Brief Note: The Garos

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The Garos are a tribal group of people belonging to the of Mongoloid stock with distinctive cultures and residing in the Garo Hills of present-day Meghalaya, and in other parts of the Indian states of Assam, Nagaland, Tripura, and West Bengal, and across the political divide in Bangladesh. They call themselves A’chik and Mande (Playfair [1909] 1975), which simply means “man”. Some scholars (de Maaker 2006, Bal, 2007) have said that A’dik mande refers to “hill man”. But however Marak (2014), reveals that the word A’chik does not mean “hill”; rather it refers to the oath that the forefathers had taken among themselves by biting the soil. Oral tradition states that Garos, under the leadership of two chiefs Jappa-Jalimpa, the father of Jap and Jalim, and Sukpa-Bongipa, the father of Suk and Bongipa, migrated from Tibet to other places in Northeast India. Jakhapna from A’chik song opines that Garos were traditionally warriors moving with the Milam (sword), and carrying the gitchi (hoe) and cultivate in the hills and forests.

At present it has five districts districts, North Garo Hills, South West Garo Hills, West Garo Hills, East Garo Hills and South Garo Hills. It is bounded on the north and west by districts of Goalpara, on the east by the Khasi Hills and on the South by the Mymensing district of Bangladesh.

Ethnically and linguistically, Garos are said to be the members of the great Bodo family, akin to the Kacharis (Boros), Rabhas, Mechues, Dimasas, Chutiyas, Tripuri and other cognate tribes, which belong to the section of Tibeto Burman race (Grierson, 1967). They are a section of the Tibeto-Burman race of the Tibeto-Chinese family, whose cradle is said to have been the north-western China between the upper rivers of Yang-tse-Kiang (Yangtze) and Ho-ang-ho (Hwang ho), According to their oral tradition, the Garos came from Tibet and settled down in Koch Bihar for about 400 years.

There are twelve dialects in the Garo language; they are A’we, Chisak, Dual, Ruga, Gara or Ganching, Atong, Me’gam, Kotchu, Atiagra, Matchi, Matabeng or Matjangchi and Chibok. Like Khasis and Jaintias, the Garos are well known for their matrilineal set up of society. In fact, besides the matrilineal inheritance of property and Kinship, many of the social and religious aspects of the Garos are influenced and moulded by their matriliny, and they abide by it.

The Garo literature can be broadly classified into two sections, i.e. (i.) Traditional, Oral literature and (ii.) the written literature. The traditional/Oral literature consists of myths, legends, folk-tales, historical accounts, socio-cultural norms, in both poetry or songs. However, the written literature began with the advent and introduction of education by the British government (Abraham, 1994). Society in Garo had been divided into two groups; exogamous moieties (Chatchi) viz. Sangma and Marak, each of which is again sub-divided into many strictly exogamous clans (Machong). Former is an indicative of a larger exogamous group, descending from one of the founding Garo mothers, whereas the later group attributes to an immediacy of the matri-relations to the membership of relatively separate group, centering around a
common mother born of the earliest. In Garo society marriage establishes a perpetuating relation and a customary contract between the respective machongs (clans) of the principal male and female of a household as the husband of the inheritress daughter (Nokna) is to be ideally chosen from any of the sons of her father’s ma.chong, who becomes the only resident son-in-law of the household (Nokrom, meaning pillar of the house). He takes up the place of father-in-law after the latter’s death and thus the process is repeated.

The Nokma (Headman) and the village council are the oldest political systems of the Garos. Each A.king (land belonging to particular mahari, or clan) is an autonomous political unit; Nokma being the head. A.king comprises of a number of villages and Nokma holds the office through the right of the A.king, which in true sense belongs to his wife and her clan; as Garo society is matrilineal. Although, he plays a centre role in the religio-cultural and socio-political activities in the A.king, his position and power cannot be compared with that of Kings and Chiefs of other tribes. The real centre of power is the people of the A.king, particularly the mahari, to which the A.king belongs.

The Garo Hills district Council has raised the position of the Village Council by entrusting them with full responsibilities in administering their own areas but the paucity of funds of funds still stands in the proper functioning of the village Council. Succession to A.king Nokmaship is subject to ordinary laws of inheritance through the system of Nokma (haress), and Nokrom (man married to a haress), who are entitled to the A.king and they shall be recognised by the government as Nokma. When they succeed to a Nokmaship, their names are entered in the record of Nokmas by the Deputy Commissioner, but now the records are kept and maintained by District Council (Sangma).

Usually, the A.king Nokma, like any other Nokma, looks for a nephew, that is the son of his sister, to come and be his son-in-law and heir. Thus, the nephew not only becomes the heir to the house and property but also succeeds to the ‘headships’ when his father-in-law dies. As a rule, a Nokma should be a member of the lineage and form the same village as the previous Nokma. Therefore, generally a succession of Nokmas are member of one village and lineage descent but hold the status or headman in another village by virtue of being married to the girl who is successively chosen as heiress in the senior most house of the village (Burling). In the absence of a daughter, the nearest female relation of the Nokma’s wife is adopted as heiress and she together with her husband succeeds to the A.king land. However, in recent years, there have been a few cases where, after the death of the Nokma, his surviving wife succeeded as Nokma in supercession of all her daughters and their husbands. In any case, it is the important relations of her clan who have a final say in the matter. They have every right to elect anybody to the Nokmaship by majority vote or consent and the Government will simply endorse it.