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# 8 Creating World Heritage at the Margins of the State

## Wildlife, Custom, and Culture

*Erik de Maaker*

### The Challenge

For some years now, the Meghalaya Forest Department advocated the creation of UNESCO World Heritage site in Garo Hills, the Garo Hills Conservation Area (GHCA). Garo Hills, the westernmost one-third of the Indian state of Meghalaya, is a biodiversity hotspot (Bera et al., 2006; Chettri et al., 2010). It harbors large numbers of unique plant and animal species, including many that have so far not been documented. In recent decades, due to logging, as well as changes in the usage of the land, the dense forest that once covered much of Garo Hills has thinned, reducing wildlife habitats and eroding the diversity of plant species (Karlsson, 2011). In addition, coal mining creates substantial environmental pollution. The Meghalaya Forest Department manages a number of relatively small forest reserves, nearly all of which have been created in the 1880s, at the time that Garo Hills became included in the colonial state.<sup>1</sup> In addition, in the 1980s, the Nokrek National Park and the Balpakram National Park were established as a major conservation area. As national parks, these are included in a national-wide (i.e., all-India) scheme, while its management is being done by the Meghalaya Forest Department. Quite a few of the forest reserves, as well as both national parks, are located along an east–west axis, running through the southern half of the Garo Hills. Having been created at different moments in time, these various conservation areas are mostly disconnected. The GHCA was – certainly initially – envisioned as a contiguous area, which would encompass existing conservation areas, while also creating corridors among them. This means that the Garo Hills Conservation Area, as initially proposed, would also relate to land managed and held by villages under what I have written about elsewhere as customary communal ownership (*a'king*) (de Maaker, 2018).<sup>2</sup> This could be included either in the core area or (more likely) in a surrounding bufferzone.

Early 2017, I was approached by one of the main advocates of the GHCA initiative, to become involved in the effort. Based on ethnographic fieldwork conducted in Garo Hills over a period of about two decades, I had and have published quite extensively on changing cultural attitudes toward land (de

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Maaker, 2013, 2018, 2020, 2021, 2022), also in relation to North East India more generally (de Maaker & Tula, 2020). To gain recognition as a UNESCO World Heritage site, the Garo Hills Conservation Area would be proposed as a site of “outstanding universal value.” In such a site, various kinds of heritage combine, involving, e.g., natural, geological, and cultural values. As mentioned in the extensive literature on heritage studies, the distinction between natural and cultural heritage implies a specific (western) ontological perspective, which often has little relevance for the communities whose heritage it is supposed to describe (Geismar, 2015, p. 72; Muzaini & Minca, 2018). Cultural heritage, to fit the framework of UNESCO, typically emphasizes “the magical-supernatural aspect of local belief,” to render it compatible with the “secular-rational” conceptual framework it is expected to fit in with (Byrne & Ween, 2015, p. 130). Such a demand can easily result in overlooking aspects of heritage that are locally considered important, yet do not fit this framework.

UNESCO’s application procedure entails a long and arduous process, which includes the drafting of a hefty and very detailed dossier, and it was with respect to this bureaucratic exercise that my involvement was sought. I have tried to contribute in this – as of now not completed – effort at various moments in time, throughout 2018 and 2019.<sup>3</sup> I have met face to face with the people who have taken to the GHCA the initiative, engaged in extensive Skype conversations, and, while in Meghalaya, discussed the opportunities the realization of a Garo Hills Conservation Area might create, as well as the challenges it poses to many of the stakeholders. It is evident to me that the thinning of the forest cover of Garo Hills is detrimental to the biodiversity in the region, mining creates severe pollution, and more generally communal land management is under pressure; developments which combined pose a severe threat to people and environment in Garo Hills. While I would like to contribute to efforts to mitigate if not reverse these threats, I am less certain about the trajectories to be followed to arrive at this. Efforts at conservation of the natural environment easily go against the interests of people who are living on and with the land, whereas their support, commitment, and knowledge should be central to any efforts made (Melick et al., 2012). Creating conservation areas has frequently resulted in people being evicted, as in the “hard conservation” that characterizes many national parks worldwide (Redpath et al., 2015). That the Garo Hills Conservation Area is being proposed within the UNESCO category “outstanding universal value” therefore creates an interesting opportunity, since this can potentially foreground the meaning which land has for people who live on it. The GHCA could then call for conservationist’s efforts to align with farmer’s connections to land. In this chapter,<sup>4</sup> following up on my involvement with the effort, I explore different interpretations of what cultural heritage in relation to the proposed Garo Hills Conservation Area might entail.

The proposed GHCA is located close to the India–Bangladesh border, and in that sense politically at the margins of the Indian state. More significantly,

the Garo community, categorized within India as “tribal,” is culturally and numerically marginal within the country. The GHCA initiative could thus result in acknowledgment as a UNESCO World Heritage for an area that is at the margins both in a political and in a cultural sense.

### **The Tentative Listing**

The United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) has created a framework for the recognition of world heritage. This can encompass sites, landscapes, or built environments, or a combination thereof, which are “priceless and irreplaceable assets,” “not only of each nation, but of humanity as a whole” (Intergovernmental Committee for the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage, 2019, p. 9). Such “most prized” assets should be protected against “deterioration or disappearance,” since that would constitute “an impoverishment of the heritage of all the peoples of the world” (Intergovernmental Committee for the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage, 2019, p. 9). For the Garo Hills Conservation Area to be accepted as UNESCO World Heritage, in other words, it should not just constitute an asset of people in Garo Hills, or even of India, but have a unique value for people throughout the world. In other words, for the GHCA to qualify as world heritage, it should really stand out with respect to the qualities which its proponents claim it has.

Most world heritage sites are listed for their either “natural” or “cultural” value, and sites that combine these qualities are relatively rare. In India, UNESCO has so far recognized only one world heritage site of “outstanding universal value,” and that is the Khangchendzonga National Park, located in the state of Sikkim. The park has managed to obtain this qualification since its natural assets (“a unique diversity of plains, valleys, lakes, glaciers and spectacular, snow-capped mountains covered with ancient forests”) area is so cherished for their cultural value (“Mythological stories (...) associated with [Khangchendzonga] (...) and with (...) caves, rivers, lakes (...) that are the object of worship by the indigenous people of Sikkim”) (UNESCO, 2016). The nomination document based on which the “Khangchendzonga National Park” was acknowledged as UNESCO World Heritage details the natural features of the park, but it also specifies how rocks, streams, and forests in the park are important in terms of religious worship (Forest Environment and Wildlife Management Department Government of Sikkim, 2016).

In 2018, the GHCA was accepted by UNESCO for its tentative list. The tentative list contains proposals for world heritage sites which have garnered the support of the national governments within whose jurisdiction they fall, while roughly matching the criteria set by UNESCO. For the Garo Hills Conservation Area, this meant that the proposal supported by the Government of Meghalaya was accepted by the Indian central government in Delhi, and thus also obtained its backing. The proponents of a site thus listed need to prepare a full and very detailed nomination dossier (the Khangchendzonga

one counts about 1200 pages). Such a dossier is currently being prepared for the GHCA. The tentative listing presents the Garo Hills Conservation Area as a “mixed site” of “outstanding universal value” (UNESCO, 2018). This claim is substantiated with reference to culture, geology, as well as biodiversity.<sup>5</sup> For the GHCA to match the biodiversity criterion seems to be beyond doubt. The tentative listing mentions many different kinds of mammals, insects and reptiles, and a large number of rare plant species, including the in situ conservation of unique citrus genes.<sup>6</sup> Compliance with the geology criterion also seems rather straightforward, as notably, the Balpakram National Park contains limestone formations which are rich in (among others) rare nano fossils and bears witness of the India-Asia continent collision which occurred some 56–60 Million years ago.<sup>7</sup>

The cultural uniqueness of Garo Hills is motivated foregrounding shifting cultivation (in North East India known as *shum*). Shifting cultivation involves making temporary fields on forest land. According to the tentative listing, shifting cultivation as practiced in Garo Hills is “one of the classical examples of traditional methods of sustainable land-use for cultivation in the landscape.” This is in line with recent policy reports, which emphasize how shifting cultivation can contribute to the sustenance of biodiversity (Aryal & Choudhury, 2015; Pant et al., 2018). The cultural uniqueness of the Garo Hills Conservation Area is further substantiated stating that many people continue to “hold traditional beliefs” located with, or originating from the traditional Garo community religion, even though the vast majority of the Garo have converted to Christianity (UNESCO, 2018).

When I learned about the tentative listing of the GHCA, I was intrigued but also excited about the interlinkage between (notably) biodiversity and culture. In Garo Hills, the traditional Garo community religion has on the whole become culturally marginalized (certain locations exempted – de Maaker, 2018), but even so the linkage of land use to religion and mythology creates a perspective which can accommodate everyday experiences and engagements with the environment which escape a rigid religious categorization. That is, for Christian Garo, land- and agriculture-related knowledge continues to be rooted in carried over traditions. Moreover, the positive references made in the tentative listing to shifting cultivation suggested that the Garo Hills Conservation Area would come to include measures aimed at strengthening this modality of land use. Here, I expected the project to follow in the footsteps of efforts earlier made by the International Fund for Agriculture Development (IFAD) in Garo Hills (International Fund for Agricultural Development, 2006), which were later on followed up by among others the Meghalaya Basin Development Authority (2017). This would be unusual, since the Forest Department has no jurisdiction over land collectively owned by villages. Realizing the Garo Hills Conservation Area thus seemed to call for a dialogue between government officers and the rural areas’ residents, which in the best possible case could result in new strategies to value traditional landscape and

environment-related knowledge as cultural heritage, also with the intention to sustain or even increase biodiversity.

### **Elephants in the Room?**

When the news broke in Meghalaya that the Garo Hills Conservation Area had been placed by UNESCO on the tentative list, this triggered positive responses in the press. Roopak Goswami, in an article published in *The Telegraph*, quoted Garo Hills conservator of forests, Meghalaya Forest Department, Mr P.R. Marak:

(...) the area still has pristine vegetation, with rich biodiversity unique to the area. Nokrek and Balpakram national parks have a unique landscape and geological formation and are associated with lore, custom and belief of the Garos and hence the proposal for world heritage site under the mixed category.

(Goswami, 2018)

Among the reactions, the news triggered was a letter to the editor by Raka Matachisal A. Sangma, published as a special article in *The Shillong Times*. In the article, she expresses appreciation for the initiative taken but spends a major part wondering how feasible any effort at conservation is, given that poaching and illegal logging are rampant in the state forests managed by the Meghalaya Forest Department in Garo Hills. She mentions “poaching inside the protected areas,” “illegal felling of timber,” and “illegal coal mining in and around the proposed site,” “all with the connivance, consent, ignorance or under the noses of the concerned departments.” This resonated with concerns that had been shared with me earlier that year, when I had been invited to participate in Tura in a consultation organized by the Forest Department on the cultural value of land in rural Garo Hills, in the light of the GHCA as a cultural heritage site. Preceding my talk, I received an email from a colleague of the North Eastern Hill University. Being unable to attend in person, she did want to convey her concerns regarding the proposed Garo Hills Conservation Area. In her message, she also mentioned poaching, as well as the “illegal felling of trees, smuggling of timber,” which, she specified, would be done by men from across the border

crossing over illegally to the Balpakram area to cut mature, valuable trees for timber. The men cut the trees, carve their names/ initials into the bark, timber, and leave the logs on the banks of the river Mahadeo [flowing through the Balpakram area], so that the logs would be carried down across the border during the monsoon.

The international border between India and Bangladesh, which runs immediately south of the Balpakram National Park, thus creates opportunities for

illegal logging, since the logs being taken across the border by the river solves the problem of transporting them over land. Moreover, the wood of trees thus logged is illegal in India, but this qualification would not apply to it in Bangladesh.

The sceptis voiced by Raka in her piece in the Shillong Times was not limited to the viability of conserving nature in Garo Hills but extended to the claims to the unique cultural value which the GHCA would represent. Under the sub-header “Disappearing Cultural Heritage – The elephant in the room,” she wrote:

“I’m clothed, yet I still feel naked.” This was what one elderly lady from the village of Kemragrein in West Garo Hills had to say. She felt naked in the sense that she missed wearing ornaments like earrings, bangles, necklaces, and other personal adornments that she used to wear before converting to Christianity. (...) Our culture and our indigenous traditional knowledge (...) is disappearing in the fast pace of life and disregarded as folklore. The dominant Christian community has stigmatised the way of life of the Songsareks [the followers of the traditional Garo community religion – EM], which have a history of living intimately with nature. (...) The threat to the cultural heritage of the Garos is not one external but is from within. (...) how can we nominate something that is non-existent? How can we nominate the traditional values that we ourselves do not value?.

(Sangma, 2018)

My colleague, in her email to me, voiced an opposite perspective with reference to the cultural or religious value of the land. Referring to the Balpakram National Park, she wrote:

The Balpakram area (...) [is] sacred to the indigenous A’chik/Garo beliefs, traditions and folk literature. The A’chiks for ages have left the area untouched, virgin as they found it when they ascended to inhabit the land. They neither cultivated the area, nor did they rob or spoil nature and the natural formations. For them the area was sacred, and continues to be so till today. The A’chiks of today have tremendous reverence for the land and the beliefs associated with the various objects, springs and rock formations, fossils.

Between this last statement and the concerns expressed earlier by Raka Sangma seem to lie a world of difference. The overlap between both positions is that historically at least, Garo would have managed a respectful and sustainable way of living with their environment. My inference is that whereas both authors refer to “the Garo,” Raka Sangma refers primarily to the urban Garo middle class, whereas my colleague’s remarks relate to people living rural lives in the vicinity of the Balpakram National Park. In that respect,

these two assessments reveal the kind of cleavages or disparities that exist among Garo.

My talk at the Forest Department in Tura combined with one given by colleagues from the Wildlife Institute of India (WII, Dehradun), who introduced our audience of about 30 people to the biodiversity of the proposed Garo Hills Conservation Area. The WII, and more specifically the UNESCO C2C (Category 2 Centre) located there, has been a main promoter of the GHCA and is also entrusted with the preparation of the nomination dossier. The people attending were officers from the Forest Department, some senior members of civil society, as well as a number of younger men working in the field of tourism. The colleagues from the Wildlife Institute of India talked about the impressive variety of birds, insects, and plants which they had encountered on their forays through the forests of Garo Hills. As they talked, supported by photographs they had made, I realized that I had never been conscious of this richness in terms of species. It is not unlikely that my talk about the religious significance of land, which followed, similarly covered “new ground” for them. This part of the workshop experience made me realize that conceiving of the GHCA as a mixed site would not necessarily be easy, since it required identifying and acknowledging differences between the various disciplinary perspectives involved.

In my talk,<sup>8</sup> I argued that the cultural heritage of the Garo Hills Conservation Area should not depend solely or even primarily on its relevance for the traditional Garo community religion, considering that it has nowadays only few followers. Rather, I maintained, cultural heritage should be broadened up to encompass knowledge that relate to landscape and environment more generally. These are embedded first and foremost with practices, techniques, and taboos that relate to shifting cultivation, as well as the forest management practices associated with it. These knowledge and practices are “traditional” in the sense that they have been carried over from preceding generations. Yet they are contemporary in that they are enacted in the present, in the process of which these also continue to be reconstituted and redefined. This was somewhat of a departure from the take on cultural heritage presented in the tentative listing, which much more rigidly foregrounded religious ideas and practices.

Following the two talks, we engaged in discussion with the people who attended the consultation. No one doubted the need for the creation of the GHCA, in fact, all who were present seemed positively inclined toward the initiative. The young men involved with tourism thought it was a particularly promising idea, since in their opinion, the realization of the Garo Hills Conservation Area could help to bring tourists to Garo Hills. The Balpakram National Park, which in their eyes has the potential to attract many more tourists than it currently does, is quite difficult to reach. The one-lane road leading there is in a terrible state, full of potholes, with most its bridges in an appalling condition. The creation of the GHCA would certainly result in money for improvement of the infrastructure, they expected. In this sense,

the initiative seemed to be pretty much welcomed as another development-oriented intervention by the state. It was noted during the consultation that Garo Hills has seen many such interventions over the past decades, some of these being more successful than others. Unsuccessful interventions were particularly those that were policies that were implemented to put down, without taking the requirements of the people to whom they were meant to apply into account.

When we were concluding the meeting, one of the young men bent on promoting tourism asked when “cultural consultants” would be recruited for the project. I wasn’t entirely sure about the role of the latter, and to what degree these were to be recruited at all, but my colleagues from the WII answered that this would be done in a couple of months’ time. I inferred that such consultants could be in-betweens between the Wildlife Institute of India team (none of who spoke Garo) and the village environments in which the initiative would need to be explained to Garo speakers, whose cooperation would be required to realize it. It meant, I supposed, that active involvement of the villages would be sought, in line with the idea that the Garo Hills Conservation Area would pertain to both state forest and village lands.

I had in my talk made some rather positive references to how shifting cultivation can foster biodiversity, and expected at least some people to speak out against it, but that did not happen. Also, from the side of the Forest Department, people seemed quite sympathetic to the idea that we should try to incorporate practices and knowledge not exclusively tied to the Songsarek domain into the phrasing of the cultural heritage encompassed by the GHCA. In addition, people suggested including cultural knowledge present in architecture (bamboo and wood based), ethno-medicine (based on the utilization of plants from the forest), as well as the maintenance of “sacred” groves or forests. These practices should be sustainable for the GHCA to achieve – and once awarded live up to – its qualification. While sustainable livelihoods would need to be encouraged, this would also mean that unsustainable practices, such as coal mining, mono-cropping, or deforestation, should be discouraged. Since the state forests as well as the national parks are uninhabited, it would mostly be the land owned and worked by villages that could espouse this kind of cultural heritage.

Something remarkable about the meeting, which I only realized afterwards, was that none of the officers of the Garo Hills Autonomous District Council were present at the talks. The GHADC is an administrative body that has been created under the Sixth Schedule of the Indian constitution, which governs all the land which villages communally hold. This was (in part) my mistake, since the organizers had asked me to suggest names of people who might attend, and I had mostly invited my academic colleagues and friends, but not suggested anyone from the Council. Yet, it seemed odd that none of the others had thought of this either, notably so since the Garo Hills Conservation Area would also relate to village lands, which are administered by the District Council. I will elaborate on this below. For now, it

suffices to state that several people noted this absence and also pointed out to me that the GHCA as projected could only become a success if the efforts made by the various administrative bodies would be coordinated.

### Local Perspectives

Some days later, I had the opportunity to together travel with a longtime friend through parts of the fringes of the proposed Garo Hills Conservation Area. We started out along the northern slope of the Nokrek range. The ridge of the Nokrek range constitutes Nokrek National Park. The slopes, on both sides of the range, have communally managed village lands. Some of these village lands might according to the sketch map prepared by the Forest Department early on in the application procedure be included in the GHCA, and we set out to get an understanding of how the people living there related to the initiative taken.

We first traveled to Daribokgre, which is a village located more or less on the western extreme of the Nokrek range. The road is steep, and not much more than a dirt track. The tiny village is a popular destination for people from Tura making day trips, and during a couple of hours we spent there, several cars filled with people from Tura town, with some slipping and sliding managed to make the climb. A largish group of youth rode up the hill on trail bikes. They took pictures, with the Nokrek range as a backdrop (Figure 8.1). At Daribokgre, an enterprising couple had made a lodge and offered a delicious hot lunch of rice and curry. The lodge owners had constructed a traditional Garo house (*nokmande*), made of bamboo, cane, and thatch, for the



Figure 8.1 In Garo Hills, Nokrek peak has become a popular spot for local tourism (Courtesy of Erik de Maaker).

visitors to see and experience. I was hanging around when a family from Tura visited it, and I heard the mother say to her 9 or 10-year-old daughter: “This is how Garos used to live.” It was an interesting remark, since I could think of many places in Garo Hills where people still live in such houses, yet the mother suggested to her daughter that this was something from the past. To me, it exemplified the somewhat ambiguous perspective from which “urban Garo” perceive their cultural traditions. While these are a reality for many of the rural poor, middle-class town dwellers are rather inclined to associate these with a cultural past, thus disregarding the socio-economic inequalities manifest in the present. Daribokgre is central to the Nokrek biosphere reserve, and people such as the lodge owners clearly welcomed any conservation initiatives taken, presumably since that would increase the attractiveness of the village as a tourist spot.

We traveled further along the northern slope of the Nokrek range for several hours, until we reached Rongkinggre. Rongkinggre is located at a high altitude, not far from the edge of the Nokrek National Park. People here had not heard of the Garo Hills Conservation Area initiative, but when we told them about it they were enthusiastic, welcoming it as another development-oriented initiative. A road to the village had only been constructed some 10 years ago, while electricity reached just about 2 years ago. People here were happy with these developments. Recently, they had also begun to try to grow areca palm trees, since arecanuts (usedaschew) make for steady returns. Until recently, Rongkinggre’s winters were too cold for growing arecanuts, but climate change has resulted in much warmer winters at this altitude, rendering this now feasible. Growing arecanuts has elsewhere in Garo Hills resulted in the replacement of biodiverse forests by monocultures, and in my understanding the GHCA initiative could involve stimuli for farmers to make use of the forest for tree-based crops, rather than replacing it by orchards.

People in Rongkinggre had all converted to Christianity, but that did not keep them from respecting the ancestral *a’song-kusi* boulders. These boulders, associated with spirits that are integral to the traditional Garo community religion (Marak, 2019), are located in a small patch of forest central to one of the village’s wards and approached with some degree of awe (de Maaker, 2021). Many Garo villages have such patches of – what some literature refers to as – sacred forest (Tiwari et al., 1999). In my understanding, the forest is not so much sacred, but rather these are places of avoidance. The sustained acknowledgment of these patches of forest, also by people who have become Christians, renders these important elements of cultural heritage.

Traveling further east, we passed several places where people were clearing forest, underscoring my assumption that in this part of Garo Hills shifting cultivation continues to be very popular. It requires a lot of dedicated knowledge of trees, animals, and soil, which is crucial to selecting the right patches of forest to be cultivated, how to trim and chop the trees, how to

burn the dried up branches, how and when to sow what seeds, when and what to weed out, how to protect the crops from wild animals, and when to harvest. All this knowledge constitutes cultural heritage, and the creation of the Garo Hills Conservation Area might help to underscore its value in relation to the land.

As we traveled onwards, eastwards, and toward Nongalbibra and then Siju, we crossed the “coal belt” of Garo Hills. Here, villagers make land that has coal-bearing layers available to what are often migrant laborers, who under risky conditions dig for coal. The coal sells at a good price, which renders the business attractive. Yet, digging for coal, and storing it until it is being sold, can severely pollute ground and surface water. Coal mining has been rendered illegal for many years (even though it was more recently once again conditionally allowed (Sitlhou, 2019)), but this has never stopped it, since no such prohibition has ever been enforced. The creation of the GHCA, with its emphasis on nature and biodiversity, would be expected to discourage if not stop coal mining. Even though high-ranking officers of the Forest Department indicated that prohibition would certainly be desirable, they at the same time doubted whether it would ever be feasible to enforce it, given the significant commercial interests at stake. Rumors have it that coal mining would also be financed by business men from outside the area and involve local politicians, which would create even more hurdles to control it.

### **Complementary Governances**

As mentioned above, my interest in the Garo Hills Conservation Area project was initially triggered by the proposition for it to encompass both land owned and managed by the Meghalaya Forest Department, as well as land communally held by Garo villages. The communally held land is, as mentioned, under the jurisdiction of the Garo Hills Autonomous District Council. The council was created upon Indian independence, under the Sixth Schedule of the constitution, which rendered Garo Hills an Autonomous District within the state of Assam. According to the constitution of the GHADC, it has full jurisdiction over the communally held village lands, which it enacts through an extensive list of rules and regulations (Garo Hills Autonomous District Council, 2007). The GHADC is governed by an elected council, the largest political fractions of which create governing council.

When the state of Meghalaya was created, in 1972, the entire erstwhile autonomous Garo Hills district became included in that state. While the GHADC continued to be responsible for the governance of the communally held village lands, Meghalaya state became equipped with the departments common to any Indian state, such as a Forest Department. In Garo Hills, this department became practically speaking primarily responsible for the state forests, as well as (once formed) for the national parks. The Forest Department is a strong organization, funded by the state government. The GHADC, on

the other hand, receives only piecemeal funding from the state government and is for most of its funding dependent on the payment of rather nominal taxes by the villagers residing under its administration. Since the Meghalaya Forest Department took the initiative for the creation of the GHCA, I expected it to seek cooperation with the GHADC, if only because the latter was itself involved in a variety of efforts to encourage villagers to engage in forest conservation. However, to my surprise such did not happen, and over time I began to understand that the Forest Department was not truly in a position to negotiate with the GHADC.

People living in rural Garo Hills are on the whole poor, and, according to the classification of the Indian state more or less collectively fall Below Poverty Line (BPL – a poverty indicator of the Indian government). This renders them economically vulnerable and creates a certain dependence on development initiatives offered by government organizations, which these organizations used to coax the villagers to buy into the initiatives they are proposing. Meghalaya is a developmentalist state, where administration and governance are being enacted through the handing out of incentives. It runs a great variety of government programs, aimed at achieving rural development. Programs tend to have a relatively short life cycle, or at least they are subject to being updated regularly. This is also since programs seldom prove to be the panacea which they are thought to be at the time of their inception. Ever so often, the proposed recipients of these programs will complain that either the benefits do not – or insufficiently – reach them or whatever it entails does not fulfill their needs, suggesting that many of these programs in practice first and foremost serve to sustain a sizable bureaucracy, which due to its fragmentation as well as what might euphorically be termed “internal weaknesses” has difficulty to deliver. Villagers, in other words, were quite open to not only whatever initiatives were proposed by the state bodies but also weary of what these could deliver for them.

Following my first research trip in January 2019, I was able to make a second trip in June that year. The second visit confirmed my earlier impression, which was that the Meghalaya Forest Department and the GHADC had difficulties to find common ground regarding the development of the GHCA. Again some months later, I received the news that the Forest Department had finalized the borders of the Garo Hills Conservation Area and had decided to shrink the GHCA to the state forests and the national parks, i.e., the areas which were already managed by them. This meant that none of the communally managed forest lands would be included in the Garo Hills Conservation Area, and corridors between disconnected reserves and parks would at least for the time being not be realized. This decision must have made sense from the perspective of the Forest Department, but to me it felt like a lost opportunity. After all, it meant that in principle no land on which people resided, which was actively shaped by the kind of agricultural practices that made the region stand out in terms of cultural heritage, would be included in the initiative.

### Conclusion: How Can Cultural Heritage Matter?

There is every reason to be concerned about the condition of forests in Garo Hills. Satellite scans report a deceptively dense forest cover for Garo Hills, but much of this consists of orchards, with only a small part being prime forest (Kurien et al., 2019). Some people told me that with the imposition of the 1995 “timber ban,” which made the trade in timber illegal, maintaining forest became economically unviable since this rendered legal trade in timber virtually impossible. I do not consider this a convincing argument also, because major deforestation in Garo Hills seems to have taken place in the 1970s and 1980s (Karlsson, 2011). In addition, Garo Hills once abundant wildlife has become scarce. Colonial era sources talk of herds that were so large, in that easily 300 animals a year could be caught (Stracey, 1963). Now, the entire elephant population of Garo Hills has been reduced to about 50 animals. Given the stress on the environment, there is every reason to try to find ways in which sustainable usage can be encouraged.

From the perspective of the Forest Department, as the government body which is the main propagator of the GHCA, it seems that conservation of wildlife and forest is a prime concern. The proposal for the GHCA being floated as a mixed site is to some degree a strategic choice, since it is likely to improve the chance of success. Yet, given that the project entails a clear agenda oriented toward “nature,” it seems almost impossible not to arrive at an objectified if not reified conceptualization of culture. Hence, the suggestion is to focus primarily on the traditional Garo community religion, rather than on everyday practices which may not be identified by people as religious, even though these certainly represent culturally specific knowledge. In order to foreground such knowledge, and encourage the sustainable economic practices associated with it, a much stronger alignment with initiatives taken at the village level would be desirable. This could also create a ground for conversation and cooperation between the various government departments.

From the perspective of villagers who live close to the state forests and national parks, a possible Garo Hills Conservation Area should help them to utilize their knowledge of the environment, resulting in activities that can help them to improve their life. Rural poverty is a serious issue, which will make itself increasingly felt, the more people living in rural areas become dependent on markets, both as sellers and as buyers, and develop a need for cash. It would make sense to try to follow up on strategies that render the forest productive, thus encouraging economically viable sustainable practices. This means that the GHCA, from the perspective of the villagers, should address the challenges they face in this respect, if it is to be an initiative that is supported by the people whose cultural heritage it is meant to represent.

### Notes

- 1 The forest reserves that were initially created are repositories of valuable timber (mostly *sal* trees). The Forest Department has only in recent decades changed over

to forest conservation (Gadgil & Guha, 1993). Today, it runs many programs aimed not only at forest conservation, but also for instance at promoting the cultivation of tree crops, such as rubber. Such programs result in the Forest Department gaining a certain degree of control of the land to which it is applied, which is why people are suspicious of its intentions, which renders it difficult for them to cooperate with villagers that have communally owned land.

- 2 In the colonial era, Garo Hills obtained a dedicated land tenure system which was premised on existing land rights. These rights were located with village territories (*a'kings*), each territory being governed by the (senior) residents, under the nominal leadership of a village head (*nokma*).
- 3 The research related to this chapter has been generously supported by the International Centre for Integrated Mountain Development (ICIMOD), Leiden University's profile area Asian Modernities and Traditions (AMT), as well as the Dutch Research Council (NWO) and the Indian Council of Social Science Research (ICSSR).
- 4 This chapter has grown out of a paper presented at the international conference on "Custom, Law and the Colonial State in Northeast India: Dynamics and Challenges for the Postcolonial State," which was organized in June 2019 by Nandini Bhattacharyya Panda at the North Eastern Hill University in Shillong, with the support of the Nehru Memorial Museum and Library (Delhi).
- 5 The UNESCO format specifies 10 criteria, the relevance of which depends on the actual features of the site nominated. The heritage value of culture is defined as: "to be an outstanding example of a traditional human settlement, land-use, or sea-use which is representative of a culture (or cultures), or human interaction with the environment especially when it has become vulnerable under the impact of irreversible change" (criterion V) and "to be directly or tangibly associated with events or living traditions, with ideas, or with beliefs, with artistic and literary works of outstanding universal significance" (criterion VI). Geology is a criterion specified as: "representing major stages of earth's history, including the record of life, significant on-going geological processes in the development of landforms, or significant geomorphic or physiographic features" (criterion VIII). Nature is mentioned under criterion X: "to contain the most important and significant natural habitats for in-situ conservation of biological diversity, including those containing threatened species of outstanding universal value from the point of view of science or conservation" (Intergovernmental Committee for the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage, 2019, pp. 25–26).
- 6 "The nominated property falls under Biogeographic Zone 8B i.e. North-eastern India, which is one of the biologically most diverse regions of India. (...) Fifty-two species of mammals have been recorded here so far from Balpakram Landscape, of which twenty-one are carnivores. It holds one of the largest and most-threatened populations of Asian Elephant (*Elephas maximus*). (...) The different forest types, hill streams, rivers and caves within the property provide a diversity of habitat for an enormous diversity of species of invertebrates, 298 species of butterflies, 448 species of moths, 26 species of amphibian, 45 species of reptiles and 347 species of birds.

The State has 3331 plant species recorded of which 1319 Angiosperms (around 834 (25.04%) ethnomedicinal species are estimated to be used in healthcare sector). Among which 116 species were either under threatened or endemic. 17 species are endemic to Meghalaya, 113 Pteridophytes, 248 Bryophytes. A recent survey reveals a total of 436 Rare, Endangered and Threatened plant species have been recorded from Meghalaya representing 13.09% of the state's flora. (...) The germplasm of *Citrus indica* is conserved in-situ at the National Citrus Gene Sanctuary in the Nokrek Biosphere Reserve the area is noted for other wild

- varieties of citrus fruits as well that provide a gene-pool for commercially produced citrus. (...) The cave systems in the property are crucibles of ongoing biological evolution, with species having been isolated for long periods” (UNESCO, 2018).
- 7 “Northeast India is significant in the study of the India-Asia continent collision, estimated to have happened 56–60 Million Years Ago (mya). This collision precipitated significant upheavals of geology, climatology, oceanography and paleobiology. Sediments are well developed in the eastern Tethyan realm in the Garo, Khasi and Jaintia hills and makes Meghalaya globally significant in the understanding of early foreland basin evolution. (...) In the Mahadeo Formation dominated by sandstone, the Late Cretaceous fossil content includes foraminifera, plant remains, dinosaur bone sand trace fossils” (UNESCO, 2018).
- 8 *Living Heritage Under Threat? Changing Utilization, Occupation and Appreciation of Land in the Garo Hills*, January 9, 2018, Meghalaya Forest Department, Dakopgre, Tura.

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