Garo: The Garo Ethnic Community

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Garo: Fact Sheet

(602 words)

The *Garo* are an ethnolinguistic community resident in the *Garo* Hills (Meghalaya), in neighboring parts of Goalpara (Assam), and in Mymensingh (Bangladesh). In addition, *Garo* are a minority community in Khasi Hills (Meghalaya), and in the northeastern Indian states of Nagaland and Tripura. Shillong – the administrative, political, and educational center of Meghalaya – also has a significant *Garo* population. According to the 2011 census, Meghalaya had a population of just over 800,000 *Garo* speakers. Approximately 150,000 *Garo* reside in Assam. Population figures for minorities in Bangladesh are not easily available, but a rough estimate puts their number at some 150,000. This means that, all in all, there are well over a million *Garo*. In Meghalaya, as well as in Assam and Bangladesh, *Garo* speakers live in social environments that they share with members of other ethnolinguistic communities. In western Meghalaya *Garo* are the majority, but in most other locations, they are a minority. The term "*Garo*" derives from Bengali (Majumdar, 1977; Martin, 1990). While it has become a self-referential label, notably in English, in the *Garo* language it is more common for people to refer to themselves as Mande ("People"), or more rarely A'chik Mande ("Hill People"). *Garo* is a Tibeto-Burman language, and as such related to quite a few other languages spoken in northeast India. The *Garo* language encompasses several dialects, such as Ambeng, A'we, Chisak, Gara-Gancheng, Matabeng, Matchi-Dual, Ruga-Chibok and A'tong, of which the A'we dialect has come to be regarded as "standard *Garo*" (Majumdar, 1980). The distinct *Garo* dialects are mutually intelligible, with the exception of A'tong. This has led some scholars to question whether A'tong should actually be considered a *Garo* dialect or a language in its own right (Burling, 2003). From the colonial period onward travellers, administrators, missionaries, and anthropologists have written about the *Garo*. Early publications include J. Eliot (1799), R. Martin (1838) and A. Mackenzie (1884), all of who provide valuable insights into *Garo* religious beliefs and practices at the time of early colonial contact. More detailed descriptions are provided in A. Playfair (1909) and with respect to missionization among the *Garo* by W. Carey (1919). The most comprehensive contributions derive from anthropologist and linguist R.

Burling (1956-1997), while many important publications have also been written by anthropologist D.N. Majumdar (1966-1996) and by historian M. Sangma (1981-1998). Entanglements of identity and ethnicity with respect to the *Garo* in Bangladesh have been studied by E. Bal (2007), the food culture of the *Garo* by Q. Marak (2014), while a thorough analysis of the political ecology of *Garo* Hills is provided by B. Karlsson (2011).

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Garo: The *Garo* Ethnic Community

(6,000 words)

Traditionally, upland *Garo* have practiced shifting cultivation, and in many ways "Garoness" continues to be associated with that mode of agriculture. Shifting cultivation is closely tied up with the traditional *Garo* community religion since it requires the negotiation of relationships with innumerable deities (*mitde*s) who are considered a primordial presence. Songsareks, as the followers of this community religion are known, have come to be perceived as archetypical *Garo*. In recent decades *Garo* agricultural practices have changed. *Garo* farmers who live in the plains have become wet rice cultivators. In the hills, people have been planting more and more orchards and have come to depend significantly on cash crops such as areca nuts and cashew nuts. Disparities in terms of income and education have increased, and many *Garo* who gained higher education have taken on jobs as educators or civil servants. These social transformations have been enabled by, but at the same time induced, the replacement of the *Garo* community religion by Christianity.

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Garo trace descent first and foremost through the female line, emphasizing relatedness to mothers, grandmothers, and great-grandmothers (Burling, 1997). Inheritance also follows the female line. Parents can only transfer assets to their sons during their lifetime, and as far as this does not encompass property that is considered part of the matrilineage. Property such as land or houses, custom dictates, must be passed on in the female line. *Garo* matrilinity has its

origins in an agricultural society in which land, as the most important asset, used to be collectively owned by a number of matrilineally related families. Changing economic conditions, and the growing importance of privatized property, is resulting in a redefinition of *Garo* matrilinity. While relationships among larger kin groups may become less tight, matrilinity continues to organize social relationships.

Historically, as shifting cultivators who shared the ownership of their land with other members of their (localized) matrilineage, *Garo* seem to have had a rather "flat" political structure (Sangma, 1981). Traditionally, the authority of a village head depended on relationships among kin seniors, and on a village head's ability to provide sacrifices to the deities of the community religion, and host the associated large scale feasts. Nowadays, in Meghalaya, village heads' authority also depends on their recognition by the Indian state. Yet, earlier social and political mechanisms have been transformed rather than abandoned (de Maaker, 2018). Comparable to the strategies formerly used by headmen to earn respect, politicians who want to gain the support of their (potential) voters are for example more or less obliged to provide meals during their election campaigns in order to establish themselves as credible candidates.

Contemporary Traditions

The *Garo* community religion is in decline, and may well cease to be practiced in the near future, such is the common sentiment among the majority of the *Garo* in northeast India and Bangladesh. In recent decades, most *Garo* have become Christians, rendering the *Garo* one of the (almost) completely Christian communities of the northeastern region, comparable to the Naga and the Mizo (Joshi, 2012; Pachuau, 2014). *Garo* Christians tend to perceive Christianity as a modern ontology that is in principle superior to the community religion. Today, conversions continue, gradually but steadily reducing the number of Songsareks. Yet a minority of the *Garo* continues to follow the community religion, rejecting the proselytizing endeavor of missionizing Baptists, Catholics, and Pentecostalists. In this article, rather than taking the decline of the Songsarek traditions for granted, I focus on the question of why certain of these practices and beliefs persist or seem to persist, even though they stand against "the tide" and the majority of the *Garo* render such practices and beliefs old fashioned and conservative, if not obsolete.

People who persist in being Songsarek, in a context in which Christianity is dominant, resist the pressure to conform to the religious orientation of the larger community which they are part of. The agency they display is relevant since it forces us to rethink the commonly held assumption that it is inevitable for local or "small" traditions to be subsumed into the melting pot of global ideologies. As far as religion is concerned, this assumption reflects M. Weber's argument that what he called "world religions" are superior to "traditional religions" in their

ability to explain the world (Weber, 1963). Consequently, R. Horton (1971) argued, "small religions" come under pressure to be revised when formerly relatively isolated people become included within global markets and "ideascapes" (Appadurai, 1996). This would make it seem logical for people to turn to, and in the case of proselytizing religions such as Christianity and Islam convert to, a "world religion." Although M. Weber's ideas continue to inspire, the opposition between "traditional religions" and "world religions" has lost much of its validity due to the shift in emphasis, in the anthropology of religion, from religion as doctrine to religion as practice or performance (Bowen, 2011). Challenging the very notion of religion – notably referring to "world religions" – as an essentially ideational model that is rooted in doctrine and belief, T. Asad (1983) has shown that, on the ground, all religions are vernacular and depend on practice and performance. Along these lines, far from assuming that "world religions" are more advanced, modern, or effective than local religious traditions, I consider all religious (and even secular) traditions as part of a discursive realm, in which ideas and practices gain or lose credibility according to the needs of the people who engage with them. In this article, rather than regarding the *Garo* community religion as a remnant of the past, doomed to extinction, I attempt to gain an understanding of its continued relevance for its practitioners today.

The *Garo* Community Religion Today

Every time I visit the village in which I have lived for nearly two years, I am surprised that a substantial number of its residents continue to be Songsareks. This is evident at a glance: for instance, from the practice of making *kima,* effigies of the dead. Such an effigy represents a deceased person. A thick wooden pole, which has the head of a deceased person carved in one of its ends, is planted near the house of the one who died. The effigy is dressed in the clothes of the deceased person and given some of his or her personal belongings (toothbrush, glasses, sling bag with tobacco, walking stick, etc.). Standing in for the body of the deceased, an effigy provides a "contact point" with the deceased person. Occasionally, people offer food or rice beer (*chu*) to the deceased at the effigy. Exposed to the elements, over time, the clothes that have been put on the effigy rot and the wood is consumed by termites. After five or six years of gradual decay, the effigy disintegrates fully, to eventually vanish. Creation of an effigy, as an alternative embodiment of a deceased person, thus allows for the "delayed putrefaction" of the corpse (de Maaker, 2015).

Abandoned altars that have been used to make sacrifices to the deities of the community religion also indicate the continued presence of Songsareks. According to Songsareks, the environment abounds with deities (*mitde*s) that feed on people's life fluids. Whatever people know with respect to these entities has been accumulated over many generations, and yet Songsareks are the first to acknowledge that this knowledge is patchy and incomplete. Of some of the deities they know the name, their inclinations, how and where they bite people,

and the kinds of ailments they cause. If a deity bites, it holds on to and sucks blood from its victim. The biting seems to resemble that of a leech, apart from the fact that the bite of a deity remains invisible. By biting and sucking blood, a deity depletes its victim of its strength. Knowledge of the character of a deity is required in order to be able to address it and tempt it to release its victim. The latter is done by constructing a dedicated altar using fresh materials from the jungle. A shaman (*kamal*) then invokes the deity concerned through chanting. He (it is usually a man) then provides an animal to the deity, as a

Fig. 1: A *kima* representing a deceased man (photo by author).

substitute for its human victim, in order to persuade it to release the victim. Knowledge of a wide variety of such offerings and chants has been passed on from generation to generation. These range from fairly straightforward and short sacrifices, to costly and complex day-long celebrations. The latter also have an important social element to them and typically involve a common meal and long hours of socializing and rice beer drinking. Both men and women take part in this, but do so while sitting in adjacent rooms. People continue to conduct such offerings to the deities and bear the costs incurred because they are convinced that it can be efficacious. If someone is ill, this kind of treatment can sidetrack the deity causing it and thus cure the afflicted person.

The continuation of the community religion, in the current day and age, is remarkable. Most followers of the community religion are illiterate, but that does not render them isolated or ignorant. They are well aware of *Garo* Hills being included in the Indian state, and how that positions them in an economic and political sense. They are also not unaware of biomedical approaches to illness: some of them have visited hospitals in Tura, the administrative and political center of the region, and they also sometimes make use of biomedical medicines that can be procured from itinerant salesmen. Furthermore, quite a few households have a television,

Fig. 2: A man performs a sacrifice to cure a woman who is being bitten by a deity (photo by author).

and everyone, including Songsareks, likes Hindi movies for their songs and the window these provide on the world at large.

Considering that the followers of the community religion are not disconnected from the wider society they are part of, its continuation triggers at least two relevant questions. So, (1) how can the persistence of the *Garo* community religion, albeit marginalized, be explained? And subsequently, (2) what role may be left in the near future for the practices, objects, and beliefs

associated with the community religion? These two questions hint at a separation between distinct religious realms. Therefore, before addressing these two questions, I first want to briefly dwell on a third, which is of a much more fundamental nature: (3) what are the implications of following or practicing a religion in a pluralistic context, and how does that involve notions such as belief, knowledge, and truth?

Belief, Knowledge, and Truth

T. Asad (1983) has fundamentally questioned the extent to which religion constitutes a realm of ideas and practices set apart from those that are nonreligious, which relegates religion to a separate domain of "knowing." This setting religious experiences and thought apart has its origins in European enlightenment, and allowed for the definition of "the secular" (Asad, 1993). Secular knowledge is then not based on what are considered religious premises, but on premises that are presumably universally valid. Generally speaking, science is secular, and insofar as scientists (or better, "academics") study religion, they tend to do that from a secular perspective. That is, they analyze religion and write about it for an audience of essentially nonbelievers. If secular knowledge is universally true, that by default renders religious knowledge less true, if not false. Extending Asad's influential contribution, W. Keane (2008) has further challenged the distinction between "the religious" and "the secular". Can knowledge based on religious premises be distinguished from knowledge as a category more generally? W. Keane asks rhetorically:

> What is knowledge? What are strange beliefs? Beliefs you do not claim yourself. But if viewed in the context of other people's beliefs, then they should not appear strange. It is a truism…that if you live in a world in which everyone accepts the existence of witches, witches will seem natural. And can people have a category of the supernatural if they have no category of the natural?" (Keane, 2008, 115)

From the vantage point of science, what science produces is supposedly objective knowledge, which is based on the "laws" of nature. Religion, however, then encompasses assumptions and beliefs that are accepted by some, yet cannot contest the overall and ultimate validity of scientific knowledge.

Let me develop this thought in relation to the *Garo* community religion, with reference to a diagnostic technique used by its followers. In addition to observing the symptoms of someone who has fallen ill, Songsareks can use diagnostic techniques (*sma channa*) to identify the deity that causes an illness. One of these techniques involves a *pongsi*, a little bow made of bamboo. The bow is dipped in some rice grains provided by the household of the person who has fallen ill. The person conducting the diagnosis then carefully lifts up the bow, which will have some of the rice grains on it, and one by one murmurs the names of the deities who may be at play.

If the deity who causes the illness is mentioned, the bow begins to swing. The diagnosis can extend both to deities that are conventionally included in the community religion, and to what appear to be "deified" illnesses that originate from the biomedical discourse, such as what people call "tibi" (tuberculosis) and "numonia" (pneumonia). The bow is thus a measuring device that in its being still, or swinging, produces a reading of the condition of the patient. The observation is empirical, in the sense that the reading can be observed, and be repeated whenever necessary. How are such observations, from the vantage point of Songsareks, for who the presence of deities that cause illnesses is a given, not empirical? Can they be compared to the reading of a thermometer as an indicator of illness for people who explain illness in biomedical terms?

More generally, from a secular perspective, religious beliefs are second-class theories that are necessarily (at least) one step removed from the truth. To Songsareks, however, their knowledge of the world is not second-class. If the *pongsi* identifies a certain deity, that can be, from their perspective, as good as a laboratory reading is for someone who accepts the biomedical framework as authoritative. Yet many of the people who I encountered during fieldwork, be it Songsarek or Christian *Garo*, accepted knowledge based on distinct premises next to one another. *Garo* Songsareks attribute truth value to

Fig. 3: Handling the *pongsi* (photo by author).

observations and beliefs that are anchored in the premises of the community religion. Yet next to these, they also accept knowledge deriving from Christian or secular realms. Which set of premises prevails and why, depends on the context and on the process by which knowledge is validated in a particular situation.

Changes in the Religious Landscape

Now let me return to the first of the two questions that I formulated above: how can the persistence of the *Garo* community religion, albeit nowadays significantly marginalized, be explained? I will approach this question from a historical perspective, which will allow me to relate the overall decline of the community religion to the political and economic transformations that the region has seen.

What is nowadays recognized as the *Garo* community religion does not seem to differ significantly from the religious practices of the *Garo* in precolonial times, although, by any account, current practices appear scaled down. Whereas the community religion has, and had, certain correspondences with vernacular Hinduism, it does not include references to the mainstream Hindu epics nor to any of its deities. Yet, it does share features with the religious

practices of surrounding communities, particularly of the Hajong, Rabha, and Bodo of the Brahmaputra valley, many of which are categorized as Hindu. Induced, partially, by an administrative and sociological framing of uplanders as distinct from the people of the plains, the *Garo* community religion has gradually emerged as a comprehensive set of religious practices and beliefs.

From the mid-19th century onward, with the assimilation into the colonial state of the upland areas in which *Garo* constituted the majority of the population, Christian missionaries from Britain, the United States, and Australia began a proselytizing drive (Sangma, 1987). Their efforts soon became indigenized, in the sense that *Garo* Christians became the main propagators of Christianity, aided by Baptist ministers from elsewhere in the region (such as Nagaland, Mizoram), as well as by Catholic priests from southern India. The missionaries equated the world of the dead, as conceptualized by the community religion, to hell, and categorized its deities as demons or devils. Although these kind of classifications have been asserted for decades, the decision to convert seems to have been more significantly stimulated by formal education than by fear induced by daunting renderings of the afterlife (Burling, 1997). *Garo* associate Christianity with schooling, biomedical health care, and with "being modern" in general.

A further, and perhaps even more significant reason for abandoning the community religion lies in the increasing redundancy and undesirability of the communal practices associated with it. Most ceremonies and rituals conducted in the context of the community religion demand substantial commitment from participants in terms of money, rice beer, and often meat, translating in taxing celebrations. In those parts of the *Garo* Hills where shifting cultivation has gone into decline, the large-scale religious ceremonies that define and mark its annual agricultural cycle have lost their earlier relevance. This also ended their capacity to shape and legitimize local social and political hierarchies. What goes lost, when people abandon the community religion?

Shaping Social and Political Hierarchy

Where people continue to practice shifting cultivation in *Garo* Hills, land is communally owned and managed. Fields are made on fallows, and only cultivated for two years (or, increasingly, one year) at the time. People have to collaborate to make their new fields. They have to jointly agree on a location for their fields and define the borders between them. In addition, progressing from one phase of shifting agriculture to another often requires all cultivators to work together. According to the *Garo* community religion, the harvest is "given" by the deities, and people have to jointly provide certain offerings in order to be able to reap the crops and consume them. Cultivating swiddens is embedded in an annual cycle that includes at least three large-scale festivals, each of which demands the articulation of social

relationships among villagers. Apart from the pivotal *wangala* post-harvest festival, this includes *a'galmaka* (at the time of sowing) and *jamegapa* (releasing the fields). At all of these ceremonies, the most senior persons have pivotal roles in interacting with the deities. These seniors are not necessarily the oldest people, but rather the most senior in terms of their kinship designation. People belonging to households who are junior to them need to support their seniors' efforts. Making offerings to the deities can therefore reveal social relationships between villagers.

Significantly, each of these ceremonies involves the communal consumption of rice beer. *Garo* make rice beer in large earthen vessels, and drinking rice beer is much enjoyed. One vessel contains enough rice beer for 10 to 20 people, and easily provides enough for an hour of drinking. A rice beer drinking session in a single house often requires more than one vessel of rice beer, and religious festivals tend to encompass many houses. Religious festivals therefore provide for many hours of social interaction. In the rare cases that the use of alcohol translates into violent behavior, which occasionally happens, the perpetrator is later on disciplined by the village court. Drinking rice beer is generally experienced as highly enjoyable, entertaining, and relaxing. The latter seems to become ever more important as the commodification of land and produce increasingly provides scope for conflicts of interest on economic and political grounds. Even at locations where people continue to practice shifting cultivation, private orchards expand on communal hill land. This effectively brings such land under private control, rendering it unavailable for further communal tenure. In the recent past, some people have been quicker to acquire permanent land holdings than others, and within villages income disparities have increased. In addition, earlier conflicts about the usage of communal land persist. Wherever coal is mined on communal land, conflicts are likely to arise as to how to share the revenues gained. Drinking rice beer, with its mildly intoxicating effect, allows and encourages people to loosen up. Cracking jokes and pulling each others' leg creates a relaxed social sphere that allows people to redress social tensions, and mend and cement social relationships.

Rice beer drinking is exclusively associated with the community religion, and as a rule Christians do not join in. Catholics may drink, albeit in moderation, but even for them it is said to constitute a sin (*pap*). Most Christians drink tea. Seventh Day Adventists do not even drink tea, but stick to hot water. Tea is not inebriating, and tea parties never become as liberating as those that involve rice beer. Drinking rice beer, in other words, makes for a special kind of much cherished sociality, that is not accesible to people who have abandoned the *Garo* community religion.

As mentioned above, most of the festivals associated with the community religion involve redistributive feasting. The deities make frequent demands on people to provide offerings, usually animals, varying from a rooster or a duck to a goat or a bull or cow. When an animal is

offered to the deities, its meat is eaten by all the people who attend the ritual. While the deity receives a little bit of meat, most is eaten by relatives and friends. The number and size of these animals depends on the demands made by the deities involved, which is in turn largely prescribed by the event. Funerals always demand the slaughter of at least one animal, but dependent on the seniority of the deceased many more may be required. The larger the number of animals that can be provided and the higher these rank in the sacrificial hierarchy (bulls/cows top the list), the more prestige (*rasong*) is attributed to the hosts. Meat is a luxury food, and beef is no doubt the most valued of all meats. Animals are highly valued, and wealthy people can provide these more easily than others. Offering animals to the deities thus results in their meat being shared out, also towards people who may otherwise not be able to afford it.

People earn prestige when they can offer food to others, since that confirms that their household has the "economic muscle" to provide it. Notably, when it comes to larger ceremonies, the hosts are not the only ones to provide meat and rice beer, but receive support from households that belong to junior kin or to close lineage members. Being able to host is thus also a way to display one's kinship network, and the extent to which one's household is acknowledged and able to command support. Such redistributive systems are common in the uplands of northeast India, and in fact throughout the larger contiguous uplands of South and Southeast Asia (van Schendel, 2002; Scott, 2009).

In the context of the *Garo* community religion, redistributive feasting is compulsory not only from a social but also from a religious perspective. When illness is at stake, the deities make demands that must be satisfied if they are to release their victim. During my fieldwork, I heard several stories of people who had lost all their livestock, and eventually all their other wealth, due to repeatedly having to offer sacrifices. The sustained demands made by the deities can easily deplete people's resources. Christians do not engage in redistributive feasting in this way. Redistributive rituals and communal sharing do take place, but much less frequently. For urban Christians, Christmas is a big feast, and marriages are celebrated extravagantly, as are death rituals. Significantly, as mentioned above, at the time of elections politicians' campaigns invariably involve the provision of collective meals. Thus, in a Christian context, redistributive feasting continues to be an important characteristic of *Garo* sociality, but it seldom seems to reduce people to poverty the way it can among the practitioners of the community religion.

What Role is Left for the Community Religion?

I now come to my second question: what role is left in the near future for the practices, material objects, and beliefs associated with the community religion? Even though, in a limited number of localities, a good number of people continue to practice the community

religion, the majority are in their thirties or above. Most youth have been baptized. Over the last couple of years, the village where I did my fieldwork has gained a number of (mainly primary) schools. Now that attending primary school has become the norm, so has baptism.

In addition, as mentioned above, practitioners of the community religion are increasingly pragmatic when it comes to drawing on registers of knowledge that relate to the Christian and/or the secular realms. When an ill person is diagnosed as suffering from pneumonia, antibiotics can be an appropriate treatment. Since most biomedical medication is obtained from Christian doctors, these are referred to as medicines of Jesus (*jesuni sam*). In other respects as well, the community religion's practitioners are adaptive: until a couple of decades ago, dead bodies were always cremated. Nowadays, cremation is either reserved for people who are considered very important or conducted when a death involves a severe transgression. What was once the general practice has become a very special, most thorough treatment of a dead body. Burial has become acceptable since it involves less effort, but probably also because it is the Christian practice

However, Christians do not necessarily cut all ties to the community religion. I have shown elsewhere (de Maaker, 2013a) that Christians continue to acknowledge a certain category of deities. These deities (*skal*s) are of a particularly malevolent nature and cause illnesses that cannot be treated with biomedicine or prayer (de Maaker, 2009). A *skal* is a deity who connects itself to a person, making that person into a witch. I have been told by many Christians that witches are becoming an increasingly serious nuisance. The mainstream Christian denominations, they confided, cannot offer any protection. One person told me, looking scornfully: "In Tura, witches are preaching from the pulpit." In other words, even in church, people are at risk. I have heard of more than one case in which people who had been Christians for almost all their lives, in desperation, sought recourse to ritual means of treatment that were firmly located within the realm of the community religion to counter such evils (de Maaker, 2013a).

Quite apart from witchcraft, the mainstream Christian denominations have been (willingly or not) accommodating of ideas that derive from the community religion. Human to animal transfiguration, or shape shifting (*pil'a*), is a known phenomenon for many Christian *Garo*. And herbal healing (*sam a'chik*) is widely practiced and used, the inspiration for which quite a few of its practitioners find in "forces" that seem to neatly align with the community religion. In addition, as mentioned above, certain practices relating to death have been carried over from the community religion into Christianity with just a few minor modifications.

Perhaps the flexibility of mainstream *Garo* Christianity explains why attempts to reformulate the community religion into a "new" tradition have met with so little enthusiasm. In *Jadoreng: The Psycho-Physical Culture of the Garos*, D.R. Sangma (1993) made an attempt to redefine the *Garo* community religion as one that might contend with "modern" ideologies such as

Christianity. D.R. Sangma, who had been baptized in his youth, left the church after a row with the church authorities and readopted the community religion. However, his ideas did not catch on, and no other neo-Songsarek movement has emerged to date, as has happened, for instance, among certain sections of the Naga (Longkumer, 2010).

Before I move to my conclusion, I would like to briefly dwell on the public appreciation of the community religion. The "missionary evaluation" of the community religion has not been very positive, and urban *Garo* Christians in particular tend to describe Songsareks as conservative, backward, even "dirty," and the women as "unchaste." Practitioners of the community religion themselves do not subscribe to such pejorative judgements. Rather, they tend to regard themselves as culturally superior and as guardians of true and ancient knowledge. In that respect, sustaining the community religion means shouldering the responsibility to safeguard *Garo* heritage from the cultural loss that is so often lamented by *Garo* intellectuals (de Maaker, 2013b). It may seem far-fetched, but in line with these sentiments the followers of the community religion increasingly enjoy recognition as cultural specialists. Researchers regularly visit them to ask about "real *Garo* custom." They are appreciated as musicians and dancers, and not only at the "Hundred Drums Wangala" contest that is organized annually by the state of Meghalaya and nearly always won by a Songsarek dancing troupe. For instance, they also received acknowledgment from outsiders when the famous musician and choreographer A.R. Rahman included a number of men from the village where I did my fieldwork in the opening ceremony of the 2010 New Delhi Commonwealth Games. I would not argue that these instances of recognition are what motivates people to continue practicing the community religion, but it does help to ward off the derision that has earlier been (and to some extent continues to be) directed toward Songsareks as a result of the dominance of Christianity in the *Garo* Hills.

Conclusion

In this article I posed three questions. The first was: how can the persistence of the community religion, albeit marginalized, be explained? I have shown that people stay with the *Garo* community religion because they continue to derive benefits from its sacrifices, ceremonies, and feasts, which they do not want to lose out on. In fact, in the village where I lived, quite a few people have reconverted from Christianity to the community religion in order to regain access to these. Furthermore, Songsareks are also able to connect to knowledge and practices associated with Christianity and/or secular science. They are pragmatic when it comes to health care and engage, sometimes simultaneously, with both biomedical and deity-related disease etiologies and trajectories of healing. To Songsareks, the community religion continues to offer an array of valuable ritual techniques that have been proven over generations. In addition, it thus offers a large number of feasts, which are prime occasions for the renegotiation of sociopolitical relationships, but are not accessible to Christians.

My second question was: what role is left for the practices, objects, and beliefs associated with the community religion in the near future? As long as Songsareks refuse to accept that the community religion is erroneous, they are likely to stay with it. What is more, the relatively recent reappreciation of the community religion as a core element of "Garoness" has resulted in some positive acclaim from wider society. While there can be little doubt that practices and ideas relating to the community religion have absorbed some Christian and secular knowledge, at the same time, local Christian and secular configurations continue to be heavily influenced by concepts and practices derived from the community religion. This holds not only for ideas concerning disease and well-being, nature and the environment, but also for the obligation to participate in redistributive feasting, notably at the time of death. Even though the occasions when it is demanded are less frequent than among followers of the community religion, redistributive feasting continues to be important for gaining prestige and negotiating social relationships. This connects to the third, more fundamental question that I have asked.

My third question was: What are the implications of following or practicing a religion in a pluralistic context, and how does that involve notions such as belief, knowledge, and truth? In this article I have shown that rather than assuming that the realm of religion is distinct and involves a kind of knowledge that is secondary to that which is secular or scientific, people engage with various strands of knowledge at the same time. Rather than one strand of knowledge consistently overriding others, credibility is attributed to different types of knowledge according to personal experiences and the kind of consensus that comes about in the social environment in which a person lives. In order to understand how people locate themselves in a religious sense, we need to consider how these multiple flows of knowledge gain or lose people's trust as they come together, influence, confirm, and contradict one another.

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