

NEGOTIATING LIFE

Garó Death Rituals and the Transformation of Society

PROEFSCHRIFT

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Discussing *ma•gual* at the mortuary ritual of Sisi M. Sangma.

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For the people of Sadolpara



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## REMARKS ON THE GARO LANGUAGE AND ITS TRANSCRIPTION

The Garo language has a number of dialects. In school people learn Awe, which is regarded standard Garo. The pronunciation of Awe differs from that of A•beng, the dialect that people use in the rural areas of West Garo Hills (in Awe referred to as Ambeng). Most of the Garo cited in this text is A•beng. I have not converted this A•beng into Awe, since that would devalue A•beng as a dialect in its own right. Consequently, the spelling used here differs from that which is used in standard Garo dictionaries such as Harendra W. Marak's 'Ku•bidik' (2000). Such dictionaries tend to be geared towards Awe spelling.

The various Garo dialects have not been described in detail, and many of the words or specific meanings of words used in the area where the fieldwork was conducted are not found in any of the existing dictionaries. In particular, little attention has been given to the use of words in relation to the Songsarek faith, the local Garo religion.

It is standard to write Garo using the Roman alphabet. In this text, the (•) sign indicates the *raka* or glottal stop. A *raka*, placed in a word, indicates that the sound of the syllable preceding it ends abruptly.

The text has many Garo quotations that are translated into English. These translations stay as close to the Garo meaning as possible. Wherever required, I am providing a more liberal interpretation between square brackets ('[ ' and ']'). Garo terms for which no satisfactory English equivalent exists are consistently placed between quotation marks (as in 'head' of the House). This indicates that the English term used is no more than an approximation of the original Garo word.

Regarding many of the Garo quotations cited, a full Garo transcript is provided in a footnote. These footnotes end with an archival code that refers to the place of the particular fragment on a research video tape. This code is formatted as: VTx yy:yy–zz:zz. 'VT' stands for Video Tape, and 'x' for the archival number of the tape. 'Yy:yy' and 'zz:zz' indicate respectively the start and end time code of the particular quotation.

## GLOSSARY

<i>a•kim</i>	Marriage alliance, which involves the obligation for the kin group of either spouse to replace him or her upon death.
<i>a•king</i>	All the land that belongs to a village.
<i>a•king nokma</i>	The 'head' of the most apical House of a village
<i>a•ma</i>	All assets that are not personal property, but belong to a House.
<i>a•tot</i>	People's personal property.
<i>apa-chra</i>	For a married man, his wife's male matrilineal relatives.
<i>ba•saa</i>	A unit of descent, which can vary in size from a few dozen to a few hundred people. Frequently, most of its female members will be concentrated in a single village. Male members reside upon marriage with their wife, which usually implies that they move to another village than the one in which they were born.
<i>chatchi</i>	The most comprehensive unit of descent. The <i>chatchi</i> encompasses <i>ma•chongs</i> that are believed to have a joint origin. Most people belong either to the Sangma or the Marak <i>chatchi</i> .
<i>chra</i>	Someone's male matrilineal relatives.
<i>dama</i>	Large wooden drum which is normally kept in the bachelor's house.
<i>dol</i>	A House of ten to twenty Houses, most of which are normally located in a single ward. All these Houses relate to the <i>kram</i> -drum of a single House, which is apical to the <i>dol</i> .
<i>du•sia</i>	A ritual that is conditional to the initiation of a marriage in accordance with <i>niam</i> .
<i>janggi</i>	Immaterial component of a person, often equaled to wind or breath ('soul').
<i>kima</i>	Effigy of a deceased person, made of a wooden pole, which is placed in the courtyard of the house in which he or she lived.
<i>kimbrong</i>	A hardwooden pole that has three encircling notches on its top end, which relates to the cows that have been slaughtered for a particular deceased person at the locality where it is erected. For a single deceased person several <i>kimbrongs</i> can be made.

<i>keram</i>	Large wooden drum which is associated with the deity Risi.
<i>kusi</i>	A boulder that is regarded as a seat of the deity Guira. The boulder represents an exclusive claim to the land that surrounds it vis-a-vis people from other villages.
<i>ma•chong</i>	A unit of descent which encompasses <i>ba•saas</i> that are believed to share a joint origin.
<i>ma•gual</i>	A gift, offered by the House of a deceased person to Houses of women who classify as mothers. <i>Ma•gual</i> consists ideally of heirlooms such as brass gongs, jewelry and swords, but these are often substituted by money.
<i>marang</i>	A concept that is identified with blood, violence and death. <i>Marang</i> poses a lethal danger ('pollution').
<i>mi•mang</i>	Immaterial component of a deceased person. The <i>janggi</i> transforms into a <i>mi•mang</i> upon death ('soul').
<i>niam</i>	Guidelines for relationships among people, regarding attitudes to the deities, as well as to animals and plants ('observance').
<i>skal</i>	Usually a synonym for the deity Daini, who has taken possession of a particular insect. Simultaneously, the deity associates with the <i>janggi</i> of a person.
Songsarek	A follower of the traditional Garo religion.
<i>ukam</i>	A gift that is offered by the House of a deceased person to Houses of women who classify as mothers. <i>Ukam</i> consist ideally of an inexpensive gong, but often a little money is given instead. A House that accepts <i>ukam</i> agrees to offer a cow for the dead man or woman. Whenever a mortuary takes place in the House that took the <i>ukam</i> , it can be returned to the House that has initially offered it, obliging that House to slaughter a cow in turn.
Wangala	Festival of the annual agricultural cycle that involves offering the last of the first fruits to the deities. It is held at the changeover from the wet season to the dry season, by the end of September or early October.

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**Map 1:** The Garo Hills, the westernmost part of the State of Meghalaya (India) (scale 1:12.000.000).

