

## Continuity and Change in Matrilineal Marriage System: A Case Study among the Garos of Poschim Bosti, Assam

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**ABSTRACT** The Garo population is a major matriarchal tribal group of Meghalaya and a small section of them can also found to be scattered in different places of Assam. Being one of the matriarchal tribes of the world here the woman's side offers the marriage and the houses bear the name of a woman instead of a man and they consider their descent through the female line. Though they have their age old cultural beliefs and practices for marriage, due to some external factors there seem to be a transition in their marriage system. The present paper highlights the continuity and change related to their marriage system and attempts to highlight the probable causes of the transition.

### INTRODUCTION

Marriage is a cultural universal phenomenon and it is defined by different scholars in different ways. According to Gough (1959), "marriage is a socially recognized and normatively prescribed relationship between at least two persons that defines economic and sexual rights and other duties, each owes the other or others and provides the primary mechanism in a society by which offspring are recognized as legitimate and accorded full birth-status rights common to normal members of their society or social stratum". The nature of marital bond is almost similar in every society and it includes the social sanction in the form of various religious rites and practices. Every society irrespective of its patrilineal or matrilineal nature has individual tradition to perform different rituals during marriage and these rites give the authority to the opposite sexes to engage in sexual as well as other related socio-economic relations with one another. But in recent years the institution of marriage is undergoing tremendous transition. There are studies around the world which highlight the transformative process of marriage in today's scenario (Fincham et.al. 2007; Srinivasan and Lee 2004; Hortacsu et.al. 2001; Malhotra and Tsui 1996; Santow and Bracher 1994) and also show variation of marriage system with regard to different religion and location of the same population group (Rongmei and Kapoor 2005). The present study on Garo population residing in Assam offers the scope to see the continuity and change related to their marriage system with regard to migration, acceptance of Christianity and other socio-

economic factors. As Garo is a matrilineal tribe, it also presents a scope to see whether the status of women in their society regulate the transformation process in marriage, as a strong relation has already been suggested between status of women and institution of marriage by Bhasin (2007).

### The Setting

The village Poschim Bosti comes under the Japihujia revenue circle within Bokota Mouza in the District of Sibsagar, Assam. It is on either side of the road that connects Sepon Sunpura road to Mohokuti Tea Estate. The district of Sibsagar lies between 25° 49' and 27° 7' N latitude and 95° 5' and 95° 26' E longitudes. On the North it is bounded by North Lakhimpur district, on the East by the district of Dibrugarh and the state of Arunachal Pradesh, on the South by the state of Nagaland and on the West by Jorhat district of Assam. The village is homogenously inhabited by Garo population and they are surrounded by villages inhabited by Ahom (described as other backward class people by the Government of India) and Sonowal Kachari (Scheduled Tribe) community. There are a total of 194 households in the village with a total population of 987 persons (491 males and 496 females).

### The People

The Garo is a major matrilineal tribal population of North East India inhabiting mostly in the Garo hills district of Meghalaya. A small section of them is also found to be scattered in different

places of Assam. They call themselves as *Achik-mande* which literally means 'Hill man'. Ethnically the Garos belong to the Bodo group of the Mongoloid racial stock. They believe that their original home was in Tibet (Playfair 1975: 7). But most of the scholars are of the opinion that the Garos like the other Bodo Groups of people belong to the Tibeto-Chinese family whose cradle is said to have been the North Western China. They have their own dialect which belongs to the Tibeto-Burman family of Bodo linguistic group. They call their dialect *achik kusik* which literally means 'voice of the hills'. They were generally brought into the present village by the British for various reasons, one of which was for cutting the forests for tea gardening. The people of the village are Christian by religion and a total of five churches can be found within the village.

#### METHODOLOGY

Standard anthropological techniques have been used for the study. At first the existing literatures have been reviewed and they are supplemented by in-depth interviews of few key informants. The key informants include local head and persons representing the elder and younger generations. Various questions regarding the concept, regulation and continuity of cultural traits relating to marriage have been asked. Questions were asked to identify the matrilineal characteristics associated with the marriage system. Observation method has been applied to see the continuity of the traditional norms whenever possible. There generally exist three main characteristics of matrilineal societies: descent through the female line, inheritance of property by the female and matrilocal residence. While conducting the study all the couples fulfilling the three criteria are classified under 'traditional' and the couple that doesn't conform to these criteria and only trace the descent through maternal line are grouped under 'transitional'. Thus the couples are divided into two groups i.e. traditional and transitional and they have been analysed on the basis of some socio-economic characteristics. The study was undertaken in the month of September 2003 and it was supplemented by frequent visits afterwards.

#### FINDINGS

The villagers regard marriage as a sacred

union between a male and a female. The rule of tribal endogamy and clan exogamy is traditionally practiced by the Garo people. In the present setting 70.17% tribal endogamy and 29.83% tribal exogamy has been found to occur and it has been depicted in the Table 1. Among the tribal endogamous cases clan exogamy is strictly followed. Adherence to the clan exogamy is due to the fact that the people still regard the members of the same clan (*chatchi*) and sub clan (*machong*) as their own brothers and sisters and they also believe that marriage within the same clan and sub-clan is a sin. On the other hand the people think that tribal exogamy has occurred mainly due to the open-minded nature relating marriage in today's scenario. There was another traditional law called *A'Kim* by which the marriage system was regulated earlier. According to the law of *A'Kim*, a man or a woman who has once contracted marriage will never be free to remarry a person of another clan, even after the death of his/her spouse. They had a custom of supplying another wife/ husband from the same clan, in case their partner is dead. Usually when a wife dies, one of the sisters of the deceased is given for marriage. Similarly, when a husband dies, one of the nephews of the deceased husband is given to her. It is only when no substitute can be arranged then the marriage bond is broken and the man/woman is free to marry any one of their own choices. The law of *A'Kim* is not continuing in this village owing to the lack of interest to remarry. It may be due to the influence of their religion and also the cultural influences of the neighbouring tribes and caste people like Ahom and Kachari who don't approve remarriage easily. However three cases of remarriage (1.75%) have been found in the village which also don't confront to the law of *A'Kim*. Sarkar (2004) has reported another parallel or juxtaposed institution known as *mahari* related to the marriage system of the Garos. The *mahari* basically include all the males and females of the same *machong* dispersed over a number of villages. For all practical purpose the *mahari* of a particular woman consists of the relatives who can be contacted easily, who stay near about her village, partake active interest and render all sorts of help and cooperation during one's marriage. On enquiring, the villagers expressed that due to the limited number of person of a particular *machong* they don't have this particular institution and for all practical purpose all the villagers come forward to render their help.

Marriage by negotiation and marriage by capture are the two traditional ways of acquiring mates among the Garos. However marriage by capture doesn't remain the choice of acquiring mates anymore in this setting, which is due to their change in their religion. Among the *Songsareks* (non-Christians) the practice of bridegroom capture particularly in rural areas of Garo hills of Meghalaya is still going on but among the Christians irrespective of their geographical area marriage by capture has already been wiped out. Variation in the pattern of marriage among the Christian and non Christian Zeliangrong tribe has also been reported by Rongmei and Kapoor (2005).

Marriage by negotiation is generally initiated by sending a formal proposal from the bride's side. But change of this general trend is also not unknown in this village and in some cases marriage proposal from groom's side can also be noticed. This is due to the fact that with the increase of educational status of the people, the male section is becoming egoistic and thus not been able to adjust with the matrilineal setup. The proposal is given by the old folk of the bride's mother's lineage. This type of process takes relatively long period and formalities. Here the maternal uncle (preferably the eldest one) of the bride takes the lead part. A Garo traditional turban known as *Khotopkha* is being worn by him that indicates his superiority. The major items for marriage are the groom's shirt (*chol*), Dhuti (*Dhuti*), little amount of milk (*machok*), sugar (*chini*), betel nuts (*guwe*), and betel leaves (*phan*) etc. for the groom. Betel leaves and betel nuts are taken in a *xarai* (an Assamese traditional copper bowl) to the groom's house. It is interesting to note here that the betel leaf, betel nut and *xarai* have become a part and parcel of their marriage ceremony, which hitherto not reported among their hill dwelling counterparts. Inclusion of these particular traits can be attributed to the influence of surrounding Assamese culture in which these are regarded as sacred items. The groom is offered to drink a glass of milk which is believed to bring good fortune. The marriage ceremony may be organized either in the church or at the home. For economically backward families church marriage is a preferred type. It is organised by the church authority and all the expenditure is born out from the church fund. A nominal price is charged from the spouses for marriage registration. Nowadays it costs only one hundred rupees to get registered. On the day of wedding the bride generally wears

a white Garo traditional dress known as *Dakmanda* and a white *Khamis* (a Garo shirt). Together with the traditional attire she also wears white gloves in her hands and a long net called 'veil' on her head which is associated to their religion. The groom generally wears a shirt and a pant preferably white in colour. It is the Deacon who registers the name of the couple with three signatures from the witnesses. Until the registration the marriage is regarded as incomplete one. The second widely prevalent form of marriage is love marriage where the concerned couple takes the initiative. Sometimes it leads to elopement under certain circumstances when the parents or the society do not give consent to the marriage.

Traditionally the system of marrying one's father's sister's son is prevalent among the Garos, but it is totally absent in this village. The same kinship terminology for groom's Mother's Brother (MB) and his father-in-law i.e. *mama* in the present day situation still bears the witness of the validity of the preexisting norms. It has been reported that a girl regards her own father's sister's son as her own brother as prevalent among the neighbouring patriarchal societies so a girl is becoming reluctant to marry her father's sister's son. Inter tribal and inter-religion spouse selection is also common among the villagers. Number of marriages in the village according to the selection of spouse is presented in the Table 1. The table shows that out of 171 couple 70.17 % have

**Table 1: Number of marriages in the village according to the selection of spouse**

Groom	Bride	No. of couple	%
	Garos	120	70.17
	Ahom	1	0.58
	Tea garden labour	11	6.43
	Caste Assamese	6	3.50
Garos	Bengali	1	0.58
	*Kachari	4	2.34
	Koch	1	0.58
	Manipuri	1	0.58
	*Mech	3	1.75
	*Naga	1	0.58
	Nepali	1	0.58
	Rabha	4	2.34
Adibasi		5	2.92
Caste Assamese		2	1.17
Mech		4	2.34
Nepali	Garos	1	0.58
Oriya		1	0.58
Rabha		4	2.34
Total		171	100.00

\* includes single case of remarriage in each category.

undergone tribal endogamy whereas the rest 28.83% have preferred tribal exogamy. The table also shows that tribal exogamy mostly occurred with the Adibasi (tea labourer) community. Prevalence of tribal exogamy may be attributed towards the openness of the Christian religion which has accepted various tribal and caste fold into it. In the village prerequisite to marry a Garo member (bride/groom) is to baptize oneself (if the member is a non Christian). The villagers call it *duplowa* and thus by baptizing one non Garo member, a Garo can easily marry him or her.

It has been reported that earlier (before two to three generations) the bachelors used to reside in their traditional bachelor dormitory known as '*nokphante*'. The word *nokphante* literally means a house of bachelors, where *nok* means house and *phante* means bachelor. After marriage the husband used to live in the house of his respective wife or form neolocal residence depending upon their preference. This particular institution (*nokphante*) is missing here. After interviewing it has been found that the young generation, engaged in different types of activities to earn their livelihood, finds it difficult to form this particular institution. Above all their educational burden hardly let them form such type of institution.

Traditionally divorce is easy to obtain among the Garo population. A man or a woman can even entitle to divorce without a cause but in any case the party seeking the divorce has to pay the customary *dai* (compensation). According to traditional Garo customary law the person responsible for the divorce is to pay a compensation of rupees sixty to the other spouse, however this compensation is usually not accepted by the aggrieved party and only a token compensation of rupees thirty or so is accepted (Mazumdar 2003). But with the advent of Christianity separation after marriage has become very hard as the church authority doesn't allow the couple to go for divorce easily and above all the legal procedures are also very complicated. As such a

change towards getting divorce has also been observed in the present setting.

From the literature on matrilineal society it has been found that some of the matrilineal societies have changed through the ages to patriarchy and this process is making a progress inroads into the remaining matriarchal societies which are coming into contact with the outer world (Vidyarthi and Rai 1985). The same process can also be seen in the present setting. When the couples (tribal endogamous) are been divided into two groups i.e. traditional and transitional it has been found that only 61.6% (74 couples) have still been attached to their traditional matrilineal norms whereas the remaining 38.3% (46 couples) have been transited from their traditional norms. This change can easily be recognized with regard to the place of residence after marriage which has been presented in the Table 2. Due to the presence of a small number of couples in the present setting no statistical analysis is being possible to assess the significance status. The Table 2 depicts that with the passage of time the patrilocal residence after marriage is becoming a preferred type (26.7%). It must be mentioned here that the younger daughter known as *nokna* usually inherits the lion's share of her family property and her husband (known as *nokrom*) always reside with his in-laws to protect the same. But here only 65.6% *nokroms* are found to reside with their in-laws. Sustaining the traditional norm of matrilocal residence on economic basis has been found to become flaccid as there are 18.8% cases where the *nokrom* has formed separate neolocal residence and 15.6 % cases where he has formed patrilocal residence. It can be mentioned here that the remaining 42 cases (35.0%) of matrilocal residence (where the *nokrom* is not there) result out of joint family system and among the couples who have adopted neolocal residence, 11 (9.1%) still adheres to their traditional matrilineal norms.

It is further attempted to classify the traditional and transitional couples depending upon some socioeconomic particulars of both husband

**Table 2: Distribution of couple according to their choice of residence after marriage (only tribal endogamous cases have been considered)**

S. No.	Marital residence	No. of couples		Traditional couple		Transitional couple		Number of <i>nokrom</i>	
		No.	(%)	No.	(%)	No.	(%)	No.	(%)
1	Patrilocal	32	(26.7)	0	(00.0)	32	(26.7)	5	(15.6)
2	Matrilocal	63	(52.5)	63	(52.5)	0	(00.0)	21	(65.6)
3	Neolocal	25	(20.8)	11	(09.1)	14	(11.7)	6	(18.8)
4	Total	120	(100.0)	74	(61.6)	46	(38.3)	32	(100.0)

and wife, and it has been depicted in Table 3. Here, it has been observed that couple who have undergone arranged marriage are more inclined to their traditional norms (46.6%) than transitional (20.8%) one. However in case of love marriage the difference is not so enormous to draw any conclusion from the same as there are 15 % cases who are tradition bounded and 17.5% are found to be transited from the same. Nuclear as opposed to extended families, neolocal residence of the young couple, together with increased exercise of freedom of choice in spouse selection, are associated with the satisfaction of individual needs within the conjugal as opposed to the extended family and with the emergence of the “modern” family emphasizing mutuality, spousal intimacy and equality, and romantic love (Lee and Stone 1980; Levinger 1992).

Regarding the educational status of the couple it has been noticed that whenever wife’s education supersedes her husband there is every possibility to remain attached to their traditional value. The table depicts that out of 35 cases where the wife’s educational level is higher than her husband, 33 (27.5%) cases have been found to be centered towards their traditional norms whereas only 2 (1.6%) cases have been found to transit from their value system. Husband’s educational level doesn’t seem to affect this transformation process. The outcome is in conformity with Bhasin (2007), who emphasized about the status of women for regulation of marital union.

When occupational status of the husband is

considered it has been found that the males who are engaged in agriculture (24.1%) and wage earning (15.8%) are more inclined towards traditional norms. Most of the businessmen (15.0%) belong to transitional group in comparison to the traditional group (6.6%). Whereas most of the women working in different sector (except some women who are wage earner by occupation) are found to be tradition bound. The trend suggests that husband’s occupation is very much associated with the transition towards patrilineal system. It can be mentioned here that most of the businessman who are influenced by the urban life (as they have to travel to the urban areas very frequently for their business purpose) are totally transformed to patriliney. Here it can be mentioned that industrialisation and urbanisation have been associated with the rise of individualistic values emphasizing individual needs over group loyalties and decline of collectivistic values stressing family integrity and in-group loyalties as suggested by Triandis (1997).

## CONCLUSION

As the abode of the Garos of Assam is surrounded by people belonging to various castes and tribal communities of Assam, some cultural traits of the surrounding population has been found to have permeated into their traditional norms relevant to their marriage system. Another important dimension towards change in their traditional norms is associated with their

**Table 3: Socioeconomic particulars of the traditional and transitional couple (only tribal endogamous cases have been considered)**

S. No.	Socio-economic particulars	Couple status	Traditional		Transitional	
			No	(%)	No	(%)
1	Marriage	Arranged marriage	56	(46.6)	25	(20.8)
		Love marriage	18	(15.0)	21	(17.5)
2	Educational level	Wife’s is more than her husband	33	(27.5)	2	(01.6)
		Husband’s is more than his wife	41	(34.1)	44	(36.6)
3	Primary Occupation (husband’s)	Agriculture	29	(24.1)	11	(09.1)
		Govt. Service	0	(00.0)	7	(05.8)
		Business	8	(06.6)	18	(15.0)
		Private Service	2	(01.6)	1	(00.8)
		Technical work	5	(04.1)	3	(02.5)
		Wage earner	19	(15.8)	2	(01.6)
		Doesn’t work (include the aged males)	11	(09.1)	4	(03.3)
		Only house wife (include the aged females)	46	(38.3)	28	(23.3)
4	Primary Occupation (Wife’s)	Agriculture	18	(15.0)	8	(06.6)
		Govt. Service	1	(00.83)	0	(00.0)
		Business	2	(01.6)	0	(00.0)
		Wage earner	7	(05.8)	10	(08.3)

acceptance of Christianity which has earmarked different rites and rituals in their marriage system. The factors like urbanization, spread of education, occupation etc. have also been found to add some influence to the process of transforming from their matrilineal setup towards patrilineal one. It is high time to let them understand to resurrect their languishing tradition so that one of the few matrilineal tribes of the world can retain their age old tradition and make progress keeping pace with the other communities of the world.

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