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## **Negotiating life: Garo death rituals and the transformation of society**

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## I INTRODUCTION

“Similar souls of the dead, similar debts.”<sup>1</sup>  
(*Mi•mang gandadi, gru gandadi.*)

paraphrase: “If the death of someone who is near to me makes you offer,  
that obliges me to offer at the death of someone who is near to you in return.”

### 1.1 The dead and the living

Some people claimed that Sisi had lived for more than a hundred years. Old, grey and blind, she looked emaciated. In the cool of early mornings or late afternoons she would sit, crouching in the courtyard. The rest of the time she stayed indoors and slept. One morning, when her husband called her for tea, he found that she had stopped breathing. Sisi’s corpse was laid-out, and valuable heirloom jewelry displayed on it. By the end of the day the corpse would be cremated. As the news spread that Sisi had died, dozens of villagers gathered in her courtyard. Many were related, others did not trace a kin tie. After a while people from neighboring villages began to arrive as well. Some of the men drove a cow, as a gift for Sisi and the widower. Twenty-two cattle were driven in, the meat of which enabled the hosts to serve a lavish meal of curry and rice to everyone present. Women brought rice and cotton as gifts for Sisi. They wailed over the corpse, lamenting the fate of her soul (photograph 1).

Most of the men who attended the mortuary ritual slipped some paper money into the front pocket of the widower, or under the collar of his shirt. It was obligatory to make such gifts. The widower reacted at each offering with a semi-surprised: “Why? Why are you doing this?” or words of equal bearing. In turn, Sisi’s sons and sons-in-law offered valuable heirlooms to some of the people attending: jewelry that had been displayed on the corpse, and gongs that were taken from a storeroom inside the house. In addition, they presented people with larger or smaller amounts of money. The most valuable heirlooms and largest sums of money were offered to female matrilineal relatives of Sisi. By accepting such a gift, they acknowledged their relationship to the deceased Sisi.

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<sup>1</sup> Remark made by Winseng (Awara) Mangsang Sangma, at the mortuary ritual of his classificatory grandfather Diran.



**Photograph 1:** Women mourn the death of Sisi. Each one of them holds a stick that has a bunch of cock tail's feathers tied to it, and waves it over the corpse. Heirloom jewelry is displayed on Sisi's chest. Behind her head is cotton wool, given to Sisi by people attending to the funeral.

Sisi was a Garo. She lived in the Garo Hills.<sup>2</sup> The Garo Hills are at the western part of a hilly range that separates Bengal from Assam (map 1).<sup>3</sup> Sisi was a Songsarek,<sup>4</sup> a follower of the traditional Garo religion. She lived in a village with a Songsarek majority. The rest of the people were Christian Garo, mostly relatively recent converts.

<sup>2</sup> The Garo Hills comprise three districts of the State of Meghalaya (North, South and West Garo Hills). These districts cover an area of approximately 340 square miles (Simon 1996:13).

<sup>3</sup> According to the Census of India, in 1991 about 540,000 people lived in the Garo Hills who regarded Garo as their mother tongue (Vijayanunni 1999:63). There are at least a quarter of a million Garo speakers in the Goalpara and Kamrup Districts of Assam (Bordoloi 1991), and another 100,000 in the Mymensingh and Modhupur regions of Bangladesh (Bal et al. 1999; Bal 2000; Bessaignet 1958; Bose 1985; Burling 1997b; Khaleque 1983, 1985; Sattar 1983). In addition, smaller Garo communities exist in Coochbehar in West Bengal (Raha 1966), but also scattered throughout Tripura (P.N. Bhattacharjee 1992) and the Khasi Hills of central Meghalaya (Basu 1994; Simon 1996:30).

<sup>4</sup> The term *songsar* is likely to derive from the Sanskrit *saà-sàra* (from *saà-si*): 'to be in the world,' as opposed to renouncing it. As such, it is mild pejorative, which is likely to stem from the people who live in the plains that surround the Garo area. The term Songsarek is presently also used, albeit sparsely, by the adherents of this faith. More often, they refer to themselves as 'the ones who are obeying the deities' (*mitde manigipa*).

Among Garo, extensive mortuary rituals (such as the one performed for Sisi) are very important events. Garo are far from unique in the prominence that they grant to rituals of death. Throughout the world funerals often demand huge expenses, and involve large numbers of people. In various recent studies attempts are made to explain the apparent universal importance of death rituals. Huntington and Metcalf (1999) examine the emotional responses to death in various societies. They show that these emotions depend on people's perception of death, and vary with the status of the deceased. Barraud, de Coppet, Iteanu, and Jamous (1994), and de Coppet (1981), emphasize the relevance of the dead for the constitution of society, suggesting that the relations which the living trace to the dead refer to an encompassing notion of social order. Bloch and Parry (1982) explore the recurring association between death and fecundity. They argue that the conversion of death into a life-generating principle requires the transposition of inherently finite biological and social processes towards a superior transcendental level. The importance of the dead for the living is also a core theme of studies by Chambert-Loir et al. (2002), Klima (2002), Venbrux (1995) and Wilson (2003).

Many modern studies of death rely to an important extent on the work of Hertz (1960[1907]). Hertz's study on the significance of second mortuary rituals formulates fundamental questions in relation to the corpse, the soul, and the condition of the mourners. Hertz argues that throughout life, a person's body and soul are united. Death transforms the body into a corpse, from which the soul dissociates itself. The mourners need to dispose of the corpse, and install the soul in an afterworld. Particularly close relatives of the deceased person are seriously constrained in their participation in daily life, until the obsequies have been completed. Hertz argues that mortuary rituals derive their often exceptional efficacy from the correspondence between the various processes that they encompass. In many societies the disposal of the corpse is a prerequisite for the establishment of the soul in the afterworld. Since the mourners conduct the funeral, they have a certain measure of control over the fate of the soul of the one who died. The restrictions that the mourners face are not lifted until the soul has reached its destination, suggesting that the dead have a certain ascendancy over the living as well.

Death ends the ability of the deceased to act in the roles that he or she previously fulfilled. This exposes the tension that exists between the sense of "relative perpetuity" that people attribute to the structure of their society, and the "impermanence of its personnel," the people who provide shape to that structure (Goody 1962:27). The death of an individual poses a threat to society. The gravity of this threat varies with the status of the deceased. The death of someone who holds only limited social responsibilities (such as a child) may not have a strong impact, but if a person of high status dies, the very relationships that organize society are challenged. Hertz argues that through the funerary rites, "society" "triumphs over death" (Hertz 1960:86). In this study I explore

how death challenges Garo society. Garo deaths demand the redefinition and often rearrangement of relationships that are fundamental to society.

People who participate in a funeral do not necessarily agree on its meaning. Between them, they are likely to interpret such an event in various ways. Rather than assuming that from among these different perspectives an intrinsic meaning can be distilled, I focus on the implications of people's participation as revealed in the performance of the rituals (Bell 1992, 1997; Oosten 2005, Tooker 1992).

Gift exchange is at the core of Garo mortuary rituals. People offered various gifts to Sisi, many of which were at the same time meant for the people who were near to her. In the gifts people expressed their relationship to the soul of Sisi, as well as to the people with whom she had lived. Gifts made to the man or woman who died call for reciprocation at the same mortuary ritual, as well as at future mortuary rituals. It is to this necessity for future reciprocation that the motto of this chapter relates ("Similar souls of the dead, similar debts"). Reciprocation is expected, but it is not achieved unless people are willing and able to comply with their commitments. I will show how the success or failure to reciprocate gifts, and the choices that people believe to face in that respect, influence their relationship with the person who died, as well as with his or her close relatives. Proceeding from the dynamics of gift exchange, I explore the multiple processes that Garo try to effectuate in the context of funerals.

## 1.2 Perspectives on Garo mortuary rituals

The earliest references to Garo funerals were made by representatives of the colonial government, in accounts deriving from the beginning of the nineteenth century.<sup>5</sup> Written sources from the time preceding colonial contact are not available.<sup>6</sup> The texts suggest that sacrifices were made for persons who died (Eliot 1799:28). The higher the status of the deceased, the greater the importance of these sacrifices. The offertory could be a chicken, a cow, or—presumably—even a human.<sup>7</sup> Funerals were important social events. Hamilton (1940:96) noted that at death "relations are summoned to attend," and

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<sup>5</sup> The British came into contact with the Garo when the East India Company expanded into the northern plains of Bengal, in the last decades of the eighteenth century (Shakespeare 1929: 30-31).

<sup>6</sup> Precolonial texts such as the Ahom Burunji and the Baharistan-i-ghaybi make reference to what are most probably predecessors of the Garo (Acharyya 1984). Orally transmitted accounts that relate to the origin of the Garo community are among others quoted in Playfair (1909), D.R. Sangma (1967) and M.N. Sangma (1995).

<sup>7</sup> The early sources contain repeated references to human sacrifices at mortuary rituals. It is not clear to what extent such sacrifices were actually made, or whether people have merely indicated that they would be desirable at certain occasions. That human sacrifices have actually been performed is for instance suggested in Ayerst (1880) and M.S. Sangma (1981). M.S. Sangma (*ibid.* 38) maintains—based on a colonial era source—that as late as 1877 two men were murdered for someone who required their heads as a sacrifice at the funeral of his deceased son.

“feasted.” Close relatives of the dead man or woman were sad, but for the rest funerals “bore the appearance of a merry meeting, an occasion rather of rejoicing and carousal than one the cause of which was death” (Dalton 1872:67). Emphasizing these apparent social connotations of mortuary rituals, Playfair (1975:70) suggested that the gifts which people offered had an effect on the relationships that they maintained among each other. He wrote that at “a man’s death, his widow (...) must give to the parents of her deceased husband a small present, which is fixed by custom at two gongs, two cloths and a sword.”

The mortuary rituals were first placed in an analytical perspective by the anthropologist and linguist Burling (1997a[1963]), who did extensive fieldwork in the Garo Hills in the 1950’s.<sup>8</sup> Burling (ibid.155) noted that at the death of a married man gifts were not just presented to his parents, but to a much broader range of matrilineal relatives. If the deceased person was married, his or her relatives should provide the widower or the widow with a replacement spouse. Burling suggested that the gifts related to this replacement of the deceased person. “Unless they [the representatives of the one who died–EM] send *magual* [a type of gift–EM], the relatives of the man are not likely to feel that they should send another man to act as a replacement for the dead person” (Burling 1997a:156). The replacement allowed for the continuation of the marriage alliance that the deceased had been involved in. There were occasions that replacement failed, but on the whole: “(...) the system is actually carried out as indicated by the formal rules” (ibid.157). Burling’s emphasis on regularity underrates the complexity and unpredictability of the processes of replacement. What if the representatives of the person who died are unable to provide sufficient gifts to the people who are entitled to them? Can the intended recipients of the gifts refuse them if they prefer not to replace the one who died? What happens if people who are obliged to provide a replacement for a deceased person fail to arrange someone suitable? Such questions raise the issue of the discrepancy between people’s obligations and their abilities and intentions to meet them.

Burling argues that the perpetuation of alliance relationships is of importance to society at large: “The continuity provided by the systems of heirship and replacement gives a permanence to the structure of the society around which can be built the more inclusive groupings of the lineage and the village” (ibid.161). Burling’s analysis emphasizes the matrilineage.<sup>9</sup> But he also indicates

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<sup>8</sup> Reference to Songsarek mortuary rituals is also made in: Allen et al. (1993:506); Ayerst (1880); Bertrand (1958:100-107); Bessagnet (1958); Burling (1988); Kar (1982b:34); C.R. Marak (ca. 1994); J.L.R. Marak (2000b); Majumdar (1980a:24-25); Pianazzi (ca. 1934:18-19); Robinson (1975); D.R. Sangma (1996); E.C. Sangma (1984); M.N. Sangma (1984); M.S. Sangma (1981); Sinha (1952) and Stoddart (1873).

<sup>9</sup> “Matrilineal kinship” has generally been regarded as a characteristic feature of Garo society. Studies on Garo matrilineity include: Bose (1936, 1941, 1980); Burling (1956, 1958a, 1985, 1997a); Choudhury (1969), Ehrenfels (1955); Frazer (1921); Goswami and Majumdar (1965, 1967, 1972); Hodson (1921a, 1921b); Kar (1982a); Majumdar (1982, 1996); Mukherjee (1955, 1961); Nakane

that replacement has important consequences at the level of the household: “(...) the occupants of the family house are considered to be the living incumbents in the role of man and woman of that particular house. Households continue, though their members come and go (...)” and elsewhere “property and status do descend in the household from mother to daughter and from father-in-law to son-in-law” (ibid. 157-8). This inheritance of property and status is particularly important for those households that “possess substantial land titles” and powerful religious objects such as a “sacred drum” (ibid. 227-228). It suggests that households not only serve to organize daily activities such as working, cooking and sleeping, but constitute important social concepts. This idea is supported in E.C. Sangma (1984:66), where he defines the Garo term *nok* (‘house’): “the literary (*sic*) meaning of *nok* is house, household or family. Present day Garo might interpret it as house, building, land and so on. In traditional Garo society the meaning goes beyond such visible material objects.” In addition to people, assets, and landed titles, the Garo *nok* refers to genealogy and reputation. People indicate that they belong to a *nok* in this latter sense. In a meeting that was held during a funeral, a son of the dead man referred to himself as: “I am a son of the *nok*” (*anga nokni dipanti*).

Contemporary studies by Carsten and Hugh-Jones (1995), Joyce and Gillespie (2000), and Macdonald (1987) focus on societies in which Houses represent an important level of social organization. (I refer to the ‘House’ as a social concept with a capital ‘H,’ distinguishing it from the ‘house’ as a building with a lower case ‘h’). The House is particularly important in many small-scale societies that have traditionally been the topic of anthropological enquiry. The overt emphasis that anthropologists used to place on lineages has resulted in analytical models that insufficiently reflect native conceptualizations of relatedness.

The importance of the House has been emphasized by Lévi Strauss (1991), who defined the concept as:

“The House is 1) a ‘moral person,’ 2) holding title to an estate, 3) encompassing both material as well as immaterial assets 4) perpetuating itself through the transmission of its name, its wealth and its titles in a real or fictive line, 5) legitimizing this continuity in the language of kinship or alliance and 6) most often of both.”<sup>10</sup>

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(1958, 1967); Nath (1978); Rose (1925); Roy and Rizvi (1990) and Sinha (1952). The earlier prevailing concern with the lineage is also manifest in studies that relate to other communities of the same region, such as Leach (1954). Leach’s stress on the disparity between the kind of models that people perceive, and the rather distinct ways in which society functions, appears to indicate a certain caution about the significance that lineages have in practice.

<sup>10</sup> “La maison est 1) une personne morale, 2) détentrice d’un domaine 3) composé à la fois de biens matériels et immatériels, et qui 4) se perpétue par la transmission de son nom, de sa fortune et de ses titres en ligne réelle ou fictive, 5) tenue pour légitime à la condition que cette continuité puisse se traduire dans le langage de la parenté ou de l’alliance, ou 6) le plus souvent les deux ensemble” (Lévi Strauss 1991:435).

As a ‘moral person,’ a unit with a certain measure of corporateness, a House can be vested with assets, titles to land and responsibilities in the cosmological sphere. A House can be inhabited by successive generations of people, allowing it to persist over time. A House is not necessarily identified with a lineage of either a husband or a wife, nor with the alliance relationship that is constitutive to it. Rather, Houses typically supersede the opposition between descent and affinity. If in a given society the House assumes prominence over all other social principles, it can be warranted to regard it a “House based society” (Carsten and Hugh-Jones 1995:18).

The Garo *nok* can be considered as a House. However, matrilineal kin groups have such a great relevance in Garo society, that it appears inappropriate to regard it as a “House based society.” Nevertheless, for Garo, the continuation of Houses is a crucial concern. The death of a spouse poses a threat to the existence of a House. Burling (1997a[1963]) suggests that the replacement of a deceased spouse depends to an important extent on the performance of the mortuary ritual. This implies that much of the prominence of funerals derives from their efficacy in relation to the continuation or discontinuation of Houses.

### 1.3 Positioning Songsarek Garo

Garo refer to their own community as *A•chik* (‘hill dweller’), or simply *Mande* (‘person’). The term “Garo” (initially spelled as “Garrow”) derives probably from Bengalis of the plains to the south and west of the hills (Hamilton 1940:89, M.N. Sangma 1995). The Garo are divided in subgroups, which are primarily distinguished from one another on basis of the distinct dialects that people speak. Authors have never completely agreed on these groups. Playfair (1975:59-62) mentions twelve “tribal divisions,” Allen et al. (1993:504) fifteen “geographical divisions” and Saha and Barkataky (1969:180) eight “subdivisions.” I think that these subgroups have been granted a greater importance than warranted. Garo agree on numerically large groups such as the A•beng,<sup>11</sup> the Awe and the Atong,<sup>12</sup> but the extent to which the smaller groups exist is subject to debate.<sup>13</sup> My study is based on fieldwork that was done among the A•beng.

<sup>11</sup> Majumdar (1980a:26) suggests that the A•beng account for 50% of the Garo in the Garo Hills.

<sup>12</sup> The Atong are culturally Garo, but their language is close to Raba. Other Garo speak dialects that belong to the Bodo-Koch group of languages. Both Bodo-Koch, as well as Raba, belong to the Tibeto-Burman language family (Burling 2003, van Driem 2001).

<sup>13</sup> Playfair listed 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. He had his doubts about some of the smaller groups, and writes 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 1909:60)



Sizable non-Garo communities<sup>14</sup> reside on the flat lands at the fringes of the Garo Hills, and in its few towns, but the interior areas are almost exclusively inhabited by Garo. In the interior of the hills people practice swidden cultivation. They also maintain small-scale plantations with crops such as rubber, areca nuts and—in some of the higher areas—tea. Paddy rice is grown in valleys and riverbeds, as well as on the flat lands at the fringes of the hills. Situated adjacent to the water rich plains of Bengal, the Garo Hills are for six to eight months a year exposed to extensive orographic rains. The high rainfall combines throughout the wet season with an average day temperature of about thirty degrees Celsius. This results in a very high humidity, which provides ideal conditions for the growth of a broad range of crops.

The population of the Garo Hills has grown five-fold between 1901 and 1991. In 1901 there were approximately 104,000 Garo living in the Garo Hills; in 1991 this number had increased to about 540,000 (Playfair 1909:1; Vijayanunni 1999:63). This sharp rise is primarily due to a lowering of the mortality rate, as rudimentary allopathic healthcare has come within reach of a large number of people (Majumdar 1966). As the population grows, greater demands are made on the natural environment. Until the mid-twentieth century much of the Garo hills was covered by dense forests. Over the last couple of decades much of the jungle has been reduced to little more than bamboo bushes. This is due to large scale legal and illegal logging,<sup>15</sup> the intensification of swidden agriculture and the extension of the area in use for small scale plantations (Hussain 2003; Majumdar 1966, Saha 1970).

Preceding colonial conquest the Garo of the hills were not subject to a Hindu or a Muslim ruler (Hamilton 1940:86; J.L.R. Marak 1995). Garo lacked a central authority, such as a king. Rather, Garo social organization appears to have had an acephalous character (Scott in Barooah 1970:253). Many villages were engaged in protracted feuds, resulting in a permanent condition of war-by-proxy. Since the Garo did not have a centralized state, and followed a religion that involved headhunting,<sup>16</sup> the British categorized them as a “savage tribe” (Mackenzie 1995:7).

In the early decades of the nineteenth century the British colonial state came to encompass the Garo Hills (Barpujari 1970, 1978; Kar 1970). Initially, the

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<sup>14</sup> The most important of these are according to the 1991 census: Hajong, Rabha and Koch. For the Hajong see Majumdar (1984) and Hajong (2002); the Koch are discussed in Koch (1984) and Majumdar (1984, 1985).

<sup>15</sup> From 1996 onwards all commercial logging has been prohibited in North East India, due to a ban that has been imposed by the Indian Supreme Court (Dev 2000; Karlsson 2004, 2005).

<sup>16</sup> Headhunting seems to have provided a major incentive for the feuds that existed among the Garo. In addition, headhunting played a role in the raids that were conducted at plains villages. It appears that the severed heads played an important role in the propitiation of certain deities (Pianazzi ca 1934:5; D.R. Sangma 1996:61).

British refused to occupy the area. Endemic malaria posed a serious threat,<sup>17</sup> while the hills had little to offer in terms of revenue. Moffat Mills (1984:46) wrote: “There is nothing to be gained by occupying the country; the revenue that could be derived from it would not cover one-sixth of the cost of maintaining the Police force (...).” However, regularly recurring violent conflicts between the hill dwelling Garo and the people from the plains resulted in 1866 in the decision “to put an end to the independence of the savages inhabiting this nook in the midst of British territory” (Mackenzie 1995:265). But the financial argument earlier formulated remained valid, and is likely to have been conducive to a policy that aimed at the Garo settling as much as possible their own affairs.

With its inclusion in the colonial state, the Garo Hills, as a “tribal” area, was granted a special status. As a result, particularly the people living in the interior of the hills were exempted from many of the laws that applied elsewhere in British India (J.B. Bhattacharjee 1973; Hussain 2003). Only offenses that involved serious violence, such as murder, came under the jurisdiction of district level courts (Allen 1980: 59). For the rest Garo *niam*<sup>18</sup> was brought within a broader legal framework. *Niam* encompasses guidelines for relationships among people, but also regarding attitudes to the deities, as well as to animals and plants. Violating *niam* results in punishment by one’s own kin; severe transgressions are believed to be avenged by wild animals or by deities. The rules and principles that *niam* consists of are orally transferred. *Niam* is based on ‘sayings’ (*kattarang*) that derive from the “time of the old grandmothers and grandfathers” (*ambi-at chu git chamni somoi*).

The special status that was granted to the Garo Hills has restricted the settlement of people from the plains, particularly in the interior areas of the hills.<sup>19</sup> Under colonial rule, and after independence, the status of the Garo Hills has repeatedly been adjusted, but many of the special regulations have remained

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<sup>17</sup> M’cosh (1975[1837]:165) noted that: “Above all jungly countries in India, that of the Garrows is perhaps, the most fatal for a European to visit. (...) three-fourths who have done so, have fallen victims to its baneful climate.”

<sup>18</sup> The Garo word *niam* (relates to Sanskrit *niyama*) is usually translated as ‘customary law.’ This translation is not very satisfactory, as *niam* refers more to principles than to laws, and ‘observance’ appears a more appropriate translation. Attempts to codify *niam* have been made by Baldwin (1933); Chattopadhyay and M.S. Sangma (1989); Costa (1954); Ladia (1993); J.L.R. Marak (2000a); K. Marak (1997); K.R. Marak (1964); J. Sangma (1973) and M.S. Sangma (1981).

<sup>19</sup> “In 1876 a regulation was passed to “prevent entry of unlicensed persons into the hills for trading purposes, and to control the acquisition of land in the hill-district by persons who were not natives of the district.” These provisions were similar to those of the Inner Line Regulation (Regulation No. V of 1873) and were enacted separately in view of the fact that the Inner Line Regulation as such could not be applied to a tract which was entirely surrounded by settled territory.” (J.N. Das 1990:9). The Inner Line Regulation applied to areas along the boundaries of the colonial state, such as the erstwhile North East Frontier Tracts (the present day Arunachal Pradesh) (Bose 1979; Chaube 1999:186-7).

in place.<sup>20</sup> Till today, access to land, the conduct of marriages, and settlement of disputes are organized through *niam* (Dutta & Karna 1987, J.L.R. Marak 1995).

Throughout the past two hundred years the Garo community has been subject to drastic transformative processes. The inclusion in the colonial state resulted in the ending of the violent feuds and the abandoning of headhunting. Roads were constructed in the hills, and the significance of the market economy increased. A number of small towns emerged, of which Tura became the most important.<sup>21</sup> Throughout the Garo Hills, non-Garo dominate trade. By law, Garo have exclusive access to most elected offices, as well as to the great majority of the jobs in civil service. This has resulted in the emergence of a town based Garo elite. This elite is relatively affluent, particularly in comparison to the Garo who live in the interior villages.

Significant disparities in wealth within the Garo community have given rise to a class-like stratification.<sup>22</sup> Nevertheless, in the South Asian political and academic discourse, the Garo continue to be regarded a “tribe.” Garo support a continued usage of the concept. This may not be surprising, given the range of privileges and rights that are associated with being “tribal.” However, from an academic point of view a continued usage of this notion appears increasingly problematic (Bal 2000:29 ff., Karlsson and Subba 2005, van Schendel 1995).

Christian missionaries organized the first schools (1878) and hospitals (1908) in the Garo Hills (M.S. Sangma 1981: 260; 1985:30). They transcribed the so far unwritten language and wrote the first school books.<sup>23</sup> As a rule, Garo who went to school let themselves be baptized.<sup>24</sup> Initially, only few people

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<sup>20</sup> Initially a Scheduled District, Garo Hills was subsequently declared a Backward Tract and then a Partially Excluded Area. After independence it became one of the Autonomous Districts of Assam, under the provision of the Sixth Schedule of the Indian Constitution (Kumar 1996). A local body, the Garo Hills Autonomous District Council, became responsible for the administration of the interior villages (Kusum and Bakshi 1982). After 1970, when the area became part of the newly created State of Meghalaya, this body has continued to function as the Garo Hills District Council (Das 1990:10-11; M.S. Sangma 1998).

<sup>21</sup> According to census data, Tura had in 1991 a population of 46,066 people (Vijayanunni 1999:77). Tura is the political, educational and commercial center of the Garo Hills.

<sup>22</sup> The transformation of political institutions is treated in Majumdar (1990); changes in systems of land tenure and occupation are analyzed in Dutta and Karna (1987), Lyngdoh (1996); Majumdar (1980b, 1983, 1986a, 1986b) and Saha (1968). Bhattacharjee (1984) discusses the development of class.

<sup>23</sup> Garo has both been transcribed towards the Roman and the Bengali script. Nowadays, the Roman script is used. The Awe dialect was adopted as the Garo to be thought in schools, resulting in Awe being regarded standard Garo (Allen et.al. 1993:505; Bareh 1977; M.S. Sangma 1983a, 1983b).

<sup>24</sup> Obviously, it has been important for the missionaries to win as many converts as possible. As Pianazzi (ca. 1934:44) formulated it: “We want that Christ may conquer, that Christ may rule, that Christ may reign even in the demon-haunted Garo Hills.” Nowadays, rather than missionaries, Christian Garo from the urban centers fuel the steady proselytizing of the rural areas where most

converted. Burling estimates that in the 1950's about a third of the Garo were Christians; the rest had remained Songsarek (personal communication). From the middle of the twentieth century, schools spread throughout the interior areas, and proselytizing gained pace. At the turn of the twenty first century more than eighty percent of the Garo had adopted Christianity.<sup>25</sup> With a presence of over a hundred years, Christianity has become among the Garo a tradition in its own right (Bonnerjea 1929; Burling 1997a; Majumdar 1966; Roy Burman 1995; Sarmah 1977, M.S. Sangma 1981, 1987, 1992).

Notwithstanding the extensive political, economic, religious and demographic change in the past two centuries, present day Songsarek beliefs and practices resemble in many ways those described in the early nineteenth century literature. Important changes are also manifest. For instance, the position of village heads, who act among Songsareks in certain respects as religious leaders, has come to depend to a large extent on recognition by the state. It seems likely that in the past their office depended primarily on their ability to sacrifice to the deities, offer concomitant feasts, and otherwise oblige followers. Garo are traditionally Songsareks, but that does not imply that the Songsareks of the present day are particularly traditional.

The significant differences that exist between the Songsarek faith and Christianity easily suggests that they are antipodes. In reality, the relationship is much more complex. The adoption of Christianity demands a formal rejection of Songsarek teachings, but it is not necessarily very consequential for people's attitude towards life. When it comes to relationships among people, religious disparities are easily bridged by the strong loyalties that kinship incites. Differences between Songsareks and Christians on the religious plane are easily superseded by peoples' belonging to the broader Garo community.

#### 1.4 A site for fieldwork

I came to the Garo Hills for the first time in 1997. At that time, I had not yet secured a grant, nor obtained permission from the Indian government to carry out research in the area.<sup>26</sup> Conversations with scholars such as anthropologist Robbins Burling and historian Milton Sangma had convinced me that it would

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of the remaining Songsareks reside. Particularly in the towns, Christianity acts as an ideology that allows Garo to define an ethnic identity which is free from the connotation of "backwardness" that particularly Hindus and Muslims associate with the Songsarek faith.

<sup>25</sup> The 1991 census lists 407,000 Christians in the Garo Hills. A total of 94,500 people have indicated that they are followers of the Songsarek religion (Vijayanunni 1999:58-63). Figures about the breakup of Christians by denomination are not available, but Garo tend to claim that the majority of the Christians are Baptists. A smaller section would belong to the Catholic church, and the rest to a range of numerically much less significant Protestant denominations (such as the Seventh Day Adventists).

<sup>26</sup> In the early nineteen sixties the Indian government restricted research by Western scholars in North East India. From 1995 onwards, policies towards the region have been liberalized.

be highly relevant to study the funerals of Songsareks. Songsarek Garo conduct mortuary rituals within one or at the most one and a half days. Unless one is informed about a death at a very early stage, it is impossible to attend a mortuary ritual from the start. The research demanded a location from which I could do fieldwork for a prolonged period of time.

Milton Sangma brought to my attention a part of West Garo Hills district where a majority of the people had remained Songsarek. With more than sixteen hundred inhabitants, Sadolpara was the largest village in that area. Most villages count no more than four to six hundred people. In a large village deaths are likely to occur with a higher frequency than in a smaller place. Statistical grounds apart, I decided to do fieldwork in Sadolpara because I felt, from my first visit onwards, that I would be able to negotiate meaningful relationships with the people there. When I returned to Sadolpara, two years later, I decided to live next to Jiji.



**Photograph 2:** Jiji. She belonged to an important House, but faced difficulties maintaining its reputation.

Jiji was in her mid-sixties (photograph 2). She lived with her youngest daughter, who was about thirty years old. Jiji was a widow. When her husband died, more than ten years before I met her, he had not been replaced. Jiji had given birth to eight children, the eldest of whom had a daughter who was well into her

twenties. Jiji was well versed in the Songsarek traditions. She was an accomplished midwife, could perform sacrifices that aimed at curing illnesses, and was among the few women of Sadolpara who knew the traditional funeral chants. Jiji's House was attributed great genealogical depth. In recent decades it had lost much of its wealth, but because it held title to land, and owned a sacred drum, it continued to be important to people. The landed titles that were vested with Jiji's House enabled her to offer me a place for the construction of a small house.

From the time that we first met, Jiji decided to consider me "a son." Garo in general, and particularly Garo villagers, tend to perceive social relationships first and foremost in terms of kinship. Without anyone taking my filiation too literally, it did formalize the tie with Jiji, as well as with her close and more distant relatives. Throughout the fieldwork we have spent a lot of time together, sharing countless cups of tea. Notably during the early phases of the research, when I was little accustomed to the habits of the villagers, Jiji helped me access funerals that were held in Sadolpara, as well as in neighboring villages. Her children, brothers, sisters, uncles and aunts acknowledged our relationship, accepting me as some sort of a relative as well.

The residents of Sadolpara were primarily oriented towards people of their own village, and to those who lived in villages in its vicinity. Yet, Sadolpara was not isolated. It counted two primary schools (albeit rather rudimentary) and a tiny Baptist church. In the dry season the village was occasionally visited by politicians on campaign, government officers and missionary groups. At a distance of about four miles was a government health center, but it had only rudimentary facilities and hardly anyone ever went there. Nearly every household owned a radio, which brought daily news in Garo. The village counted at least four televisions sets (running on batteries charged by solar panels). Especially in the weekends youngsters crowded in front of these to watch shows in Garo, as well as Hindi movies.

Sadolpara was relatively well connected. The two main nuclei of the village were at about two to three miles from a metalled road, which had served throughout much of the twentieth century as the main passage from Tura to the plains of Goalpara. At the time of the fieldwork the road had a daily bus to Tura (at a little over thirty miles), and most of the villagers had visited this town. A handful of people had even been as far as Guwahati, the capital of Assam, which was more than a hundred and fifty miles away. People spoke of these urban environments with admiration. But since most of them had hardly any cash to spend, visiting town made them feel very poor.

Every now and then a youth from Sadolpara attempted to settle outside the village. Throughout the nearly four years that I have been involved in the lives of the villagers only one or two of them succeeded. All others were back within weeks. Even a young man who earned himself a relatively well paid permanent

job with the police returned to the village after two or three months. Generally, the explanation given by those who came back was that they had been made to feel “shame” (*kracha•a*), because they had been ordered about. In the village, youth accept hierarchical relationships, particularly when authority is exerted by kin seniors. Outside the village people are subject to the authority of non-kin, which is for most of them, difficult to accept. The stories of those who failed to settle outside the village, and the sense of exclusion that town environments brought about due to villagers’ lack of cash, contributed to people experiencing Sadolpara and neighboring villages in many ways as a realm of its own.

I stayed in Sadolpara for a period of twenty one months. The main fieldwork was done from November 1999 until June 2001. A brief additional fieldwork took place in December 2003. Although I acquired a working knowledge of Garo,<sup>27</sup> I have depended on field assistants for linguistic support. During the first couple of months Sengjrang N. Sangma helped me. After he left I worked with Henysing A. Sangma and Nixon Dango. As educated Garo, the field assistants were Christians. Sengjrang was a Baptist, Henysing and Nixon were Seventh-Day Adventists. Their faith prohibited them to consume rice beer, or food that had been prepared for one of the Songsarek deities. But independent of whether villagers were Songsareks or Christians, the assistants engaged in meaningful relationships with them.

Nandini, my wife, has lived throughout the fieldwork in Sadolpara. Her presence positioned me as a householder, a status much closer to that of most people in the village than that of a man alone. Nandini learned at least as much Garo as I did. Talking to her, the villagers could inquire about me, and crack jokes at my expense. Nandini’s presence has extended the scope of the research. If I posed certain questions to women, that could sometimes result in embarrassment and laughter. The same issues, posed by Nandini, could engage them in a serious discussion. Likewise, women trusted her with the kind of very personal stories that they would not tell me. When a baby was born, I had to stay at a distance with the other men. She was allowed nearby. Nandini was literally allowed into the women’s realm.

### 1.5 Researching rituals of death

This study is primarily based on an analysis of fifteen funerals, some of which have been studied in more detail than others (appendix B). It involved deaths of men and women, and of old and young people. Some of the dead belonged to Houses of great reputation, others to Houses that were regarded insignificant. Some of the deaths were not regarded particularly inauspicious, while oth-

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<sup>27</sup> Caroline Marak, Head of the Department of English of the North Eastern Hill University in Tura, organized an introductory course.

ers were believed to pose a danger to the mourners. The text includes a large number of cases which highlight specific aspects of the mortuary rituals studied. An overview of all the cases that relate to a particular mortuary ritual is given in appendix C.

Most of the fieldwork has been done in the village Sadolpara, but I have also taken mortuary rituals into account that occurred in neighboring villages. In an attempt to gain a historical perspective I have asked people about the changes that have come about in the performance of mortuary rituals, and in society in general, in the recent and more distant past.

Many of my informants were elderly people. Villagers granted them the authority to speak about beliefs and mythology, and many of them were very knowledgeable with respect to genealogy. A man named Biki was one of my key informants (photograph 3). Other important senior informants were Jiji, as well as her younger sister Meji (photograph 4). In addition, dozens of other people from Sadolpara and surrounding villages have contributed to the research.



**Photograph 3:** Biki, one of the most accomplished priests of Sadolpara.

In Garo villages, mortuary rituals are public events. The more people attend a funeral, the better. Only the undressing of the corpse, and its initial washing (soon after death has occurred), is done in seclusion by very close relatives of



the deceased. The public character of mortuary rituals holds for deaths that come more or less as expected (for example the death of Sisi, with which this chapter opens), as well as for deaths that involve a high degree of personal tragedy (such as when the mother of an infant passes away). Deaths that involve mutilation of the corpse are believed to pose a danger for the mourners, and attract few people beyond close relatives of the deceased person. Mutilation can occur due to a disease, or when someone is killed by an animal such as a bear or a tiger.



**Photograph 4:**

Meji, the younger sister of Jiji, taking a break from weeding her swidden.

Garo mortuary rituals are complex events, and it is difficult to study their practice if one can only observe them at the time of their performance. The activities they encompass are not easy to describe, and for anybody other than the people involved it will usually be a problem to grasp the meaning of what is being said or enacted. In addition, most informants regard it inappropriate to provide lengthy explanations at the time of a funeral. These problems were overcome by recording the rituals on video. I was aware of the possibilities that video recordings can offer in this respect due to a study of South Indian Hindu rituals that I had conducted earlier (de Maaker 2000).

A video recording can reproduce images that relate to observed events, and

make the sounds audible that were produced at that time (such as dialogues). As long as such a video recording consists of a single continuous shot, and not an edited compilation, it maintains a certain “facsimile” quality towards the event filmed (Nijland 1989:133). Such a video recording is:

“not just a text of an event, but an iconic text in which, with the video signal, there is a direct correspondence between the components of the field of observation (the photographic field) and the recorded text (the emulsion or video frame).” (Lewis 2004:118)

Because a video recording of this kind provides a detailed account of the registered event, it can act as a mnemonic device for the researcher. More significantly, its facsimile quality embeds the record with information that the researcher cannot “read” unless it is exposed by an informant. This “reading” of footage by informants, the possibility to discuss the way in which they interpret the events recorded, and compare their analysis with those of others, allows the inquiry to proceed beyond the conceptual biases of the researcher (Connor et al. 1986; El Guindi 2004; Gerbrands 1971, Krebs 1975; Nijland 1989, 1994; Schaeffer 1995; Sorenson and Jablonko 1995).

At an early stage of the research I asked villagers if I would be allowed to make video recordings at mortuary rituals. This was not a problem, they told me, as long as I obtained permission from the widower or widow. On a few occasions permission was refused to me, but much more often it was readily granted. Once the word had spread, people even invited me to make video recordings at funerals that I did not plan to attend at all.<sup>28</sup>

People who refused, may simply not have wanted me with my camera around. More specifically, they may not have wanted images of the corpse to be preserved. Particularly for a widower or widow it is regarded best to forget the one who died. Widowers or widows who allowed me to make video recordings at the funeral of their spouse used to state that they did not want to see the images later on. They were even hesitant to watch video recordings that had been made of their deceased spouse when he or she was still alive (as I incidentally happened to have made on a few occasions). Being reminded of a deceased spouse was not good, people argued, because that made a widower or widow “feel sad.” Sadness (*duk*) is equaled to defeat. People can mourn during the mortuary ritual, preceding the disposal of the corpse. Later on, this should be avoided as much as possible. Notwithstanding the conditions that they themselves had set many of the widowers and widows who allowed me to make video recordings later on expressed the desire to watch these. People who altogether refused permission made sure that they avoided this kind of a temptation.

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<sup>28</sup> Video recordings have also been important for the study of topics peripheral to funerals. We have also recorded the settlement of disputes among villagers, rituals performed in relation to the healing of illnesses, and rituals of the annual agricultural cycle.

Whenever video recordings were made of mortuary rituals Sengirang (my first field assistant), and later Nandini (my wife), recorded the sound. I handled the camera. We recorded aspects of the rituals that seemed to be of importance to its participants, or that somehow appeared significant to us. Single takes often lasted several minutes. I tried to include as much as possible the people who were interacting, and the objects that their activities related to (de France 1982). Considering the complexity of Garo mortuary rituals, recording one activity meant excluding many others. As it worked out, with each additional mortuary ritual, different issues came into focus. At one mortuary ritual we shot the treatment of the corpse, at another one the division of meat, and at a third one the preparation of food for the dead. By far the most complex proved to be the offering of gifts, and a major share of the video recordings has been dedicated to these transactions.

We analyzed the footage in the small house that had been made for us.<sup>29</sup> During the day people went to their fields, and the village was virtually deserted. Nevertheless, there were always people who dropped in. They had taken some time off, and came along to chat and drink tea. This provided us day after day with a continuous, albeit rather unpredictable flow of informants. Often, key informants such as Biki, Jiji or Meji were present as well.

The analysis of the video footage involved at least two steps. Initially a rough description was made of the images, a transcript of the spoken Garo, and a rough translation of the Garo into English. Next, the footage was scrutinized, shot by shot, with the help of the informants who were around. This allowed me to make a precise translation of the spoken word, to identify the people involved, and to gain an understanding of how people interpreted the events filmed.

I continued the analysis of relevant parts of the footage with people who had played an important role in the particular funeral. These were often persons who had been responsible for the distribution of gifts on behalf of the House that had been affected by the death. Because the video recordings showed the rituals as they had been performed, informants were forced to go beyond quotation of the 'rules.' "*Ukam* [a type of gift] is always returned," I was initially told. This may ideally be so, but a video fragment revealed that in practice this is not necessarily the case. I also asked people questions that involved the comparison of different mortuary rituals. Such questions could easily be clarified by showing them the relevant fragments that related to these distinct rituals.

People walked into the room in which we worked as they pleased, and

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<sup>29</sup> At the time of the fieldwork the electric grid had not been extended to Sadolpara and surrounding villages. We had a small generator (220V/500W). Its surplus power was used to charge 12 Volt truck batteries. Since all our equipment could both be operated on 220V and on 12V, we could either work with electricity from the generator, or from the batteries.

during the video feedback interviews there was little sense of privacy. If we touched upon personal or otherwise touchy issues, the presence of other villagers made the interviewee sometimes hesitant to speak out. Often, it so happened that at a later moment in time, during an informal cup of tea in his or her own house, an interviewee supplemented earlier comments. For the research, these informal conversations have proven invaluable.

Collecting genealogies has allowed me to gain an understanding of the representativeness of the various cases studied. The research has concentrated on the northern part of West Garo Hills district, but peripheral observations suggest that many of its findings apply to other parts of the Garo Hills as well, particularly areas where people have remained Songsarek.

A compilation of video material relating to one of the death rituals recorded can be found in appendix D ('An Untimely Death'). This appendix is on a DVD-video, inside the back cover. It provides an example of the kind of video material that my analysis is based on. The video compilation offers a brief overview of the main sequences of a Songsarek mortuary ritual. In addition, it has much of the source material that four of the cases analyzed in this text are based on (case numbers: 6.3.5-6; 6.3.5-7; 6.4.2-2 and 8.3-2). The visual information conveyed by these video images, as well as the tone and diction of dialogues between people, adds to the analysis provided in this text. It shows how gifts offered are not necessarily accepted, as the transfer of material objects serves to negotiate complex social and cosmological relationships.

## 1.6 Outline of the argument

I focus on the rituals of death of Songsarek Garo, who now have become a minority throughout much of the Garo Hills. Given the strong forces that further the process of proselytizing (missionary activities, the spread of education), a further marginalization of this local religion seems probable. The apparent inevitability of its cessation has been an incentive to focus on Songsarek funerals.

All Songsarek funerals follow a similar pattern, but there is great variety in how extensive they are. The greater the significance of a deceased person, and of the House that he or she lived in, the larger the number of people who attend, and the more lavish the gifts presented. The funerals of unmarried people, especially of young children, are concise. I focus primarily on the mortuary rituals of married persons, since these are of the greatest relevance for relationships among Houses.

The chapters II, III and IV provide a context for analysis of the rituals. The mortuary rituals are treated in the chapters V, VI and VII. Chapter VIII discusses the replacement of the deceased person, and the continuation of Houses.

Chapter II discusses the House, descent and affinity. I provide an outline of the various ways in which a House can come into existence, and how it can be continued upon death of either of the spouses. A House belongs to the kin group of the wife, but its creation and continuation involves the kin group of the husband as well. I show how the replacement of deceased spouses results in hierarchical relationships among Houses. These relationships define the ties that people trace among matrilineal kin, as well as—in a more general sense—with their affines.

The next chapter (chapter III), considers the relationships among Houses. Houses attain importance in the light of their ritual and economic position. It is conditional to life that Houses engage in relationships with the deities. The more apical Houses are primarily responsible for these relationships. Houses that are regarded as less senior depend on these more apical Houses for their relationship with the deities, and to gain access to land. I suggest that the manner in which ritual responsibilities are distributed among Houses influences the kind of ties that they trace.

Chapter IV deals with ideas about the soul. Souls are subject to a cycle of re-birth and death. I discuss how souls relate to people, and how they transform upon death. I treat the ritualization of birth, and the socialization of the newborn person. Death can have a variety of causes. I show that the nature of death determines the kind of funeral that is held, and the way in which people can continue to relate to a deceased person.

Chapter V treats the initial stage of the mortuary ritual. I show how people make efforts to separate the deceased from the House that he or she belonged to. They achieve this by breaking objects that relate to the deceased person, by presenting gifts to him or her, and by the treatment that they give to the corpse. These activities transform the deceased from someone who has been alive into an ancestor. People's performance in these respects results in the assessment of the relationship that they trace to the deceased person, and the House that he or she belonged to.

In chapter VI, I consider the offering of gifts that are embedded in reciprocal arrangements. These involve cows and money that are offered by people who attend the mortuary ritual. In response, the representatives of the House in which the death has occurred offer heirlooms (such as gongs, jewelry or weapons) as well as money. I discuss the arrangements by which these various gifts are offered, and the way in which they relate to each other. People use the transfer of these gifts to negotiate the closeness or distance of relationships among Houses. The gifts can accomplish this because all of them relate in one way or the other to the deceased person.

Chapter VII considers the manner in which the deceased person transforms in the course of the mortuary ritual. Here, the removal of the corpse from the house in which it has been kept in state, and its subsequent disposal are very important. Following the disposal, people engage with the deceased person in

various ways. The House of the deceased person creates a repository, to contain gifts for the one who has died. This House also erects an effigy of the deceased. Next to the effigy, it can plant a pole that represents the slaughtered cows. Other Houses that have slaughtered a cow for the person who died can plant such a pole as well, in their own courtyard. The various representations of the deceased person remain for a longer or a shorter period of time. Their slow decay contributes to the deceased being eventually forgotten.

Chapter VIII analyzes the effectuation of the replacement of a dead man or woman. If a marriage alliance exists, the obligation to provide a replacement spouse is compelling. Nevertheless, people who are faced with such an obligation often fail to act in compliance with it. Some Houses end with the death of its founders, while others are continued for many consecutive generations. I consider the kind of factors that are of relevance for the success or failure of *a•kim* replacement.

In the conclusions (Chapter IX), I argue that mortuary rituals play a crucial role in the negotiation of relationships among Houses, organizing cosmological as well as social concerns. The rituals allow people to act conducive to the transformation of the deceased person. Simultaneously, the relationships that people trace to the one who died define relationships among Houses. People express and reinterpret ties among Houses in the relationships that they maintain with the dead.