

## The Garo Tribe: A Window into Meghalaya's Rich Cultural Heritage

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### ABSTRACT

Examining their distinctive matrilineal society, customs, and traditional practices that demonstrate their adaptability and resilience in the face of modernization, the study explores the rich cultural heritage of the Garo tribes and indigenous community that live in the Garo hills region of Meghalaya, India. The study examines the Garo people's unique cultural identity through an ethnographic lens, covering their rich traditional practices, such as their festivals and their indigenous knowledge systems in agriculture and medicine, as well as their matrilineal social structure and its effects on family dynamics and land ownership. The report also looks into the difficulties that the Garo community faces. The purpose of this study is to add to the larger conversation on indigenous studies, cultural anthropology, and sustainable development.

**Keywords** – Garo, Culture, Matrilineal, Meghalaya, Community, Family

### INTRODUCTION

Numerous indigenous communities, each with its own distinct cultural identity, call Meghalaya, a state in northeastern India, home. The Garo tribe is notable among these due to its unique matrilineal culture, lively customs, and resilient nature. This article offers a taste of Meghalaya's rich cultural legacy by delving into the fascinating world of the Garos and examining their history, social structure, rituals, and challenges.

### HISTORY AND ORIGIN

An indigenous tribe known as the Garos lives in Meghalaya, India's Garo Hills. Although there is myth and mystery surrounding their history and beginnings, historians and researchers have pieced together a story based on written sources, archaeological discoveries, and oral traditions. According to historical accounts, the Garos migrated to their current home in the fifteenth century from the Tibetan Burmese region. The term "Gara," which means "song" or "music," is the source of the name Garo, which reflects their passion for dancing and music. In the past, the Garos were expert traders and warriors who had close relationships with nearby tribes and kingdoms. Two theories of migration exist: 1) Tibetan-Burman Migration: It is thought that the Garos, who share linguistic and cultural similarities with other Tibeto-Burman people, migrated from the Tibetan-Burman region. 2) Austric Migration: According to some scholars, the Garos, who speak the Austric language, came from Southeast Asia.

### MATRILINEAL SOCIETY

Property, social standing, and cultural heritage are all passed down through the female line under the distinctive matrilineal structure that defines Garo society. There are important social implications for this unique social structure:

**Family dynamics:** While the husband lives in his wife's home, the maternal uncle is an important decision-maker in the family.

**Land Ownership:** The youngest daughter inherits property, guaranteeing that family assets stay in the maternal line.

**Social status:** In Garo society, women are highly respected and have a lot of authority. Garo women have a fair amount of autonomy and decision-making authority.

The advantages of Garo matrilineality include the empowerment of women due to their considerable social and economic clout, the promotion of social cohesion through the maintenance of strong familial ties and social togetherness, and the vital role that women play in conserving cultural traditions.

### **THE CLAN CONSTITUTIONS OF THE GAROS**

The Garo call their clan the "Chatchi" or "Katchi." At first, the Garos were split into two major clans: the Sangma and the Marak. Later, a third clan called Momin was created. Areng and Shira are two new clans that have appeared in the current century. When all members of the same group come together, a mahari (kinship) is created. Mahari's social standing is higher than her family's. But among the Sangma, Marak, and Shira, this kind of kinship is called "Chatchi" or "Katchi," and the title is Ma.chong. Sangma, Marak, Momin, Shira, and Areng are the five clans into which the Garos are primarily divided. These groupings are dominated by the Sangma and Marak clans. There are several subclans within each clan. The Garo people refer to it as Ma.chong. A group of people that share a similar mother are referred to as Ma.Chong. "Chong" denotes a heap or a collection, while "Ma" indicates mother. According to the Garos' matrilineal traditions, every child in a family adopts and identifies only with their mother's clan name.

The clan's main duties are to control weddings and settle internal disputes. The Garo forbid marriages between members of the same clan. They can only get married outside of their clan.

### **CUSTOMARY LAW OF THE GAROS**

The majority of social rules are made at the village level. The basic rules that control Garo society and guarantee its normal operation are the prevailing social customs that have existed from the beginning of time. These developed customs served as the basis for the social rules of the Garo people. The Garo people naturally adhere to the rules set forth by society, even in the absence of any extraneous external pressure or laws. Their society has been able to function smoothly because of their commitment to the rules. The Garo society has no written rules or conventions. Since the beginning of time, Garos have managed their social lives by defined customs and conventions, which they adhere to.

The "Nokma" is the headman or chieftain of each Garo village. According to Garo customary law, the Nokma and village council system is the oldest means of settling conflicts in the community. The customs and rules of Garo society are enforced exclusively by the Maharis and Chras, with minimal involvement from the Nokma.

### **TRADITIONAL PRACTICES AND CUSTOMS**

There are many colorful traditions and rituals in Garo culture.

**Festivals:** With song, dance, and feasting, the Garos commemorate a number of festivals, including as the Wangle Festival (Harvest Festival). The A'song Festival (New Year Festival) ushers in the new year with traditional dances and music, while the Magrika Festival (Seed Sowing Festival) signifies the start of the sowing season. Dance Forms: Traditional dances such as the Ajia, Dokru Sua at the Wangala festival and the Doregata Dance at the Magrika festival highlight the community's love of dance and music. The Chambil Mesara is a traditional dance performed at the A'song festival.

**Music:** Kram, a traditional flute, is played during traditional dances, while Aduri, a traditional drum, is employed in a variety of events and festivals.

**Garo cuisine:** includes traditional foods like Jakkep, Do.o kappa, and Nakam Bitchi (dried fish).

**Traditional Clothes:** The Garos dress in colorful traditional garments, such as the Gando (men's garment) and Dakmanda (women's garment).

### **INDIGENOUS KNOWLEDGE AND SKILLS**

**Traditional Medicine:** Herbal treatments and natural healing techniques are well understood in the community. In addition to performing rituals to heal bodily and spiritual diseases, they also produce remedies from plants and herbs.

**Agriculture:** The Garos farm rice, maize, millet, pulses, vegetables, fruits, and other crops using traditional ways as part of their sustainable agriculture. They engage in wet and dry rice cultivation, shifting culture, and terrace cultivation. They employ the Dao (machete), Kamlai (hoe), Thabi (plow), and Sathi (sickle) as their traditional agricultural implements. The agricultural methods used by the Garos demonstrate their respect for the environment and communal ideals. Their agricultural resilience and production can be improved by initiatives to support organic farming, sustainable agriculture, and crop diversity.

**Artisanal skills:** Garo craftsmen are proficient in ancient weaving methods and use them to create clothing. In addition to creating metal objects and decorative goods through metalwork, they are skilled in woodcarving, which involves creating artwork made of wood.

### **CHALLENGES FACED BY THE GARO COMMUNITY**

The Garos confront a number of difficulties in spite of their great cultural heritage:

**Cultural Erosion:** Conventional behaviors and customs are in danger due to the inflow of contemporary influences.

**Land Rights:** Community disputes have resulted from disagreements over land ownership and management.

**Economic Development:** Many Garos are looking for work outside of their native lands due to a lack of economic prospects.

**Language endangerment:** Due to a lack of documentation, the Garo language and dialects are in danger.

**Social Inequality:** Women's empowerment is weakened by the patriarchal tendencies and the caste system.

### **PRESERVATION EFFORTS**

Numerous efforts have been made to address these issues:

**Programs for Cultural Revival:** Attempts to encourage traditional dance, music, and art forms.

**Language Preservation:** Initiatives to record and teach the Garo language A'Chik are examples of language preservation.

**Community-Based Tourism:** Eco-friendly travel initiatives that promote Garo culture and generate revenue.

**Education and Awareness:** Initiatives to help younger generations understand and value culture.

### **CONCLUSION**

The Garo tribe provides an intriguing glimpse into Meghalaya's rich cultural past by exhibiting a singular fusion of custom, tenacity, and flexibility. We can endeavor to preserve the Garo culture for future generations and guarantee the continuous prosperity of this dynamic group by comprehending and respecting their traditions, customs, and difficulties.

### **RECOMMENDATIONS**

- Create cultural exchange initiatives to foster intercultural understanding in order to further aid in the preservation of Garo culture.
- Offer financial assistance for community development and sustainable means of subsistence.
- Create instructional materials and resources about the history, culture, and language of the Garo people.
- Promote tourism driven by the community.
- Encourage the study and recording of indigenous knowledge, Garo customs, and traditions.

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