultural practices and dialects.⁵ The dialect of one of these subgroups (Awe) became the norm

for the unified Garo language that is taught in schools today. Numerically and politically, however, the Ambeng have always been the majority among the Garo.

Historically, Wangala dancing was but one element of the extensive social and religious life of the Ambeng Garo.⁶ The practitioners of this religion have become known as Songsareks. Going by the religious practices of present-day Ambeng Songsareks, as well as ethnographic sources (PLAYFAIR 1975; BURLING 1997; SANGMA 1981), Wangala was and is for the Ambeng in many ways the most important of a series of annual festivals—enabling people to advance the growth of swidden crops and to create the conditions in which they can reap and consume the harvest. Similar to their predecessors, contemporary Ambeng Songsareks celebrate Wangala in the month of October. The festival is then a thanksgiving for the rice grains that the swiddens have yielded, and part of it is used to cook rice beer. Some of that serves as offerings to the deities, while most of it is drunk by the people participating in the celebrations.

Presently, Songsareks make up only a small portion of the Garo population. Christianity has been essential to primary education in Meghalaya, and over the past couple of decades the vast majority of the Garo have become Christians. Songsareks, or “the ones who obey the deities” (*mitde manigipa*) as they refer to themselves, only remain in a few rural pockets.



FIGURE 1. Detail from a 2006 calendar, distributed by the “Garo Youth and Cultural Organization.” The calendar shows a photo montage of a Christian Garo college student against a backdrop of Songsarek dancers (A’chik Youth and Cultural Organization, 2006).



FIGURE 2: Meghalaya politician Purno Sangma, with a picture of a Wangala dancing troupe as a backdrop (detail from a calendar distributed during an election campaign in 2009).

It seems unlikely that Wangala previously enjoyed great prominence among Garo subgroups other than the Ambeng, if it was celebrated among other groups at all. But over the last couple of decades, Wangala has become a core element of what has emerged as a shared Garo culture.

Over this period, performances of Wangala dancing have gained prominence in out-of-village contexts, in a secular public sphere. Whenever a department of Meghalaya state hosts an event at which “Garo culture” needs to be showcased, Wangala dancing is performed. On such occasions, a group of villagers or students is paid to perform in front of an audience. These performances are inspired by government-sponsored dance festivals. The most extensive of these is the “Hundred Drums Wangala” festival, held annually at Asanangri. This festival has emerged at the initiative of local historians and folklorists, who have been instrumental in the promotion of a joint Garo culture. Pictures relating to such “staged” Wangala dance performances frequently appear in the regional press. Images of Wangala dancing or Garo in Wangala attire are also popular illustrations on calendars of cultural or political organizations who want to identify themselves emphatically as Garo (FIGURE 1).

Along the same lines, local politicians who want to emphasize their Garo background present themselves on campaign posters and on calendars against a backdrop of Wangala dancers (FIGURE 2).

From the early 1990s onwards, inspired by Catholic Taizé missionaries, Bangladeshi Garo have also organized Wangala dance festivals in Dhaka. More recently, festivals have also been organized in Mymensingh and near Haluaghat, towns located in the “Garo belt” along the Indian border.⁷

Wangala dancing also features increasingly on popular photo and video sharing sites on the internet.⁸ Many of these postings derive from urban youth (who have access to cameras and computers), and relate to dance festivals and other “staged” events at which Wangala is performed, such as the Hundred Drums Wangala Festival, or the Williamnagar Winter Festival. Whereas the majority of the postings are by Garo living in India, Wangala has also become an important cultural anchor for Bangladeshi Garo. Wangala dance performances, in other words, have become iconic as part of the expression of “Garoness,” or a newly developed political Garo identity.

PERFORMANCE, INTENTIONALITY, AND EFFICACY

It is often assumed that rituals or other “meaningful” cultural performances lose cultural value once they become commodified. APPADURAI (1986) defines commodities as objects of economic value, that is, objects included in an exchange. Often it means that a commodity is exchanged for money. For village-level Wangala performances, dancers are never paid. The students who took part in the Republic Day parade and their coaches received payment for their efforts—participants in other “staged” Wangala performances are also paid. According to SCHECHNER’s (1988, 141–42) efficacy-entertainment juxtaposition, the performance of staged rituals lacks “commitment” from the side of the performers, producers, and audience. Consequently, such performances also lack ritual significance: they may entertain but they cannot be efficacious. In other words, as soon as somebody performs on “stage” in order to earn money, or has monetary gain from performances in other ways, that decreases the cultural value of the performance. Of course, Schechner presents these two positions as extremes within a broader palette. He is aware that rituals can have entertaining elements and that staged performances can also be efficacious. Nonetheless, ritual is by his definition more efficacious than theater. His argument presumes an authenticity or even cultural essence in “traditional” rituals that is absent in “nontraditional” settings.

This article shows that rather than losing significance, the shifting stage results in Wangala dance performances being attributed new meanings. Shifting Wangala dance performances from their “traditional” setting towards new stages, as well as their mediatization in newspaper articles, television broadcasts, calendars, and so on, does not necessarily devalue them culturally, nor do the people involved understand such performances as less efficacious. How do ritual efficacy and interpretations change as Wangala dance performances are reconfigured, presented at new “stages,” and become mediatized to reach far beyond the erstwhile village context?

THE CHRISTIANITY–SONGSAREK DIVIDE

As mentioned above, Wangala is an important annual celebration for Ambeng Songsareks. It is generally presumed that before the emergence of Christianity, all Garo were Songsarek. Considering this rootedness of Wangala dancing in

a Songsarek religious festival, it may come as a surprise that it has emerged as a core element of a unified, dominantly Christian Garo culture. Nowadays most Garo are Christians and, as elsewhere among the hill societies of Northeast India, Christianity has emerged as an important marker by which Garo distinguish themselves as hill people, as opposed to Hindus and Muslims, who are thought to belong to the plains. In the Garo hills, Christianity has strongly been promoted by schools. In the mid-nineteenth century, when formal education was introduced, schools were created and run by missionaries, resulting in a seemingly natural merger between “modern” knowledge and the gospel. Consequently, those who went to school adopted Christianity. Conversion was in line with the expectations of the teachers, but it also allowed people to culturally distance themselves from their Songsarek contemporaries. However, it took many years, presumably until the 1970s, before primary education extended to the even more remote rural areas, and the majority of the Garo converted.

As I have argued elsewhere (DE MAAKER 2013), conversion to Christianity resulted in a gradual transformation of people’s world view rather than a kind of “radical changeover” that missionaries projected (CAREY 1993; PIANAZZI 1934). Nevertheless, becoming a Christian implied for converts the prohibition to consult, worship, or otherwise acknowledge the Songsarek deities, which in the missionary discourse were generally denounced as “demons” or “devils.” Those who became Christians could no longer participate in any of the frequent collective Songsarek ritual celebrations. Some of these were held annually, to facilitate and promote the growth of the swidden crops (such as Wangala). Others were organized only in specific circumstances, when the need to communicate with the deities arose. Such occasions included attempts at healing someone who was severely ill or the inauguration of a newly built (or newly roofed) house. The withdrawal of Christian converts from these collective rituals resulted in a weakening of the sociopolitical networks these tied in with, as well as the associated definitions of status, prestige, and wealth.

Conversion to Christianity required people to abandon Songsarek religious practices. Consequently, they could also distance themselves from obligations to support relatives, neighbors, and friends who engaged in these. Christianity taught new notions of modesty, such as the indecency of women going around with uncovered breasts. It also denounced the potlatch-like feasting that is part and parcel of most of the Songsarek celebrations (the sacrifice of animals, and days and nights of drinking rice beer). Instead, Christians advocated a “modern” morality in which female modesty, the abstaining from (home-brewed) alcohol, and the accumulation of assets linked to the nuclear family is positively valued.

Given that almost all Songsarek villagers are illiterate, they are seriously restricted in their engagement with the modern bureaucratic state. After all, they cannot deal with any texts, such as application forms, without the help of literate Garo (Christians). In an environment in which the state is an important source of benefits, this has far reaching consequences. Songsarek villagers are often poor and powerless; Garo Christians, notably those living in urban environments, are in comparison well off or extremely rich and have privileged access to political power.

Educated Garo who live in (semi-) urban environments generally look down upon village life. Village practices are generally seen as old fashioned (if not ancient) and inefficient. Villages are categorized as being in need of development. This applies in particular to Songsarek-dominated villages. These sorts of judgments are communicated in informal conversations but also emerge in more official documents. A report I received from an officer involved with a community development project in a Songsarek majority area mentioned that “before our intervention, the rural community lived in semi-darkness without any contact with the outside world” (IFAD 2010). After the successful implementation of the project, the village concerned looked “more civilized and refined.”

The positioning of Songsarek Garo at a lower level of civilization also allows for them to be heralded for their craftsmanship, their knowledge of nature, and the extent to which they manage to—at least in theory—live in harmony with it. A senior civil servant characterized a Songsarek majority village in a development proposal as:

Nestled in the lap of nature, it has a picture-perfect setting of a gurgling rivulet gushing nearby, luxuriant foliage, tall trees... and on raised mounds the most beautiful settlements primitive simple minds could conjure and construct.... It feels like being transported back in time to a fossilized past of leisure and plentitude, forlorn traditions and customs, self-sufficiency and contentment.

(OFFICE OF THE SUB-DIVISIONAL OFFICER 2010).

These romantic notions of village life tie in well with the perception of the Songsareks as guardians of the “original” Garo culture.

Accounts of Garo history generally assume that the forebears of the present-day Garo were the first settlers in the region. This claim to “firstness” derives from mythological accounts, oral histories that refer to a time immemorial, “thousands and thousands of years ago” (SANGMA 1981). It is often reiterated in local publications, such as the issue of the magazine *Chimik* whose cover features a representation of the belief that Garo migrated from Tibet (FIGURE 3). Subsequently, the general presumption is that the forebears of the present-day Garo lived their lives more or less unchanged until the region was absorbed into the colonial state. Education and missionization resulted, for those Garo that it applied to, in a “conversion to modernity” (VAN DER VEER 1996a). Those who remained Songsareks would then have continued the lifestyle of the ancestors.

To Garo Christians, Songsareks are their contemporaries. At the same time, many Garo Christians consider them as their predecessors in an ideological and civilizational sense. Nevertheless, the unique cultural traits of Garo ethnicity are rooted in the practices and beliefs of Garo Songsareks. Therefore, Garo Songsareks are to all Garo a valuable cultural resource, possessing knowledge that “modern” Garo have long forgotten. As one of the Garo coaches of the Republic Day parade troupe said: “In an urban area... you’ll get a mixed culture, a modified culture. In the rural areas, you’ll find the pure [culture].”

Nevertheless, in (Songsarek) village/(Christian) town, most people tend to perceive “us” and “them” relationships relating to distinct cultural domains. There

is a sense of alienation experienced both by Songsarek villagers when they are with the urban, educated elite, and conversely by townspeople when they visit Songsarek-dominated villages. Although there are of course many people who are able to function in both domains, the alienation that some people tend to sense when crossing over from one domain into the other does not diminish.

WANGALA IN A SONGSAREK-DOMINATED VILLAGE

As previously noted, Garo Songsareks celebrate Wangala at the village level, the start date being fixed by the head of the village. At the opening of the festival, families make offerings in their fields. In the house of the village head, this is followed by a joint sacrifice to the deities and the reading of an omen that relates to the carrying of the crops for the coming year. Subsequently, a man who acts as a shaman or priest chants the myth of creation as he dances with many others from inside the village headman's house onto the courtyard in front of it. There, a variety of dances are performed, in the course of which the Songsarek deities are fed with cooked rice.

Wangala dancing is primarily a group dance. It involves an equal number of men and women who, for most of the time, dance in rows next to each other. Each man carries a wooden drum (*dama*), which has two drumheads. The production of these drums used to be the prerogative of young men who, during their adolescence, stayed in a collective bachelors' house. The drums are made of hardwood, and I was told that their production, with fire and a chisel the only tools, involves many days of arduous labor.⁹ One of the consequences of the conversion to Christianity

is that the bachelors' houses have been abandoned, even in villages where Songsareks continue to dominate. Consequently, the production of new drums has become extremely rare today, if it has not ceased entirely.

The dancers dance to the rhythm that the men play on the drums, performing a series of stylized movements. These movements are often either inspired by particular animals (such as "doves pecking"), or by agricultural techniques ("harvesting swidden rice"). Wangala dancing connects people to the deities, reiterating their claim to the land they live on, and the forests and fields that belong to it. The most important Wangala rituals are only performed at the instigation of, and in, or next to, the house of the village head. This village head is also the most prominent

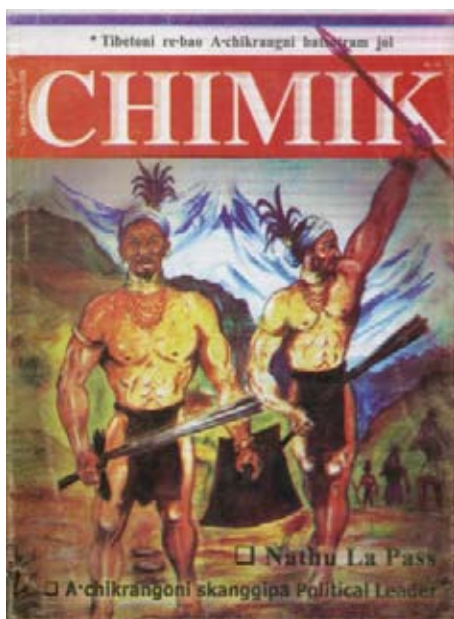


FIGURE 3. Cover of *Chimik* (vol. 4, no. 8, 2006). The headgear (turban, cocktail feather) and weapons are used in Wangala dancing today.

landowner of a village. Village-level Wangala performances therefore also result in acknowledging and emphasizing the authority and legitimacy of the village head.

Among Garo, Songsarek Wangala celebrations are less well known for their sacrificial and predictive elements than for dancing, socializing, and most of all copious drinking of home-brewed rice beer, which tend to take up the largest share of the festival. Celebrating Wangala includes making the rounds among all the (Songsarek) families residing in a particular village. One after the other, these families host a group of villagers, some of whom carry drums used for Wangala dancing. People dance to the rhythm of the drums near the house of a host, in the courtyard.

Those who want the group to visit them provide at least one vessel of rice beer. Each host is also expected to feed the visitors; the more abundant the better. People play music, sing, but most of all joke and tease each other seemingly without end. This way, the festival makes for a celebration that lasts several days, if not a week, continuing day and night. It also reputedly allows for unusually free interaction between (unmarried) men and women, which, it is said, prepares the ground for the marriage season that follows. The partying is open to all visitors—not just people from the village, but all other Garo and in fact anyone who shows up. Perhaps this is because each visitor added to the Wangala festival helps to acknowledge and strengthen the claims advanced by the inhabitants of the village to the land people live on (and off). All who take part in the celebration are expected to join in the dancing and are actively encouraged to do so. Given that the movements and steps are relatively easy to learn (at a beginner's level, that is), all who wish to do so can participate. Consequently, dancing is a way to engage all who are present and contributes significantly to Songsarek Wangala creating a sense of what TURNER (1969) has called “*communitas*.”

In the few villages where Songsareks still celebrate Wangala, Christian families obviously do not participate. In villages that converted to Christianity a long time ago, and in towns where the Songsarek practices are at best a memory of a past way of life, village-style Wangala celebrations are altogether absent. There, the



FIGURE 4. Wangala dancing in a Garo village. Photograph by the author, 15 October 2000.

social aspect has been taken over, at least to some extent, by public group dances at the time of Christmas. These are of a style that radically differs from Wangala dancing. This also involves distinct musical instruments; instead of the village-produced *dama*, people dance to the beat of a big drum as used in military bands.

WANGALA DANCING AND THE CULTURE OF “TRIBE”

Those who celebrate village-style Wangala explicitly want to include outsiders, but it is nevertheless limited to the village as a spatial realm. Much more than village-level Wangala celebrations, it is the out-of-village “staged” performances of Wangala dancing that connect Songsareks to Christians, as well as the rural poor to the urban educated and rich. This is notably so for the iconic Hundred Drums Wangala festival. Conducted annually since at least 1977, the festival is organized with the financial and logistical support of the state of Meghalaya. Among the audience are many local dignitaries, including the governor of Meghalaya, who is the highest-ranking civil servant in the state. In this festival ten dancing troupes compete, and their performances are judged by a jury of local scholars and dignitaries (each troupe has at least ten male dancers carrying a drum, hence “Hundred Drums”). The organizers of the Hundred Drums Wangala festival announce Wangala thusly:

The most significant post harvest festival of the Garos generally held in the months of October to November. It is a “Thanksgiving” ceremony to Misi Saljong... for having blessed human beings with the rich harvest of the season.¹⁰

Similar to the description of Wangala given in the program booklet of the Republic Day parade, this again places Wangala squarely in the Songsarek realm. Moreover, it again creates an ethnographic present in that it suggests that all Garo continue to be Songsareks.

The festival attracts a crowd of hundreds if not thousands and is one of the few cultural celebrations in which both Songsareks and Christians participate. About half of the dancing troupes are made up of villagers; the rest are college students. Most of the audience consists of Christian Garo. The festival is widely advertised by the tourism department of the state of Meghalaya, and it manages to attract a number of foreign tourists. Each year, their presence is highlighted in the press, communicating to the Garo (home) audience that Wangala dancing continues to have the ability to include outsiders. Such an exposure of Garo culture to the outside world is conducive to the value that people attribute to it.

The dance competition is usually won by Songsarek villagers, since “their sense of rhythm is much better than that of the students,” as a prominent Garo folklorist and historian remarked. Or, as one of the Garo coaches to the Republic Day parade troupe said, “Of course they [the Songsarek villagers] are the original dancers.” This emphasizes that Songsarek villagers continue to be regarded as custodians of “true” Garo culture. Wangala dancing continues to be experienced as the prerogative of the Songsareks, whose performances the college students are trying to imitate if not match. Another of the Garo coaches involved with the Republic

Day parade Wangala performance remarked on the educational value of college students learning Wangala dancing: “Wangala dancing is from the non-Christians [the Songsareks], but for our students it is important to get an idea how our ancestors engaged in merry making.” Although he again equated contemporary Songsareks to “ancestors,” this remark makes explicit that Songsarek practices are considered a cultural resource for contemporary Garo. This take is also apparent from a remark made by someone else: “We have to pass the traditions on to the new generations. Otherwise, there will be a time when our children will not know the identity of our people, our culture; and how our forefathers, the Garo, acted, what their beliefs and traditions were.” And one of the coaches to the Republic Day parade troupe added, “We [Garo] need to be aware of the earlier culture, otherwise all will be lost.”

However, the contrast between Christians and Songsareks is not that easily overcome. For Songsarek culture to become presentable within a broader context, it needs to be sanitized and stripped of uncouth elements in order to make it acceptable. One of the coaches of the Republic Day parade troupe said, “We don’t want to change the culture, [but] we need to polish it.” He added: “We have to clean the culture, in order to make it acceptable for the present.” Garo Wangala, when presented at out-of-village stages, is stripped of its “crude” sides. It does not come with the libertine connotations that are integral to the village level celebrations. During the Republic Day parade the students danced with dried gourds (*pongs*) that imply in a Songsarek context the drinking of rice beer. However, the *pongs* did not contain rice beer, not only because the Indian president would not be appreciative of that, but because the students themselves would not want to be publicly associated with “Songsarek” rice beer. This sanitizing of Songsarek practices at times takes on unpleasant forms, for instance when the sellers of rice beer at local markets see their vessels smashed by the members of a militant youth organization.

The Indian state categorizes the Garo as a “tribe.” Emphasizing the cultural distinctiveness of “tribes” in their definition of this term, the state claims that tribes are “known to dwell in compact areas, follow a community way of living, in harmony with nature, and have a uniqueness of culture, distinctive customs, traditions and beliefs which are simple, direct and non-acquisitive by nature” (MINISTRY OF TRIBAL AFFAIRS, 2007). According to this definition, a tribe is isolated, its social structure inward looking, with a world view and lifestyle that is close to nature, and a culture that is unique. This suggests a certain vulnerability that the state intends to compensate for by means of protective measures.

For the Garo, being categorized as a “tribe” has resulted in the bestowal of important economic, administrative, judicial, and educational benefits. In Meghalaya, only “tribals” can buy land, and the Garo are exempted from the payment of income tax. Most of the government jobs in the state are reserved for “tribals,” as are seats in government schools and colleges. These benefits are of such magnitude that within India as a whole a considerable number of groups, who are not categorized as “tribals,” make an effort to match the criteria set by the Indian state, as they want to qualify for these sort of benefits as well. Garo living across

the international border in Bangladesh do not enjoy such benefits, and envy the Indian Garo for the special provisions they have managed to secure.

Presenting Garo Wangala as a central element of Garo culture suggests that Garo continue to be Songsareks, living in villages, and conducting swidden agriculture. This is obviously incorrect, but it does allow for emphasizing the originality and uniqueness of Garo culture, thus allowing the Garo to meet the characteristics that the Indian state has formulated for “tribes.” Moreover, it connects to popular perceptions among the Indian audience, which locates a “tribe” such as the Garo culturally in a timeless past, supporting the claim that they are the original “indigenous” population. This explains why performances and media representations of Wangala dancing are also popular with politically and culturally vocal Garo student unions, youth organizations, and political parties. Groups like these, who claim Garo precedence, demand rights and benefits that often discriminate against other communities. The bitter conflicts that result are fought both in the political arena, as well as outside it.

CONCLUSIONS

In this article, I have shown that Wangala dancing is attributed meaning across various settings, from Songsarek villagers, urban-educated Christian Garo, politically-active ethno-nationalist organizations, to the organizers of the 2008 Republic Day parade. Practitioners, organizers, and audiences need not agree on a single meaning of Wangala dancing in order to agree that it is important. This links up with the argument made by HUMPHREY and LAIDLAW (1994, 5) with reference to Jain rituals. They showed that rather than carrying a single message, Jain rituals usually have multiple meanings. What matters is the overall agreement among participants that a particular ritual is important and is charged with a certain intentionality. Consequently, the performance is “about” something, although people need not be explicit about, or agree on, what that something is. It is the attribution of intentionality that counts.

The Wangala dance included in the Republic Day parade lends itself to distinct, quite divergent readings, which all attribute intentionality to the performance. For the Garo students who took part in the Republic Day celebrations, the adventure of going to Delhi and performing on the national stage was exciting and challenging. It was a way to represent their community nationally and served to contribute to the recognition of the Garo as a separate community by the Indian state. Such a reading emphasizes “presence,” and is in line with the Indian state being the most important body towards which demands of an administrative, judicial, and financial nature are being formulated by politically vocal Garo organizations.

From the perspective of the Indian state, the participation of the Garo students to the Republic Day parade can be understood as an expression of loyalty of the Garo towards that state. Alternatively, it can be seen as an expression of their subjugation to that state. The parade first and foremost showcases the aptness and valor of the Indian military, emphasizing its ability to repel outside threats, rather than showcasing “culture.” It is no secret that these same military have the poten-

tial to quell any internal opposition. Therefore, many people who are critical of the Indian state consider the Republic Day parade an expression of the political center's will to dominate and control India's diverse populace.

Inclusion of Wangala dancing in the parade also presents the Indian state as a guardian of pristine, vulnerable cultures, which it manages to nurture, protect, and sustain. This guardianship is important in the context of the Indian constitution, which defines the Indian nation in terms of unity in diversity, a secular nation not dominated by one religion or ethnicity. In this respect, as well as in the former (which emphasizes coercion), the Garo student group was exemplary for similar "marginal" communities, both in Northeast India, as elsewhere in the country.

To the national audience of the Republic Day parade, the dances are presented as bearing witness to the endurance of "tribal" culture in Northeast India—even though it is obvious to all that a folklorized performance is given, and the Garo coaches considered the performance far removed from what they considered "real" Wangala dancing. The paradox between genuine and folklorized culture is overcome by placing present-day Wangala dance performances in line with imagined earlier performances of the dance, as well as the Wangala celebrations of contemporary Songsareks. That Wangala is (according to these readings) part of a religious festival adds to its efficacy, and thus merit, and the suggestion that all Garo continue to be Songsareks does so as well. For a cultural expression such as Wangala dancing to be regarded meaningful in the present, it needs to connect to an imagined cultural past.

Interestingly, nobody considered the "derived" nature of the Wangala dance included in the Republic Day parade truly an issue. The Garo students did not really mind adapting the dance (although they did not want to give up their cocktail feathers), perhaps since for them Wangala dancing is learned at school and they lack a connection to village-level performances. In the interview that I had with them, the Garo coaches mentioned the lack of authenticity,¹¹ but considering that the dance was in the first place meant to please a national audience, it was best that it had been modified. The organizers of the parade, who demanded many of the modifications made, did not insist on authenticity either.

In the introduction I argued that the relationship between what is considered "real" or "authentic" and what is "derived" is of relevance for the popular appreciation of Wangala. People grant what they consider "authentic" consistently more merit than what they consider its "derivatives," yet the "derivatives" are instrumental in the attribution of value to the "authentic." Hundred Drums Wangala and the Wangala performances included in the Republic Day celebrations can be meaningful because they are considered "derivatives" of village-level Wangala performances. But Songsarek celebrations, at the village level, also gained more clout, once the "staged" Wangala dance performances had garnered more attention. The "staged" performances have heightened the interest in the village-level Wangala performances.

How do these readings connect to the earlier (and to some extent contemporary) religious village performances, in which powerful concepts such as creation, relations to land, fertility, and community play a central role? Without wanting to argue that Wangala dancing has an intrinsic meaning to it, it is clear from the data

provided above that across all “stages” Wangala dancing expresses the relationship of people to their land. This holds true for the Songsareks, student groups, politicians, and the Indian state. One important element of village-level Wangala performances is that they emphasize and strengthen the claims made by the village head, and through him by the village as a whole, towards the village’s land. The presumed authenticity of the performances presents these claims as unchallengeable.

As a large-scale Wangala dance festival, the Hundred Drums Wangala has a secular nature (although a small Songsarek sacrifice is performed on the festival grounds, the day before the actual dance festival, as if not to totally disregard the religious connotations that Wangala has for them). But the festival, widely advertised as showcasing Garo culture, and firmly backed by Meghalaya State (financially, as well as by dignitaries), no doubt confirms the claim that the Garo are the majority community in the western part of Meghalaya. The festival communicates to people outside Garo Hills, both in India as well as abroad (the festival features on the internet) that the Garo community is culturally vibrant, present, and the legal majority status in the region concerned. Along the same lines, the performance of Wangala dancing during the Republic Day parade provides visible and audible evidence of the Garo community being included in the Indian state, which also encompasses the land that “belongs” to the Garo.

Wangala dancing, performed in various settings, across various “stages,” and mediated in distinct ways, allows for distinct and even contradictory interpretations. But whoever patronizes Garo Wangala appears to make a statement in relation to imaginations of a “Garo nation,” and the land that is presumed to belong to it.

NOTES

1. The case analyzed in this article is also mentioned in DE MAAKER et al. (2011).
2. “Tribe” is widely used in South Asia for communities who are supposedly outside the caste hierarchy, and who are believed to be marginal in relation to the Hindu and Muslim mainstream. The term originates from colonial attempts at social classification and is embedded in nineteenth century theories of race (SKARIA 1999). But even though the term lacks empirical ground, its administrative and political usage in India (and neighboring countries in South Asia) has made it part and parcel of the South Asian sociological discourse (SCHENDEL 2011).
3. Animal rights activism and vegetarianism are often presented as Hindu virtues in India, locating non-vegetarians at the fringes (if not outside) of a Hindu-dominated cultural framework (VAN DER VEER 1996b). For Hindu nationalists (such as Maneka Gandhi’s BJP) this is helpful to marginalize Muslims (known for eating goat’s meat and beef), but it also contributes to the cultural marginalization of Northeast Indian communities such as the Garo, whom are ardent non-vegetarians.
4. The Garo students are referred to as belonging to the “Northeast Zone Cultural Center in Dimapur, Nagaland,” which seems odd given that neither the students nor the coaches had anything to do with that center, and Dimapur is about four hundred kilometers east of the Garo Hills. In all likelihood, the request to participate had been filed by the organizers of the parade to this center, which then, in turn, approached the Directorate of Culture in Meghalaya, which arranged for the Garo coaches and subsequently the participating students.
5. Most ethnographies list the A’beng, Akawés or Awés, Atong, Chisak, and Machi as major divisions, and the Atiagras, Chibok, Dual, Ganching or Gara, Matjanchi or Matabeng,

Koch, and Ruga as minor ones. These groups were first mentioned in Playfair's monograph—he already expressed doubts about some of the smaller groups. He wrote for example about the Matabeng: "They claim that they are a distinct division, but their language and geographical distribution make it more than likely that in them is to be found a mingling of the Abeng and Machi" (PLAYFAIR 1975, 60).

One of these subgroups, the Lyngam, speak a language that is generally not even categorized as a dialect of Garo. The same holds to some extent for the language spoken by the A'tong subgroup.

6. Garo Songsarek beliefs presume a world that has been created, and is occupied by, innumerable deities. Knowledge accumulated over generations has taught people the identity and characteristics of some of these, but the majority of the deities remain unknown. The preceding generations have also developed ritual techniques that have proven efficacious in engaging the deities, and are therefore resorted to whenever required (DE MAAKER, 2006).

7. See "Wanna celebration in Mymensingh," *The Daily Star*, 14 December 2011. <http://www.thedailystar.net/newDesign/news-details.php?nid=214033> (accessed 12 September 2013).

8. Popular video sharing sites on the internet have many entries for "Wangala." On YouTube, among the abundant examples are "Garo Dance (Wangala)," <<http://youtu.be/VlShacLYuo>>; "Wangala Dance," <<http://youtu.be/NnMoQdXUD0U>>. On Vimeo, see "Wangala A Garo Festival," <http://tinyurl.com/occp8gn> (all accessed 12 September 2013). Searches on photo sharing sites such as Picasa or Flickr also result in a large number of hits.

9. During the two years of fieldwork that I conducted in Garo Hills, between 1999 and 2001, I talked extensively with several men who had stayed in a collective bachelor's house during their adolescence. One of them was Dioson (Biki) Mangsang Sangma, who I interviewed several times. He specifically mentioned the production of the drums in an interview that I had with him on 29 January 2001.

10. See <http://hundreddrumswangalafestival.blogspot.nl> (accessed 9 January 2013).

11. Interview conducted with Armstrong Sangma and Auxilia Sangma, 10 January 2012.

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