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# The Garos and Their Traditional Methods of Livelihood

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## Abstract

Northeast India is the homeland of a large number of ethnic groups of people. These groups, belonging to different racial origins, came from different directions at different points of times and settled here. They carried with them diverse socio-cultural traditions peculiar to their identity.

The Garos, who constitute the canvas of my study, is one of the largest tribes of the North-East India. They have their well defined homeland in the state of Meghalaya which is located in the northeastern part of India lying between 20°47' and 26°10' North latitude and 89°45' and 92°47' East longitudes. The state emerged from Assam as an autonomous state on 2<sup>nd</sup> April 1970 and was converted into a full-fledged state on 21<sup>st</sup> January, 1972<sup>1</sup>.

For this study, the areas in which I have concentrated has been divided and named as Plains and Hills. Under the 'Plains' division, two Garo villages have been selected from Assam, and three villages from Meghalaya have been selected under the division of 'Hills'. The names of the two villages under Plains

division are Nidanpur and Bakrapur, and the names of the three villages under Hills division are Nogol, Cichism and Chima Apal.

Among the Garos, land is subject to the ordinary laws of inheritance, and belongs to the wife of the nokma or traditional village chief or headman of a Garo village. Traditionally, a nokma is always looked upon as the owner of the lands of his village, who derived his rights through his wife, even though she is never considered unless it is found convenient that her name should be mentioned in litigation. A woman is merely the vehicle by which property descends from one generation to another. Hence, matriarchy in the strict sense of the word does not exist among the Garos. He, however, is always thought of and spoken of as the proprietor. Land may be sold by a nokma, but with the permission of his wife and her machong or motherhood (Playfair, 1909; Sangma, 2012)<sup>2</sup>.

Land among the Garos has been broadly divided into two categories, namely, the hills lands are controlled and

managed by customary beliefs and practices; and the plains lands are governed by the provisions of the Assam Land and Revenue Regulation Act of 1886, and adopted by the Garo Hills Autonomous District Council since its inception in 1952. The hills land is known as the A'khing (Clan) land (Nongkynrih, 2008)<sup>3</sup>.

According to the Garo Hills Regulation No II of 1954 and Act No I of 1960, A'khing land means: any land held by a clan or ma'chong under the custody of the head of the clan or ma'chong called 'Nokma' recognized as such by the district council<sup>4</sup>.

The concept of the A'khing tenure is based on the inalienable and complete right of the A'khing Nokma (chief) with the members of the chra (made up of only adult male members of the clan residing in the village) and Mahari (a group of families from the same clan and traceable by rule of matrilineal descent) to act as custodians and guardians of the land. The traditional land tenure system provides land to all members of the community and this has knit them together. Sale of land is not allowed and individual households would use the land according to their need or as per the jhum cycle (Sangma, 1987;

Majumdar, 1987; Kar, 1987)<sup>5</sup>. The members of the clan can use the A'khing land without paying any rent. A Garo from another A'khing does not enjoy the same right. It is an A'khing specific right of land use (Sangma, 1885)<sup>6</sup>. Sangma elaborates that "a stranger or a resident of another A'khing, land was not allowed to cultivate or to settle down except on payment of small present or rent to the Nokma. This rent is known as Wil or Hakimil". The right to use the A'khing lands depends on the A'khing membership of a person (Sangma, 1985, p-149)<sup>7</sup>.

The A'khing lands were traditionally used for jhum cultivation, but after Indian independence, the District council introduced the Act of 1960 regulating and assessing the collection of A'khing land fees. Timber extraction and all other forest produce are regulated by this Act. According to this arrangement the Nokma collects 25 percent and the remaining 75 percent is credited to the council fund. This is not part of the customary practices in the Garo hills<sup>8</sup>.

The changes in the customary practices of A'khing land are because of various other processes that operate concurrently in the Garo hills<sup>9</sup>. A study in the hills area of Meghalaya shows—

- i) A sharp rise in the shift from Jhum cultivation to permanent cultivation.
- ii) Lands are acquired by way reclamation from the jungle or by transfer from the previous owner in the form of inheritance.
- iii) The Garo hills Autonomous District Council is issuing annual pattas through which the patta holders are becoming owners of that land. This is a shift from the traditional practice of land control and management.
- iv) There are some cases where migrant non-tribals are occupying lands with a legitimate patta issued by the district council. This gives them the right of ownership of the land; and
- v) Families and individuals are transferring land by selling it off. In some cases land is gifted. Also mortgaging of A'khing land was noticed (Law research Institute, 1984)<sup>10</sup>.

### **Agricultural Activities:**

From the field study conducted both in the Hills and Plains it is found that only a small population both in the Plains and in the Hills is engaged in paddy cultivation. In the plain area of my study the people have adopted the wet paddy cultivation. For farming, the people use

different types of traditional and modern techniques. In the traditional techniques I found that they possessed plough. Power tiller was possessed by only 25 households in the Plains whereas 19 in the Hills. In the Plains the small irrigation canal is used for the field. The fertilizers and the pesticides are used for better crops. Between the monsoonal months of June and July, the people begin tilling their land to soften it and prepare it to sow their rice seeds, and in this agricultural activity, both male and female of the study area are engaged. In the Hills of the study area, where there is a suitable land for wet cultivation, the villagers engage themselves in it. Besides the rice, as a principal food grown by the Garos, maize, ginger, chilly, yam turmeric, pineapple, banana, oranges, jackfruit, betel nut and betel leaf are also grown in the study area.

Now with better knowledge and improved standard of living has led to a shift from subsistence to commercial cropping. Traditional methods (though still applied in some case) have been replaced by more scientific methods like the use of power tillers and fertilizers to make their agricultural tasks easier. Paddy as the main cash crop of both the study area, now the people are taking up plantation crop for higher return. Areca nut (commonly

known as betel nut), betel leaf, rubber plantation (mono crop), fruits (water melon, banana, pineapple) constitute a

major cash crop and fetch a good income for some families.

**Table- 1**

**Betel nut, Banana Garden and Rubber plantation (in bighas) among the Garos of the study villages, 2013-2016**

Sl no	Area of land	Betel Nut Garden (No of Families)		Banana Garden (No of Families)		Rubber plantation (No of Families)	
		Plains	Hills	Plains	Hills	Plains	Hills
1	1-4 bighas	2	1	0	5	8	11
2	5-8 bighas	5	7	2	0	12	0
3	9 & above	1	3	0	3	5	0
	Total	8	11	2	8	25	11

The above table shows the types of different crops grown by the people of the study area. Apart from that bamboo is also one of the major type of cash crop, which is used in the household work as well as for selling. Few people of both the study area earn their living by selling bamboo in the nearby market Dudhnoi, and Damra. The Garos also produce yam, chilly, maize, potato for their own consumption as well as for selling the surplus produce.

**Role of Men and women in Agriculture:**

In the Garo society, both the men and

women play an important role in agricultural activities. It was found that the people who are engaged in cultivation are wet paddy cultivators. The males of the study villages plough their land and do other work in connection with preparation of their soil. After that the irrigation canal is prepared for watering their crops. They do sowing of seedling paddy, transplanting of paddy seedling, harvesting, thrashing of paddy by bullocks and winnowing and carrying paddy to the granary.

The role of Garo women is also very active in agricultural activities. Dominance of female labour in the paddy field was observed during the field study. Women also work hard in the paddy field along with her male members of the family. They also help her males in transplanting of paddy seedlings, in harvesting paddy and carrying the paddy to the granary. All the able bodied persons irrespective of age and sex participate in the economic activities of the family. The females collect edible roots, tubers, plants and firewood from the forests. It was found during my field study that 3.35% of males from the Plains and 7.66% of males in the Hills are engaged in farming and their females help their husbands in agricultural activities.

Besides the above mentioned males from both the study area, they are engaged in other occupations for their living. The job holding women also do their regular household activities of the family. However in both the study area the women of every household maintain a small kitchen garden, where they grow chilly, cucumber, pumpkin, cabbage, cauliflower, lady's finger etc. for their own consumption.

**Live Stock Farming:** Generally the term livestock is constituted those animals which are tamed or domesticated for the purpose of the family. Most commonly domesticated animals include cattle, poultry and pigs. The women folk of a family generally look after the domesticated animals. Traditionally, livestock rearing was not considered as a means of earning income. And it was looked at as a simple means of household utility. But with time it has been regarded as a strong economic source since the product obtained through livestock rearing can also be sold as a means of income generation.

As discussed above the Garo women first viewed a potential side of earning economic gains through livestock farming.

Among the Garos, pork is regarded as their favourite delicacy. Pig is also used in traditional ceremonies and feasts. The Garos used to rear only a few animals for their domestic utility but it was found that a lot of money was spent in the name of fodder for the animals. With the passage of time the life style and the food habits of the Garos have also changed. Instead of rearing pigs to procure meat, they can now easily get meat from the markets. It is seen

that some families have taken up piggery as a means of commercial gains.

Similarly, poultry is another favourite delicacy of the Garos. But unlike pig farming, poultry farming is more convenient to be practiced within the household compound. It takes less time, less fodder and less space to practice poultry farming, which is why the Garos can easily take it up on a commercial basis.

The practice of cattle farming for commercial purpose is not a common activity among the Garos. Only those who have cultivable land use to keep bullocks for ploughing purpose. Out of 260 households in the Plains of study area 68

families have cultivable land and 45 numbers of houses have their own bullocks for ploughing, and in the Hills out of 243 households, 95 families have their own cultivable land but only 65 families possess their own bullocks for ploughing. The rest of the families hire bullocks for cultivation. Some families rear cows for cow milk, which they use for their own consumption.

The table below shows the number of women only who are engaged in livestock farming. The figure below is shown only of the poultry and piggery farming for commercial purpose, and not the cattle because, cattle is not regarded as a commercial venture in both the study area.

**Table No- 2**

**Women Involvement in Live stock Farming of the Plains and Hills**

SI No	Nature of Farming	Plains	Hills
1	Poultry	9 (18.75%)	16 (23.19%)
2	Piggery	39 (81.25%)	53 (76.81%)
	<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>48 (100%)</b>	<b>69 (100%)</b>

From the above table it is seen that 18.75% of female in the Plains and 23.19% of females in the Hills are engaged in poultry

farming. 3 female used to do broiler farming and the remaining 6 rear country chicken in the Plains. And in the Hills it is

7 rears Broiler Chicken and 9 have country chicken farm. 81.25% of female from the Plains and 76.81% from the Hills are engaged in piggery farming.

Thus, we see that for the Garos agricultural farming and livestock are two major sources of livelihood that attribute economic stability to their existence.

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