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Negotiating life: Garo death rituals and the transformation of society

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NEGOTIATING LIFE
Garò Death Rituals and the Transformation of Society

PROEFSCHRIFT

TER VERKRIJGING VAN
DE GRAAD VAN DOCTOR AAN DE UNIVERSITEIT LEIDEN,
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Cover photo's:

Discussing *ma'gual* at the mortuary ritual of Sisi M. Sangma.

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For the people of Sadolpara

TABLE OF CONTENTS

List of figures	viii
List of maps	xi
List of photographs	xi
Remarks on the Garo language and its transcription	xiii
Glossary	xiv
Acknowledgements.....	xvi
I	INTRODUCTION
	1.1 The dead and the living.....
	1.2 Perspectives on Garo mortuary rituals
	1.3 Positioning Songsarek Garo.....
	1.4 A site for fieldwork.....
	1.5 Researching rituals of death
	1.6 Outline of the argument.....
II	THE HOUSE: BETWEEN DESCENT AND ALLIANCE
	2.1 Introduction
	2.2 Houses define people.....
	2.3 Conceptualizations of descent.....
	2.4 How Houses come into existence
	2.5 Enduring alliances.....
	2.6 From kin ties to inter-House relationships
	2.7 Summary.....
III	SUBSTANTIATING RELATIONSHIPS AMONGST HOUSES
	3.1 Introduction
	3.2 The deities, life giving and ferocious
	3.3 Titles to land.....
	3.4 Titles to <i>a•king</i> land, <i>kram</i> -drums and inter-House relationships
	3.5 The usufruct of <i>a•king</i>
	3.6 Sacrificing for the life of rice
	3.7 Summary.....

IV	THE <i>JANGGI</i> AND THE <i>MI•MANG</i>	
	4.1 Introduction	81
	4.2 The cycle of the soul.....	81
	4.3 Rebirth	83
	4.4 Relatedness of the <i>janggi</i>	88
	4.5 Death and <i>marang</i>	91
	4.6 Summary.....	95
V	TOWARDS SEPARATION	
	5.1 Introduction	97
	5.2 Anticipating death.....	97
	5.3 Endorsing death	100
	5.4 Relating goods from the House of the deceased person to the corpse.....	102
	5.5 Broadening the involvement with the deceased person	104
	5.6 Displaying defiance in the face of death.....	106
	5.7 Lamenting the fate of the dead man or woman	110
	5.8 Enabling commensality.....	112
	5.9 Summary.....	114
VI	ASSESSING HOUSE RELATIONSHIPS	
	6.1 Introduction	117
	6.2 Offering money and cows to the House of the dead man or woman	117
	6.3.1 Gifts to the Houses of mothers of the deceased person ...	123
	6.3.2 The offering of slings and coins	125
	6.3.3 The symbolism of <i>ma•gual</i>	128
	6.3.4 The responsibility for the distribution of <i>ma•gual</i>	132
	6.3.5 Negotiating the transfer of <i>ma•gual</i>	136
	6.4.1 The implications of <i>ukam</i>	147
	6.4.2 Initiating <i>ukam</i>	150
	6.4.3 Redeeming <i>ukam</i> debts that are pending.....	156
	6.5 Summary.....	167
VII	THE TRANSFORMATION OF THE SOCIAL IMAGE	
	7.1 Introduction	171
	7.2 Removing the corpse from the House.....	171
	7.3 The disposal of the corpse	174
	7.4 Re-engaging the deceased person.....	178
	7.5 The continuing importance of the remains.....	182
	7.6 Representations of the deceased person in the courtyard	188
	7.7 Summary.....	195

VIII	ACHIEVING <i>A•KIM</i> REPLACEMENT	
	8.1 Introduction	199
	8.2 The appointment of an heir couple	199
	8.3 Arranging <i>a•kim</i> replacement at the time of the mortuary ritual	205
	8.4 Extending <i>a•kim</i> replacement.....	211
	8.5 Summary.....	214
IX	CONCLUSION	
	9.1 Introduction	217
	9.2 The implications of death for the deceased person.....	217
	9.3 Negotiating relationships among Houses	219
	9.4 Change and continuity	223
	Appendix A: The relationships between gifts ‘to help,’ <i>ma•gual</i> and <i>ukam</i>	225
	Appendix B: List of funerals analyzed	230
	Appendix C: Index of the cases discussed in the text	231
	Bibliography	232
	Dutch summary	242
	Curriculum Vitae	248
	Appendix D: DVD-Video ‘An Untimely Death’	inside back cover

LIST OF FIGURES

Chapter 2	The House: between descent and alliance
Figure 1	The floor plan of a <i>nok mandi</i> .
Figure 2	Categories of descent reflect in people's surnames.
Figure 3	A senior couple appoints one of their daughters and her husband as their heirs.
Figure 4	Upon death of the senior husband, his heir marries polygamously to the widow.
Figure 5	The widower marries a replacement wife, which inhibits the succession of the heirs.
Figure 6	A young man who replaces a deceased spouse, marries polygamously to the widow and her daughter.
Figure 7	Tracing relationships by birth, as well as due to <i>a•kim</i> replacement.
Chapter 3	Substantiating relationships amongst Houses
Figure 8	The rituals of the annual cycle.
Chapter 5	Towards separation
Figure 9	The House of Sisi, in relation to the House in which she was born.
Figure 10	Only men of the Houses indicated can hack at the altars and the house when a man has died.
Figure 11	Only men of the Houses indicated can hack at the altars and the house when a woman has died.
Chapter 6	Assessing House relationships
Figure 12	The various times and locations to offer a cow for a deceased person of another House.
Figure 13	Houses eligible for <i>ma•gual</i> , slings and coins at the death of a woman.
Figure 14	Houses eligible for <i>ma•gual</i> , slings and coins at the death of a married man.
Figure 15	The circulation of a single piece of female gendered jewelry that is transferred as <i>ma•gual</i> at successive mortuary rituals.

- Figure 16 Heirlooms that are only transferred at the death of a man change *ba•saa* (and *chatchi*) each time that they are offered as *ma•gual*.
- Figure 17 Deciding on *ma•gual* for Tajak and Balmoni.
- Figure 18 The relationship between the genealogy that a House of a mother traces to a deceased person, the gifts that it presents ‘to help,’ the ritual acts that it engages in, and the significance of the *ma•gual* that it receives.
- Figure 19 The relationships between Diran and Arseng.
- Figure 20 The relationship between Chama and Nagal.
- Figure 21 An *ukam* exchange encompasses two mortuary rituals (I and II), that can occur years apart.
- Figure 22 The retroactive inclusion of a cow in an *ukam* exchange.
- Figure 23 The relationship between the Houses of Mingsin and Nangseng.
- Figure 24 Exchanging *ukam* at the deaths of Salchi and Sisi.
- Figure 25 The Houses of Diran and Natsing.
- Figure 26 Gifts accepted by the House of Diran, at the death of Jonggan.
- Figure 27a Gifts accepted by the House of Natsing, at the death of Diran.
- Figure 27b The gift returned by the House of Natsing to that of Diran.
- Figure 28 Exchanges between the Houses of Diran and Natsing, calculated from the perspective of the House of Diran.
- Figure 29 The Houses of Raksin, Naleng and Diran.
- Figure 30 Gifts accepted by the Houses of Raksin and Diran, at the death of Raksin.
- Figure 31a Money ‘to help’ given by Simeng to the House of Diran.
- Figure 31b *Ukam* given by the representatives of the House of Diran to Simeng.
- Figure 31c Additional *ukam* given by representatives of the House of Diran to Simeng.
- Figure 31d *Ukam* that was returned by Simeng to a representative of the House of Diran.
- Figure 32 Cumulative exchanges between the Houses of Diran and Raksin/ Simeng, calculated from the perspective of the House of Diran.

Chapter 7	The transformation of the social image
Figure 33	The transformation of the social image of a deceased person in the course of the mortuary ritual and beyond.
Chapter 8	Achieving <i>a•kim</i> replacement
Figure 34	The replacement of Diran by Ratjen.
Figure 35	Rajeng and Netjak ‘look after’ Jengda.
Figure 36	Miknang replaces Magil as the husband of Migat.
Figure 37	The ‘catch and stay with’ marriage of Oldap and Win.
Appendix A	The relationships between gifts ‘to help,’ <i>ma•gual</i> and <i>ukam</i> .
Figure 38	Combination I (table). Both Houses regard each other’s dead as matrilineal relatives.
Figure 39	Combination I (diagram). Both Houses regard each other’s dead as matrilineal relatives
Figure 40	Combination II (table). Only the second deceased person qualifies as a matrilineal relative.
Figure 41	Combination II (diagram). Only the second deceased person qualifies as a matrilineal relative
Figure 42	Combination III (table). Only the first deceased person qualifies as a matrilineal relative.
Figure 43	Combination III (diagram). Only the first deceased person qualifies as a matrilineal relative.’
Figure 44	Combination IV (table). Neither the first nor the second deceased person qualifies as a matrilineal relative of the other House.
Figure 45	Combination IV (diagram). Neither the first nor the second deceased person qualifies as a matrilineal relative of the other House.

LIST OF MAPS

Map 1	The Garo Hills, the westernmost part of the State of Meghalaya (India).
Map 2	Sadolpara and surrounding villages.
Map 3	The <i>delim</i> -map of Sadolpara <i>a•king</i> .
Map 4	A•jigre <i>gittim</i> , one of the wards of Sadolpara.

LIST OF PHOTOGRAPHS

Photograph 1	Women mourn the death of Sisi.
Photograph 2	Jiji.
Photograph 3	Biki, one of the most accomplished priests of Sadolpara.
Photograph 4	Meji, the younger sister of Jiji, taking a break from weeding her swidden.
Photograph 5	A <i>nok mandi</i> , seen from the front.
Photograph 6	The rear of a <i>nok mandi</i> .
Photograph 7	A chicken intestine.
Photograph 8	Tami and Gushen in the days that they were getting to know each other.
Photograph 9	A sacrifice to Risi (I).
Photograph 10	A sacrifice to Risi (II).
Photograph 11	The <i>kusi</i> of Sadolpara.
Photograph 12	The <i>kram</i> and <i>natik</i> of the House of Jiji.
Photograph 13	Jiji cuts the umbilical cord with a bamboo knife.
Photograph 14	Meji ties the placenta between halved bamboos.
Photograph 15	The father of the newborn disposes of the placenta by tying it on a tree.
Photograph 16	The imprint of a tiger that has rummaged the ashes of a cremation.
Photograph 17	Heirloom jewelry and coins displayed on the chest of the deceased Sisi.
Photograph 18	People driving a cow to a mortuary ritual that is held in another village.
Photograph 19	The tail of a party that is heading for a funeral.
Photograph 20	A funeral pyre, constructed under the guidance of senior men.
Photograph 21	A grave is dug at a dedicated plot in the jungle.
Photograph 22	Following a cremation some of the charred bones are buried in a shallow hole.

- Photograph 23 A repository is constructed in front of the house of the deceased.
- Photograph 24 Shares of newly harvested swidden rice that have been offered as 'rice on the stalk' for a recently deceased person.
- Photograph 25 The effigy of a deceased man, in front of the house that he used to live in.
- Photograph 26 The effigy of Sisi on the day that it was made.
- Photograph 27 An effigy, about a month after it was made.
- Photograph 28 After one or two years the face of an effigy has disappeared, and most of the clothes have rotted away.
- Photograph 29 Once the base of an effigy has been eaten by termites, it falls and disintegrates.
- Photograph 30 The size of the cluster of *kimbrongs* near a house is an indication of the capacity of a House to offer cows for its own dead, as well as for the dead of other Houses.

REMARKS ON THE GARO LANGUAGE AND ITS TRANSCRIPTION

The Garo language has a number of dialects. In school people learn Awe, which is regarded standard Garo. The pronunciation of Awe differs from that of A•beng, the dialect that people use in the rural areas of West Garo Hills (in Awe referred to as Ambeng). Most of the Garo cited in this text is A•beng. I have not converted this A•beng into Awe, since that would devalue A•beng as a dialect in its own right. Consequently, the spelling used here differs from that which is used in standard Garo dictionaries such as Harendra W. Marak's 'Ku•bidik' (2000). Such dictionaries tend to be geared towards Awe spelling.

The various Garo dialects have not been described in detail, and many of the words or specific meanings of words used in the area where the fieldwork was conducted are not found in any of the existing dictionaries. In particular, little attention has been given to the use of words in relation to the Songsarek faith, the local Garo religion.

It is standard to write Garo using the Roman alphabet. In this text, the (•) sign indicates the *raka* or glottal stop. A *raka*, placed in a word, indicates that the sound of the syllable preceding it ends abruptly.

The text has many Garo quotations that are translated into English. These translations stay as close to the Garo meaning as possible. Wherever required, I am providing a more liberal interpretation between square brackets ('[' and ']'). Garo terms for which no satisfactory English equivalent exists are consistently placed between quotation marks (as in 'head' of the House). This indicates that the English term used is no more than an approximation of the original Garo word.

Regarding many of the Garo quotations cited, a full Garo transcript is provided in a footnote. These footnotes end with an archival code that refers to the place of the particular fragment on a research video tape. This code is formatted as: VTx yy:yy–zz:zz. 'VT' stands for Video Tape, and 'x' for the archival number of the tape. 'Yy:yy' and 'zz:zz' indicate respectively the start and end time code of the particular quotation.

GLOSSARY

<i>a•kim</i>	Marriage alliance, which involves the obligation for the kin group of either spouse to replace him or her upon death.
<i>a•king</i>	All the land that belongs to a village.
<i>a•king nokma</i>	The 'head' of the most apical House of a village
<i>a•ma</i>	All assets that are not personal property, but belong to a House.
<i>a•tot</i>	People's personal property.
<i>apa-chra</i>	For a married man, his wife's male matrilineal relatives.
<i>ba•saa</i>	A unit of descent, which can vary in size from a few dozen to a few hundred people. Frequently, most of its female members will be concentrated in a single village. Male members reside upon marriage with their wife, which usually implies that they move to another village than the one in which they were born.
<i>chatchi</i>	The most comprehensive unit of descent. The <i>chatchi</i> encompasses <i>ma•chongs</i> that are believed to have a joint origin. Most people belong either to the Sangma or the Marak <i>chatchi</i> .
<i>chra</i>	Someone's male matrilineal relatives.
<i>dama</i>	Large wooden drum which is normally kept in the bachelor's house.
<i>dol</i>	A House of ten to twenty Houses, most of which are normally located in a single ward. All these Houses relate to the <i>kram</i> -drum of a single House, which is apical to the <i>dol</i> .
<i>du•sia</i>	A ritual that is conditional to the initiation of a marriage in accordance with <i>niam</i> .
<i>janggi</i>	Immaterial component of a person, often equaled to wind or breath ('soul').
<i>kima</i>	Effigy of a deceased person, made of a wooden pole, which is placed in the courtyard of the house in which he or she lived.
<i>kimbrong</i>	A hardwooden pole that has three encircling notches on its top end, which relates to the cows that have been slaughtered for a particular deceased person at the locality where it is erected. For a single deceased person several <i>kimbrongs</i> can be made.

<i>kram</i>	Large wooden drum which is associated with the deity Risi.
<i>kusi</i>	A boulder that is regarded as a seat of the deity Guira. The boulder represents an exclusive claim to the land that surrounds it vis-a-vis people from other villages.
<i>ma•chong</i>	A unit of descent which encompasses <i>ba•saas</i> that are believed to share a joint origin.
<i>ma•gual</i>	A gift, offered by the House of a deceased person to Houses of women who classify as mothers. <i>Ma•gual</i> consists ideally of heirlooms such as brass gongs, jewelry and swords, but these are often substituted by money.
<i>marang</i>	A concept that is identified with blood, violence and death. <i>Marang</i> poses a lethal danger ('pollution').
<i>mi•mang</i>	Immaterial component of a deceased person. The <i>janggi</i> transforms into a <i>mi•mang</i> upon death ('soul').
<i>niam</i>	Guidelines for relationships among people, regarding attitudes to the deities, as well as to animals and plants ('observance').
<i>skal</i>	Usually a synonym for the deity Daini, who has taken possession of a particular insect. Simultaneously, the deity associates with the <i>janggi</i> of a person.
Songsarek	A follower of the traditional Garo religion.
<i>ukam</i>	A gift that is offered by the House of a deceased person to Houses of women who classify as mothers. <i>Ukam</i> consist ideally of an inexpensive gong, but often a little money is given instead. A House that accepts <i>ukam</i> agrees to offer a cow for the dead man or woman. Whenever a mortuary takes place in the House that took the <i>ukam</i> , it can be returned to the House that has initially offered it, obliging that House to slaughter a cow in turn.
Wangala	Festival of the annual agricultural cycle that involves offering the last of the first fruits to the deities. It is held at the changeover from the wet season to the dry season, by the end of September or early October.

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Map 1: The Garo Hills, the westernmost part of the State of Meghalaya (India) (scale 1:12.000.000).

