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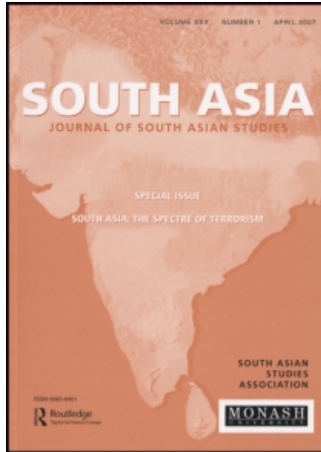
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### From the Songsarek Faith to Christianity: Conversion, Religious Identity and Ritual Efficacy

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# **From the Songsarek Faith to Christianity: Conversion, Religious Identity and Ritual Efficacy<sup>1</sup>**

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## **Abstract**

Among the Garos of the upland state of Meghalaya, Christianity was introduced more than 150 years ago. Until the middle of the twentieth century it primarily gained importance in the few larger towns where administrative and educational institutions were concentrated. In the decades after the Second World War, primary education was extended to many of the rural areas, and the number of converts quickly increased. By the turn of the millennium about 80 percent of the Garos considered themselves Christians. Nevertheless, there continue to be quite a few rural localities where larger or smaller numbers of people have remained loyal to the local animist religion. In these areas, religion divides matrilineal kin groups. This article analyses the performance of a mortuary ritual in which both Christians and animists participate. It discusses the extent to which animist practices inspire this Christian funeral, and how that affects its religious and social implications. I show that the ritual caters to various religious needs, while at the same time allowing for the expression of shared values that exceed the religious divide.

## **Introduction**

An important transformative process that has taken place—and continues to take place—among the hill societies of Northeast India is the abandoning of local religious traditions in favour of Christianity. Christianity has gained ground among many of these societies in the wake of the expansion of the colonial state, and gradually obtained a very prominent position. This is particularly true of the Northeast

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<sup>1</sup> I am grateful to Vibha Joshi for her detailed comments.

Indian states that have a 'tribal' majority.<sup>2</sup> The 'tribal' elites that dominate these states consist predominantly—if not entirely—of Christians, and Christianity is emerging as a major rallying point for the pronouncement of 'tribal' identities. Christianity is associated with Western values, and allows for the definition of identities that are perceived as profoundly modern.<sup>3</sup>

Christianity was initially introduced among the 'tribal' communities of Northeast India by European, American and Australian missionaries. Particularly from the second half of the twentieth century onwards, proselytising has also been advanced by Christians from South India, and from elsewhere within Northeast India (such as Naga missionaries working among the Garos). The conversion process continues as the older and more established Christian churches engage in an ongoing effort to bring the remaining animists 'into the fold'. In addition, new charismatic religious communities are emerging (not seldom with support from abroad), which appeal to animists as well as members of the established churches by offering arguably more compelling forms of worship.<sup>4</sup>

The Christianities that have emerged in Northeast India are rooted in the various hill societies. In this respect, the animist beliefs and practices that characterise the local community religions are an important inspiration. Similarly, wherever animist beliefs and practices continue to be followed, these are subject to processes of redefinition *vis-à-vis* surrounding religious presences as well. Such processes of borrowing and redefinition are in themselves not remarkable, for 'all religions have composite origins and are continually reconstructed through ongoing processes of synthesis and erasure'.<sup>5</sup> Yet does this imply that religions existing next to one another draw upon a shared cultural reservoir? And how do people of the same community, who belong to different religious denominations, bridge the gaps that their religious identities appear to create? I will explore these questions in relation to the performance of rituals of death that involve both Christians and adherents of an animist religious tradition.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>2</sup> The hill societies of Arunachal Pradesh lag behind in this development due to their relatively late integration with the larger nation-state. However, it seems likely that eventually similar processes will take place there as well.

<sup>3</sup> For a critical treatment of the relationship between Christianity and modernity see P. van der Veer, *Conversion to Modernities* (New York: Routledge, 1996).

<sup>4</sup> See the article by Vibha Joshi in this issue.

<sup>5</sup> R. Shaw and C. Steward, *Syncretism/Anti-Syncretism: The Politics of Religious Synthesis* (London: Routledge, 1994), p.7.

<sup>6</sup> This paper is based on my unpublished PhD thesis, 'Negotiating Life: Garo Death Rituals and the Transformation of Society', Leiden University, 2006. Fieldwork was conducted between 1999 and 2001, in 2003 and in 2006. The research was done as a fellow of the Researchschool CNWS (Leiden University), in association with the North Eastern Hill University (Shillong and Tura). The project was sponsored by the Netherlands Foundation for the Advancement of Tropical Research (NWO/WOTRO) and the Indian Council for Cultural Relations (ICCR).

## Colonialism and the State

When in the early decades of the nineteenth century the colonial state expanded into the plains of Assam, it came to encompass a hilly range known as the Garo Hills. The British initially refused to occupy the area. Endemic malaria posed a serious threat,<sup>7</sup> and the hills had little to offer in terms of revenue.<sup>8</sup> However regularly-recurring violent conflicts between the hill-dwelling Garos<sup>9</sup> and the people from the surrounding 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'.<sup>10</sup> The financial argument earlier formulated remained valid, and is likely to have been conducive to a policy that aimed at the hill-dwelling Garos settling their own affairs as much as possible.

The colonial authorities categorised the Garos as a 'tribe', and granted the Garo Hills a special administrative status. During colonial rule, and after, the status of the Garo Hills was repeatedly adjusted, but many of the special regulations have remained in place until the present day. Initially a Scheduled District, Garo Hills was subsequently declared a Backward Tract and then a Partially Excluded Area.<sup>11</sup> After Independence it became one of the Autonomous Districts of Assam under the provision of the Sixth Schedule of the Indian Constitution.<sup>12</sup> A local organisation, the Garo Hills Autonomous District Council, was made responsible for the administration of the interior villages. After 1970, when the area was merged into the newly-created state of Meghalaya, this organisation continued to function as the Garo Hills District Council.

As a result of the special status of the area, land titles have been registered with villages, and taxation—of Garos—has remained minimal. Until 1995, both Indian

<sup>7</sup> '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'. J. M'cosh, *Topography of Assam* (Delhi: Sanskaran Prakashak, [1837] 1975), p.165.

<sup>8</sup> P.C. Kar, *British Annexation of Garo Hills* (Calcutta: Nababharat Publishers, 1970).

<sup>9</sup> In South Asia, a community such as the Garos is primarily defined on the basis of language. In 1991, about 540,000 people living in the Garo Hills regarded Garo as their mother tongue. In addition, there were at least a quarter of a million Garo speakers in the Goalpara and Kamrup Districts of Assam, and another 100,000 in the Mymensingh and Modhupur regions of Bangladesh. See R. Burling, *The Strong Women of Modhupur* (Dhaka: The University Press Limited, 1997).

<sup>10</sup> A. Mackenzie, *The North-East Frontier of India* (published earlier as *History of the Relations of the Government with the Hill Tribes of the North-East Frontier of Bengal*) (New Delhi: Mittal Publications, [1884] 1995), p.265.

<sup>11</sup> These provisions were similar to those of the Inner Line Regulation (Regulation No. V of 1873). They were enacted separately since the Inner Line Regulation could not be applied to an area that was entirely surrounded by the colonial state. The Inner Line Regulation applied to areas along the boundaries of the colonial state, such as the erstwhile North East Frontier Tracts and the Naga Hills (the present day Arunachal Pradesh and Nagaland). See J.N. Das, *A Study of the Land System of Meghalaya* (Guwahati: Law Research Institute Eastern Region, 1990), p.9.

<sup>12</sup> B.B. Kumar, *Re-Organization of North-East India: Facts and Documents* (New Delhi: Omson Publications, 1996).

citizens and foreigners required a permit to access the Garo Hills. Furthermore, till today Garo villagers organise access to land, the conduct of marriages, and the settlement of minor disputes on the basis of Garo *niam* (observance).<sup>13</sup> Garo *niam* encompasses guidelines for relationships among people and the larger kin groups to which they belong. It also provides guidance for people's relationships to nature and to the supernatural.

### Garo Songsareks and Christians

Garo animist beliefs and practices are referred to as 'Songsarek'. This term derives almost certainly from Bengali, the language of the people residing in the plains to the south of the Garo Hills.<sup>14</sup> Nevertheless it has become part of the local language, and animist Garos sometimes use it to refer to themselves as opposed to Christians, Muslims or Hindus. More often, Songsareks speak about themselves as 'the ones who are obeying the deities' (*mitde manigipa*).

Christianity in the Garo Hills was first and foremost spread through education. As a rule, after often only a few years of education, Garos consented to be baptised.<sup>15</sup> In the second half of the nineteenth century, Baptist missionaries organised the first schools, transcribed the then unwritten language, and wrote the first school books.<sup>16</sup> From the first half of the twentieth century onwards, Catholic missions became established as well.

Initially, people converted only in small numbers. Burling estimates that in the 1950s about a third of the Garos were Christians; the rest remained Songsarek.<sup>17</sup> From the middle of the twentieth century, though, schools spread quickly throughout the interior areas, and proselytising gained pace. By the turn of the twenty-first century more than 80 percent of the Garos had adopted Christianity.<sup>18</sup> Baptists and Catholics are the two largest denominations. In addition, new charismatic Protestant churches are emerging, such as the Ministry of God, the United Christian

<sup>13</sup> 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 gitchamni somoi*). The Garo word *niam* (related to the 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.

<sup>14</sup> The term *songsar* is likely to derive from the Sanskrit *saà-sâra* (from *saà-sù*) 'to be in the world', as opposed to renouncing it. As such, it is mildly pejorative.

<sup>15</sup> F.S. Downs, *History of Christianity in India, Vol V, Part 5 (North East India in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries)* (Bangalore: Church History Association of India, 1992), p.55.

<sup>16</sup> M.S. Sangma, *History and Culture of the Garos* (New Delhi: Books Today, 1981), p.260.

<sup>17</sup> Personal communication from Robbins Burling.

<sup>18</sup> The 1991 census lists 407,000 Christians in the Garo Hills. A total of 94,500 people indicated that they were followers of the Songsarek religion. M. Vijayanunni, *Meghalaya State District Profile 1991 (Census of India 1991)* (New Delhi: Registrar General of India, 1999), pp.58–63.

Association and the New Frontier Church. But so far, these are numerically insignificant.

I focus on a section of rural West Garo Hills District where Christians (primarily Baptists, but also Catholics and Seventh Day Adventists) are a minority among Songsareks. Most of these Christians are first generation converts. Locally, people refer to the changeover from being Songsarek to becoming a Christian as ‘baptism’ (*napola*).<sup>19</sup> The converts believe that adherence to the old faith is a sin (*pap*), and conversion is seen as a radical break with prior traditions. Thus for example, Christians avoid food that is offered to the Songsarek deities and refuse to drink rice beer (*chu*). Songsareks, on the other hand, consider the consumption of sacrificial food and rice beer as important indicators of ‘being’ Songsarek.

Neither Songsareks nor Christians deny the existence of the other religion’s supernatural beings. Songsareks acknowledge the divine qualities of Jesus, but rather than considering him as the son of a supreme God, they equate him to one of their many deities (*mitdes*). As such, Jesus can ‘bite’ (*chika*) people, causing illness just like Songsarek deities. As for the people who have become Christian, they do not so much deny the existence of the Songsarek deities as assume that these deities ‘keep quiet’ (*jrip dong’a*),<sup>20</sup> contained by a much more powerful God.

However Christian beliefs are strongly influenced by Songsarek practices. For instance, Songsareks consider it a transgression to acquire any of the personal belongings of a deceased person. Clothes, slippers and bedding all need to be disposed of. Indeed it is regarded as very dangerous for people to go on using such items, since they continue to be ‘owned’ by the deceased. Thus Christians tend to place the personal goods of deceased people on their graves, or inter them with the corpse—even though their religion formally denies the dead the ability to claim their earlier earthly possessions. Likewise, the ideas of Christian Garos about the afterworld seem closer to those of Songsareks than is often presumed. Christian Garos from Sadolpara and surroundings often talked to me about Heaven in terms of ‘a village’ with ‘houses’, reminiscent of the Songsarek belief that in many respects the afterworld mirrors life on earth.

Similarly, contemporary Songsarek practices are significantly influenced by Christianity. For instance, according to Burling, in the 1950s nearly all Songsarek

<sup>19</sup> The accession of a person (be it a child or an adult) to a Christian community is either marked by a ceremonial sprinkling with water, or immersion into water.

<sup>20</sup> Garo is normally written in Roman characters. In this paper, an apostrophe, when placed in a word, indicates the *raka* or glottal stop. A *raka* indicates that the sound of the syllable preceding it ends abruptly.

people cremated their dead;<sup>21</sup> whereas by the turn of the twentieth century burial had become standard practice. Nowadays, only important Songsareks are cremated. For Christian Garos, of course, burial is the only acceptable means of disposing of the dead.

In the part of the Garo Hills being considered here, religious cleavages run through kin groups and even families. The Garos are matrilineal, and localised matrilineal kin groups have to agree on issues that are of relevance to the kin group as a whole. This may involve economic interests such as access to coal deposits or agricultural land. It also extends to arrangements in relation to marriages and deaths that are essential for the continuation of the matrilineal kin group. Here the religious perspectives of the various participants come into play. So, how do kin groups that contain both Songsareks and Christians resolve religious differences in a bid to find common ground? Below, I analyse this process by looking at a Baptist death ritual that took place in the year 2000 in the village of Sadolpara (West Garo Hills District). The death ritual was attended by people from Sadolpara, and from a number of neighbouring villages.

### **The Mortuary Ritual for Nangseng Sangma**

Nangseng Sangma was probably in his late sixties or early seventies when he fell severely ill. His stomach became swollen, and turned as hard as rock. Relatives of Nangseng arranged for herbal medicines (*sam burung*). Some of them also bought allopathic drugs from one of the Bengali pharmacists at the weekly market. When none of these treatments worked, Nangseng's children collected money to have their father diagnosed by an allopathic doctor at the government hospital in Tura (the largest town in the Garo Hills). There Nangseng was diagnosed as suffering from advanced and incurable cancer of the intestine. Since nothing could be done to save him, he was brought back to the village. Many of his relatives came by to pay him a last visit, and he died soon after.

Two weeks before Nangseng's death, when there was already a sense that he might not be cured, Nangseng and his wife Jengda decided to be baptised. All of Nangseng's children were Baptists. Some of them were recent converts, others had become Christians decades before. The baptism of Nangseng was, in a way, unavoidable. Had he died a Songsarek, he would have required a Songsarek funeral. None of his children—all being Baptists—would have been able to provide this for him.

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<sup>21</sup> R. Burling, *Rengsanggri: Family and Kinship in a Garo village* (Tura: Tura Book Room, [1963] 1997).

All his life Nangseng had strongly resisted conversion. He had faith in the curative power of the sacrificial rites which Songsareks regularly perform. Moreover, he liked to drink vast quantities of rice beer (*chu*). Given its close association with Songsarek rites, the consumption of *chu* is not approved by any of the Christian churches.

Along with Nangseng, Jengda also converted to Christianity. A couple of decades before Nangseng and Jengda had married in accordance with Songsarek custom,<sup>22</sup> but traditional unions are not recognised by the Baptist Church. To resolve this problem, following their baptism, Nangseng and Jengda were married in the church. The position of the church on the issue of marriage would be expressed in Nangseng's obituary as well. The primary school teacher who wrote and read out the obituary said about Nangseng's Songsarek days: 'Since he had not become a Christian at that time, he did not have the opportunity to marry'.

Since Nangseng died a Baptist, he was given a Baptist funeral according to the conventions that prevail in rural West Garo Hills. Nonetheless in many ways the ritual resembled the death rituals that are performed for Songsareks. Among the people attending were nearly as many Christians as Songsareks. The Songsareks were not sidelined, but participated in the ritual in a variety of roles. Given the restrictions of space, I shall limit the discussion to the treatment of the corpse, and the re-negotiation of the marriage alliance by Nangseng's kin group with his widow Jengda.

### *The Treatment of Nangseng's Corpse*

The funeral of Nangseng was not conducted from the house he had lived in, as is the practice among Songsareks, but from the adjacent house of Nangseng's daughter Neta and her husband Rajeng. The house of Nangseng was in a dilapidated state. Furthermore, it was a typical Garo 'longhouse', made entirely of bamboo, rattan and thatch, which is in many ways identified with the Songsarek way of life. A number of people who came to attend the funeral walked up to Nangseng's house, and found that his body had been moved out. Later, a Songsarek woman informed me that this was 'not in accordance with "observance"'. Songsareks believe that ancestors are attracted to the house in which a person dies, since it is the inclination of the ancestors to abduct and guide the deceased to the afterworld. These ancestors are feared, but should nevertheless be honoured. Moving the corpse to another house implied the abandoning of these ancestors. For Christians, this is supposedly not an issue, as they do not—at least openly—acknowledge the presence of the ancestors.

<sup>22</sup> The *du'sia* ritual centers on the reading of omens from the intestines of three chickens. These omens assess the relationship between the (future) husband and wife. More importantly, they provide an indication regarding the relationship between the larger matrilinear kin groups of each of these persons.

Nangseng's body was laid out by some of his close relatives in the centre of the main room of Neta and Rajeng's house on a bedsheet that had been spread over a bamboo mat on the floor. The entire corpse, including the head and toes, was covered by a cloth. This was a departure from Songsarek custom in which the head and the feet are left uncovered. Moreover Nangseng's body was clothed in shirt and pants, whereas the Songsarek custom is to leave the body bare, covered only by a piece of cloth. A Bible was placed on a low stool behind Nangsang's head. This emphasised the fact that the funeral was being conducted within the Christian realm.

The Baptist character of the funeral was also reflected in the kinds of objects that were placed on the corpse. One of the things that Songsareks place on a dead body is inexpensive jewellery such as necklaces with beads made of coloured glass. On the second day of the mortuary ritual this jewellery is put on a wooden effigy of the deceased, which is erected in the courtyard of the house. In contrast, garlands made from strips of coloured paper, beads and aluminium foil were placed on Nangseng's corpse. Later in the day these were hung on the wooden cross erected to mark the burial site.

Soon after Nangseng's corpse had been arranged, fellow villagers and more distant relatives, both Songsareks and Baptists, joined in the mourning. Women, both young and old and a few young men, brought cuttings of shrubs with bright flowers stuck in freshly-cut banana-stem receptacles which were placed around the body. After the interment, the cuttings would be planted at the gravesite. For Christians, burial is important because of the belief in the resurrection of the dead on the Day of Judgement. Songsareks do not mark the place of disposal of the corpse (either after burial or cremation) because in their cosmology the remains of the dead do not retain any sanctity once the mortuary ritual has been completed.

Many of the women attending the funeral brought food for Nangseng: this included about a kilo of husked uncooked rice and a raw egg in a plastic bag or folded in leaves. The food was placed behind Nangsang's head. In a Songsarek funeral, women bring similar kinds and quantities of food. At such an occasion, the food is then cooked and placed on the floor next to the corpse as an offering known as *mimi'mang*, or 'rice for the ghosts'. These 'ghosts' involve both the deceased as well as his or her ancestors. But as mentioned earlier, Baptists do not acknowledge such 'ghosts'. Probably, therefore, at Nangseng's funeral the food was not cooked. Christians present referred to it rather as an offertory (*dan*), which would eventually be given to the church. Nevertheless, many of the Songsareks attending the funeral did clearly regard the rice and egg as an offering.

At a Songsarek funeral women sit around the corpse and fan it with a cock's tail feathers tied to a stick (*du'mi*). Songsareks use these *du'mi* also, after the burial or cremation, to guide the soul of the deceased back to the house in which that person earlier lived. Christians do not practise the latter because such manipulation of the soul is against their tenets. At Nangseng's funeral women used triangular-shaped paper flags to fan the corpse. These flags were glued on to a stick. Outwardly, the flags resembled the *du'mi* used by Songsareks. At the same time, they were sufficiently different from the *du'mi* to be acceptable to the Baptists.

That Nangseng's funeral belonged to the Baptist realm was also made explicit with a stress on literacy. When the body had been put in the casket to be taken to the graveyard, a primary school teacher from Sadolpara read out Nangseng's obituary:

This is the short life history of Sri Nangseng A. Sangma. He was born in the year 1930 in the village of Mronggre [Chibinang], as the son of Janang Marak. . . . Having lived as a Songsarek for some years, God himself called on the family. . . . And suffering from physical ailments for many days, on May 26, 2000 AD, he left this world and his family, loving friends, children and grandchildren. God has taken him into his kingdom, to life's everlasting dwelling place, which God has prepared for him to rest. That is his short history.<sup>23</sup>

Songsarek funerals do not include such an obituary. Moreover, during the mortuary ritual they refer to the dead as '*mi'mang*' or 'ghost', avoiding mentioning the name of the person who died. Furthermore, Nangseng's name, his (estimated) date of birth and the date of his death were painted on a wooden cross that was placed on the grave. In writing and reading out the name of the deceased, his biography and his dates, and in the references to God, it was emphasised that this was not a Songsarek funeral.

Yet in many ways, the Baptist mortuary ritual performed for Nangseng resembled a Songsarek death ritual. True, the structure and contents of the Songsarek ritual had been modified to suit Baptist beliefs. The corpse, which is kept bare by Songsareks, was dressed; the inexpensive jewellery had been replaced by garlands. For fanning the corpse, cock's tail feathers had been replaced by paper flags. The food brought as an offering, which Songsareks would have cooked for the 'ghosts', now remained raw, and was passed on to the church. But the essentials remained.

<sup>23</sup> The obituary quoted here has been abbreviated by the author. It is a transcript from a dialogue that was recorded on video in the course of my fieldwork.

These distinctions between the Baptist and the Songsarek versions of the mortuary ritual refer to eschatological differences. Crucial in this respect is the difference in the conceptualisation of the soul of the deceased person. Songsareks assume that the soul (*janggi*) of someone who has died transforms into a 'ghost' (*mi'mang*). The living are expected to maintain a relationship with this 'ghost', as eventually it will return in the form of the soul of a newborn member of their matrilineal kin group. Contrastingly, the Baptists teach that the soul of a deceased member of the church community goes to Heaven to remain there indefinitely. The mortuary ritual of Nangseng was geared towards the Baptist realm. Yet, it had stayed close enough to the Songsarek funerary protocol to accommodate the varying ways in which both Baptist and Songsarek villagers interpreted death and the afterworld.

Below I discuss the re-negotiation of Nangsang's marriage alliance, which was part of the death ritual, as another example of the overlap of Songsarek and Baptist ideas and beliefs.

#### *Interpreting Nangseng's A'kim 'Debt'*

Garos attribute great importance to marriage alliances (*a'kim* alliances) that are maintained between loosely-defined matrilineal kin groups. An *a'kim* marriage alliance comes into existence when a marriage is conducted in accordance with *niam* (observance). (This holds both for Songsareks and Christians, even though each defines the *niam* appropriate to the conduct of a marriage differently.) When either the husband or the wife dies, his or her matrilineal kin group is obliged to arrange a new spouse for the widower or widow. Consequently, until such a replacement has been realised, a death creates a 'debt' (*gru*) with the matrilineal kin group of the deceased person. Such replacement of a deceased person is referred to as 'to put back' (*datanga*) or 'to give instead' (*on'songa*).

It is customary for elderly people to anticipate their eventual replacement by designating an heir (*nokkrom*) and an heiress (*nokna*). However, although people can arrange an heir and heiress before their deaths, these cannot succeed until appointed by representatives of the respective matrilineal kin groups involved. To this end a meeting is held during the mortuary ritual in which senior men of both kin groups—and to a much lesser extent senior women—take part.

Nangseng and his wife Jengda had designated their youngest daughter Neta as the 'heiress' to Jengda. Neta married Rajeng, a classificatory younger brother of her father, which made him the heir to Nangseng. Had Rajeng and Neta, and Nangseng and Jengda been Songsareks, then, following the death of Nangseng, Rajeng would have become the husband of Neta's mother Jengda. Rajeng would literally have filled

the void that Nangseng's death had left. Rajeng would then have had two wives, the daughter (Neta) and her mother (Jengda). Among Songsareks, 'marriage' implies acceptance of the sexual component of the marital tie, although this can be no more than a formal demand, particularly if the widow and the heir differ in age by thirty years or more (as was the case with Rajeng and Jengda). Nevertheless, a formal rejection of sexual relations by either of the partners renders the replacement invalid. So, how was *a'kim* replacement defined by the Baptists present at the mortuary ritual of Nangseng? To what extent did this involve notions different from, or crossing-over into, the Songsarek realm?

Around four in the afternoon at Nangseng's mortuary ritual, a meeting was held in which representatives of Nangseng's localised matrilineage and the localised matrilineage of his widow took part. Eleven people came together in the tiny house that a son of Rajeng and Neta used to sleep in.<sup>24</sup> There they could talk in relative privacy, away from the people attending the funeral. Nangseng's side was represented by two Baptists and five Songsareks. On Jengda's side, there were two Songsareks and two Baptists. Widow Jengda and her daughter Neta were present as well. Neta's husband Rajeng did not attend.

During the several months of Nangseng's illness, Rajeng and Neta had taken care of Nangseng's fields, orchards and cattle, besides providing food to him and Jengda. Therefore no one present at the meeting would dare to challenge Rajeng's right to inherit Nangseng's position and estate. Nevertheless the relationship that he and his wife would maintain with the widow needed to be clarified. After all, Nangseng's death had created an *a'kim* debt on the side of his relatives towards the widow Jengda.

Any public discussion of a marital relationship is considered embarrassing, which might explain why Rajeng was absent. For the same reason, most probably, the future relationship between Neta and her mother Jengda was discussed first. A senior female representative of Nangseng's side (his stepmother) asked Neta whether she would provide food to her mother.

Tajak (Nangseng's stepmother): 'Niece, you may ask yourself later on, sometime in the future: "Shall I abandon my mother?" You might refuse to serve her, to cook for her. . . . Wouldn't you rather care for her?'  
 Siljon (a classificatory younger brother of Nangseng and Rajeng): 'Ah, will you and your husband take care of your mother, or do you say "We won't do so?"' . . .

<sup>24</sup> From the age of twelve or thirteen young men do not sleep in the same house as their parents and sisters. They construct a house of their own (*nokpante*) close to that of their parents.

Neta (Nangseng's daughter): 'Even if my husband refuses, I will serve rice to her' . . . .

Siljon (to Jengda): 'Now you, when you get in, stay with them, will you eat their food?'

Jengda: 'Yes, I will eat it'.

Digat (Jengda's younger brother): 'You will have to eat it, where else will you go?'<sup>25</sup>

'Food' was actually code for 'care' in a much broader sense. Jengda was an old woman, and she could not contribute substantially to the income of the household. She was still able to cultivate her own swidden, but the returns were insufficient for even her own sustenance. Neta was the one who cooked, the one who shared out the food to the members of the household. Therefore, it was important that Neta formally agreed to take care of her mother. (This is not to say that Neta would be allowed to refuse. Had she dared to do so, she would probably have been beaten by her own kin.)

Once Neta had offered to care for her mother, Jengda was asked whether she wanted to be cared for. In theory, Jengda could have refused. However, doing so would have implied that she did not accept Rajeng as the successor of Nangseng, which was unthinkable. Thus Jengda readily agreed to be cared for by Neta and Rajeng. Nevertheless, Jengda's younger brother Digat added a remark that made clear that she did not have any other option ('You will have to eat it, where else will you go?'). A refusal by Jengda would not only have created a problem for Nangseng's relatives, but for her own kin as well. After all, if she lacked a place to live and eat, her relatives would be obliged to arrange one for her.

For the settlement of an *a'kim* debt, it is crucial that no one can later challenge the validity of the replacement. Therefore, the people who had gathered for the meeting made a point of clarifying the relationship between Rajeng and Jengda as well. Among Songsareks *a'kim* replacement results in polygamy, but Christians consider that a sin. Among Christians, a widow cannot become the wife of the heir, as she would among Songsareks. Rather, she is 'looked after' (*mitanga*) by the heir couple. Because Jengda had been a Songsarek until very recently, and there were many Songsareks among the people gathered, it was considered necessary to be explicit about the sexual component of her relationship with the heir. Junan, one of the Baptist relatives, addressed this issue. He was a senior male matrilineal relative of the widow Jengda and an affine to the kin group of Nangseng and Rajeng.

<sup>25</sup> This is a transcript from a dialogue that was recorded on video during my fieldwork.

Junan: 'Some time ago, when your husband was close to bubbling over [close to his death], he became a Christian. And his wife became a Christian as well, am I right? . . . Nangseng's wife will have to understand. . . .'

Digat agreed: 'She will need to'.

Junan: "' . . . I am a Christian, and it is my husband's precept". There can't be two wives, he [Rajeng] can't weed two fields. That will lead to quarrelling and create trouble for her uncles and brothers. So, this is the time to know and to understand'.

Tajak: 'You [male matrilineal relatives of Jengda] have the power to tell, haven't you?'

Junan: 'You can serve him [Rajeng] rice to eat. . .but you cannot sleep with him. . . . You should only take care of the grandchildren. Eggs cannot be laid in your stomach, your breasts cannot feed. . . . You should not wriggle and worm for that. Such is the law and custom of the Christians [*rurini law custom*'], such is our culture. Do you agree, or don't you agree to that?' . . .

Jengda: 'I am not willing to marry and hold him'.

Junan: 'Yea, this is it, it's up to you to decide. . . . You have said it'.

Siljon: 'These words are enough' . . .

Junan concluded: 'So, we have reached an agreement. *A'gitok* [the matrilineal kin group of Nangseng] has redeemed its debt'.<sup>26</sup>

Jengda's answer to Junan's question, 'I am not willing to marry and hold him', indicated her willingness not to maintain a marital tie with the heir to her deceased husband. This made it clear to the representatives of both kin groups that she would never be able to bring up that issue as an argument to dispute the validity of the *a'kim* replacement. Therefore, it relieved the *A'gitok* matrilineal kin group (Nangseng's relatives) of their *a'kim* debt.

The above discussion makes clear that Garo people explicitly distinguish between two kinds of 'observance': the *niam* of the Songsareks (*mandeni niam*), and the *niam* of the Christians (*rurini niam*). Jengda's statement brought the replacement of Nangseng by Rajeng into line with Baptist observance. In the meeting, this was presented as a significant departure from Songsarek 'observance'. However, given the age difference between Rajeng and Jengda, it was evident that even if both had happened to be Songsareks, their marriage would not have been consummated. This suggests that Junan's explicit questioning of the widow was designed primarily to bring the Baptist interpretation of the *a'kim* debt to the fore—which was probably sensible strategy given that half

<sup>26</sup> This is a transcript from a dialogue that was recorded on video during my fieldwork.

of the people present at the meeting were Songsareks, and widow Jengda herself had been a Songsarek until a couple of weeks before the death of her husband. In addition, and perhaps more significantly, bringing up the sexual aspect of the *a'kim* replacement emphasised that nothing less than a marriage was being negotiated (even if it was marriage without sex). In this latter sense, the discussion served to establish '*a'kim* replacement'—the arrangement of a new partner who takes the place of a deceased person—as a value that transcended the Christian–Songsarek divide.

### **Conclusion: Religious Identity and the Continuity of Culture**

In the part of West Garo Hills which this study relates to, the Songsarek and Christian (primarily Baptist) faiths represent distinct religious discourses. People objectify their own religion in opposition to the 'other' religion. In the Baptist mortuary ritual performed for Nangseng, this was manifest in the transformation of elements that were apparently too closely linked to Songsarek tenets.

On the whole, however, the Baptist death ritual remained fairly close to its Songsarek counterpart, suggesting that people were unable to transform the ritual beyond a certain point. Why, for instance, did the Baptist death ritual include women waving paper flags? The mortuary ritual was not conducted in the hot season, and the seemingly rational argument—to keep the flies away—did not hold. And why were women bringing rice and an egg for the deceased? Rice with egg is food that Songsarek 'ghosts' appreciate, but it seems far removed from the Baptist Church (which received it as an offering at the mortuary ritual of Nangseng). Over time, a further distancing of Baptist mortuary rituals from Songsarek practices is likely, as has happened in the Christian-dominated environment of Tura town.

Nangseng's funeral was unequivocally regarded as 'Baptist', but nevertheless it allowed people to connect to shared values. This was also evident in the discussion that emerged during the meeting between the matrilineal relatives of the deceased Nangseng and the widow Jengda. While allowing for an articulation of the Christian definition of *a'kim*, different from the manner in which Songsareks perceive that notion, the underlying message seems to have been that compliance with *a'kim* replacement was a shared concern for all the people involved, irrespective of their religious background.

Religious conversion is an important phenomenon among Northeast Indian 'tribal' communities such as the Garos, and the growing number of people that have changed—and are changing—their religious affiliation has contributed to a proliferation of religious identities. However, in rural West Garo Hills this has so far not resulted in cleavages across communities that cannot be bridged.