

# The Changing Garo Adivasi Culture of Bangladesh: A Case Study of Marriage Rituals



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## **Abstract**

This thesis work is mainly focused on the Garos' cultural changes related to their marriage rituals and comparative situations. From a comparative perspective the study compared between a plain land Garo village, which is to some extent with some urban facilities, and a forest surrounded remote Garo village.

The leading research questions are: 'Why is the Garo culture changing?' and 'What are the rituals and steps observed for establishing Garo marriage?' These issues have been the focus throughout the whole thesis. The project also aims to discuss the Garos' historical origin and cultural characteristics.

The study reveals that Garos' traditional cultural practices have been changing a lot and over the course of time they are getting quite a new cultural setting. Some internal and external factors are mainly responsible for Garos' cultural changes. Finally, while the Garo society is changing then they are discarding many of their distinguished traits and adapting to some other cultural traits. In fact, the process of these changes had started before. However, still today they practice many of their traditional cultural traits. The comparative study findings between the two villages show that despite many similarities, there are very few ritualistic differences between the villages, but comparatively remote Garo village's culture and tradition are to some extent in less detriment. In these discussions modernization has come as an important factor, which is influencing the entire Bangladeshi society as well as the Garos. Under the process of these changes, some aspects of Garos' future cultural identity have also been addressed.

In doing so both historical and empirical data was used; historical data was mostly collected from secondary sources, such as published books, census reports, journals, articles, and souvenir. Empirical data has been gathered from intensive fieldwork, through oral histories, informal interviews and case study methods. The field investigation was conducted in two villages; Pirgacha and Gaira of Modhupur, Tangali, Bangladesh in June-August 2007.

**Key words:** Garo People, Marriage Rituals, Factors for Garos' Changes, Identity

## **Abbreviations**

ASA-Association for Social Advancement

BRAC- Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee

CIRDAP-Centre on Integrated Rural Development for Asia and the Pacific

CHT-Chittagong Hill Tracts

GoB-Government of Bangladesh

ILO-International Labor Organization

MIS- Master in Indigenous Studies

NGO- Non-Government Organization

NSDP-NGO Service Delivery Program

SDNP-Sustainable Development Networking Programme

SHED-Society for Environment and Human Development

UN-United Nations

UP-Union Parishod

UNPFII-United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues

# Chapter 1

## INTRODUCTION

The Garos (*Mendi*)<sup>1</sup> Adivasi,<sup>2</sup> a distinguished matriarchal community of Bangladesh is now living under a changing situation. While the Garo culture is changing then they are discarding many of their distinguished traits and accepting some others' cultural traits. This cultural change related to Garos' marriage rituals and comparative situations is the main focus and will be analyzed in this study. From a comparative perspective, the investigation intends to compare Garo marriage and related cultures between the Garos living in *lamdan*<sup>3</sup> (village: Pargacha) and the Garos living in *Abori*<sup>4</sup> (village: Gaira).

In Bangladesh there are 29 indigenous groups<sup>5</sup>, approximately 1.2 million and 1.13% of the total population (Census Report: 1991). Among them the Garo is one of the largest indigenous communities of Bangladesh. They live in the north-eastern parts of the country especially in Gagipur, Mymensingh, Netrokona, Tangail, Sheerpur, Jamalpur and some in Sylhet districts close to the Indian border. There are almost 100,000<sup>6</sup> Garos in Bangladesh, many more Garos live in the Meghalaya in Indian side but gaps exist between the government official figures and private estimates. A sample survey of 1979, conducted in Bangladesh, found that 20% of Garos do not possess any land, 30% have only a homestead, 30% worked as hired labourers and 20% cultivate mortgaged land.<sup>7</sup> Almost all

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<sup>1</sup> Garos of Bangladesh also use the name *Mendi* and sometimes *A'chik* people. In this thesis I have preferred to use the term Garo, however, the term *Mendi* is also used occasionally.

<sup>2</sup> Adivasi -this word is used for the Indigenous/Minority people in Bangladesh.

<sup>3</sup> In the Garo language Plain Land village is called *Lamdani* village. This village has much more neighbouring Bengalis and to some extent has few urban facilities. Benglapedia mentioned that *Landanis* are the *Mindaya*, a name derived from the Chinese word *Mandai*, which means man.

<sup>4</sup> In the Garo language, forest surrounded high raised areas are called *Abori* village. This village is remote, far from townships and has a little bit less contact with the Bengali community

<sup>5</sup> The number of ethnic communities has been variously mentioned in the written sources. For example Qureshi 1984: 12, Samad 1984: 28 based on 1974 census report, Urao 1984:31 and Maloney 1984: 46. Quoted from *Ethnic Communities of Bangladesh* by Kibriaul Khaleque, SHED, 1998.

<sup>6</sup> No one knows certainly how many Garos live in Bangladesh, (Bal, Ellen: 1999). According to the Census report in 1991, there are 64,280 Garos who live in Bangladesh.

<sup>7</sup> Sustainable Development Networking Programme (SDNP) is a global catalytic initiative launched by the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) in response to Agenda 21, which articulated the need for improved information dissemination to support sustainable development. See [www.sdnbd.org](http://www.sdnbd.org) 2008



the Garos are bi-lingual because they have to speak Bengali in addition to their Garo language (Bal, Ellen: 1999). Garos have their own language, which is called *Achchik Katha*<sup>8</sup>. The traditional Garo religion is *Sangsharek*,<sup>9</sup> which is almost abolished and practiced by very few Garo people in some areas. Over the years, most of the Garos have been converted to Christianity and a few into Islam (Bal Ellen: 1999). However, the Garos are one of the distinguished matriarchal communities in the Indian subcontinent. This matrilineality finds that every Garo belongs to his or her mother's lineage and takes the mother's family name. According to the Garos' inheritance system, men do not inherit property from the parents; all go to the women (Chowdhury, K.A.N: 2007). Their residence pattern is matrilocal, the husband moves to the wife's house after marriage. The traditional Garo society is changing widely; it has accepted and absorbed many traits from others communities. These changes may bring greater change in Garos' social structure, but my investigation is to find the main causes of the Garos' cultural changes as related to their marriage rituals and its comparative situations.

### **1.1 What is the research about?**

The main research question is to investigate and analyse the causes of the Garos' culture changes and marriage rituals. Over the last centuries, Garos culture has been changing (Bal Ellen: 1999), but these changes did not take place homogenously in different areas. So to observe the comparative changes, I have conducted a comparative study between the Garos living in *Lamdani* village and the Garos living in *Abori* village. For these changes, modernization as a post-traditional order is an important agent, which is influencing the whole Bangladeshi society. The study aims to investigate and analyse deeply into the major causes of the Garos cultural changes and Garo marriage rituals. The main research areas or questions of the research project are as follows:

- a. What are the rituals and steps observed for establishing Garo Marriage?
- b. What are the comparative changes in the Garo marriage and related culture between the Garo living in the *Lamdani* (village:Pirgacha) and *Abori* (village:Gaira)?
- c. What are the major causes for Garos' cultural changes?

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<sup>8</sup> Spoken language of the hill people

<sup>9</sup> *Sangsharek*- animistic religion. It is rooted in agriculture. The moon, sun, rain, rivers and crops are like gods to Garos. They observe thirteen or more *brata* (vows) and festivals in a year and pray for the fertility of the soil, safety of the harvests and protection from evil spirits, diseases and epidemics. ([www.sdnpsd.org/sdi/international\\_day/indigenous-people/2004](http://www.sdnpsd.org/sdi/international_day/indigenous-people/2004).)

## 1.2 Geographical location of the study and selection of the villages

The subject matter of the study is to analyse changing aspects of Garo culture related to Garos' marriage rituals and its comparative situations. So it is reasonable that I would select Garo living areas for locations of my study. After evaluating accessibility and other factors I chose Modhupur *Upazilla*<sup>10</sup> of Tangail district as my research area. Modhupur is the north eastern part of Bangladesh, which is almost 150 kilometres north from Dhaka, the capital city of the country. Most of the Garo people of the district have been concentrated in Modhupur and their number is around 15,000 (Bal Ellen: 1999). In Modhupur, Garos are living in many villages, I could have turned to other villages but following my research proposal I choose 'Pirgacha' as a plain land village and on the other hand, in order to get to know the remote Garos I selected another village 'Gaira'. The first one is Plain land (*lamdani*) and the other one is forest surrounded remote village (*Abori*). Before selecting the Garo villages, I first spoke with some experts on Garo community. They shared their experiences and helped me a lot in finding information on Garo locality. Then I went through the District Gazetteer, the census report and some of my relations to identify the Garo villages of Modhupur. I talked to them about the two types of different I expected and finalised these two- 'Pirgacha' and 'Gaira' for comparing the Garos' marriage and Garos' changing cultural situations. The following are the comparative characteristics of the selected two villages.

### 1.2.1 The plain village (*lamdani*), Pirgacha

- a. The Pirgacha is a Plain land village, there is a Union *Parishad* (UP) office and it also has *Kacha*, *Pacca* well roads and infrastructure facilities. It is almost 10 kilometres north from Modhupur *thana* head quarter.
- b. There is a Roman Catholic Church in the village, also a high school and a primary school where students from the Garo community and the Bengali receive education. For the location of the Church this village is much more important and known to others.
- c. Pirgacha is a mixed village where some Bengalis are living along with the Garos.
- d. The people of this village are facilitated with electricity, modernity, and are close to their Bengali neighbour.

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<sup>10</sup> *Upazilla* - Sub-District; It is the administrative unit of the country. There are 64 districts in Bangladesh. Districts are divided into several sub-districts are called *Upazilla*. In Bengali *zilla* means districts and *Upazilla* means sub districts. In Bangladesh there are 460 *Upazillas*.

- e. Several Government and NGOs are working in this village for poverty alleviation, health, education, and other issues.
- f. This village is provided with some urban facilities as being comparatively near to the Modhupur Town.
- g. In Pirgacha there is a village market and also a post office.
- h. In Pirgacha (I was told) there are few elderly Garo people who practice *Shangsharek* (traditional Garo religion) religion.

### **1.2.2 The forest surrounded remote (*Abori*) village, Gaira**

- a. Gaira is quite a high raised land, has no well roads and infrastructure facilities. It is seven kilometres north of Pirgacha . There is only a *Kacha* road for the villagers to use, which passes beside the village.
- b. There is no high school in the village but there is a primary school, which is located at the corner of the village where the students from Gaira receive education. The nearest high school is Jalchatra Mission High school.
- c. Gaira is a village where almost all the people are Garo and very few are Bengali.
- d. The people of this village are not facilitated with electricity. Several Government bodies and NGOs are working in this village for poverty alleviation, health, education and other issues.
- e. This village is much close to the Modhupur National Park and far from Townships. Gaira is mostly surrounded by forest and the villagers recall that the forest was much denser before. In Gaira I have not seen any ponds for the villagers, but tube wells are in almost every house which were given by the aid agencies. Gaira is divided in two *Para* and on the other side of the village is village Chunia.
- f. Garos of Gaira are quite back warded than Pirgacha in many ways.
- g. In Gaira there is no village market, only two or three small shops.
- h. I was told that there are more Garo people in this village than in Pirgacha who are the followers of *Sangsharek* (traditional Garo religion) religion.

There is no written history of these two villages and it seems to me that many of the villagers are also not aware of the history of the villages. When I was asking about Garos historical background, people were giving different answers and not in a specific way. They gave their ideas about the first settlement of the Garos in the villages, which is in short that their ancestors had settled down there thousands of years ago and came from

north eastern corner, which is Meghalaya of India (the Garo settlement area of India). On average in the other villages of the *Upazilla*, the economic conditions of the villages are comparatively low but the economic situation of Gaira is extremely low. Like most of Bangladesh, the countryside is flat, but in Gaira the land is quite raised above the surrounding country. In both these villages a good number of Bengali live in there but there is a sharp cultural and social separation between Garos and Bengali. I asked the villagers about the number of the population in each village, but nobody could give me the accurate figure and answered somewhere within one thousand to two thousand for both the villages. The houses of the villages are clustered in such a way that one does not need more than five minutes to move from one house to another. Most of the houses of the villages are made of mud and thatched or tin roofs but the most prosperous families have brick built houses. Christian Garos visit Church on every Sunday morning or in the evening; they have made it obligatory for themselves. There are some studies<sup>11</sup> on Garos' of Modhupur, mostly done by Western anthropologists, which analysed different aspects of Garo life and culture, but not details on Garos' cultural changes. While talking about the north-eastern part of Bangladesh, Bal Ellen mentioned Modhupur (my study area) as a forested highland, which also required different cultivation methods. Here, both wet and dry strains of rice are grown, and more recently pineapple has become a very popular cash crop (Bal Ellen: 1999).

### **1.3 Research methodologies of the study**

Research methodologies are an important factor for all kinds of studies. There are no hard and fast methodological rules for conducting social research, only to get a clear picture of the study. However, for studying indigenous communities the methodological issues should have a separate dimension with a clear aim. According to Jelena Porsanger (2004), 'the main aim of indigenous methodologies is to ensure that the research on indigenous issues will be carried out in a more respectful, sympathetic, ethical and useful way and from the indigenous people's point of view.' It was my concern to carry out the research through the indigenous point of view. I was also concerned that I am not a member of the Garo community. In following indigenous methodologies, an important question to be raised here is: Without being an indigenous person, how far will it be possible for me to follow the indigenous point of views?

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<sup>11</sup> Specially Robbins Burlings 1963, 1997, T.M. Kibriaul Khaleque 1983, 1985, 1995, Bal Ellen 1999,2000.

In Bangladesh there is quite a long tradition of having community studies. According to Prof. Anwarullah Chowdhury (1988) 'In Bangladesh social scientist have been conducting micro level community studies for the last six decades, and most of these studies have been carried out in course of last 40 years. Most of these researchers in their research have used intensive field work or in their words anthropological method or method of participant observation.' During those times, in Bangladesh, there are some rich social studies based on the participant observation method. While making suggestions for field investigations Prof. Anwarullah Chowdhury , mentioned that the 'participant observation method is the most suitable method for all kinds of micro level village studies. It does not matter whether it is a pure academic research or action oriented research.' According to Kibriaul Khaleque (a prominent anthropologist of Bangladesh)'Both Qualitative and Quantitative methods of study have relevance and value in understanding society from holistic point of view. In these circumstances, anthropologists tend to adopt multi-method approach to address problems during the fieldwork', (Kibriaul Khaleque: 1992).

In my study I have adopted multi-method approaches such as participant observation, informal interviewing, oral histories, case studies, and so on. I did my fieldwork in Modhupur from 1<sup>st</sup> June to 15th August 2007. During my pre-field period, I made an outline and questionnaire for interviewing the Garo people. I have used secondary sources for tracing the historical background of the Garo Adivasi community. Here, I have gone through the records and documents about the Garos. Seventeen respondents have been interviewed in an in-depth method, of them nine from Pirgacha and eight from Gaira, for comparison. I have tried to include respondents from different professions and categories, such as local school teacher, local government representative, women leader of the community, person related to the Church, heiress daughter (*Nokma*), person who is practicing *Sangsharek* and the common people from both the *Nokrom* and non-*Nokrom* category, in terms of age, priority has been given to the older people.

**1.3.1 Participant observation:** The participant observation method is considered as one of the most appropriate methods in understanding human society and culture. (Anwarullah Chowdhury:1988). As a participant observer of the Garo community I have tried to observe and record information about Garos' culture and lives. I tried to get close to the people and make them feel comfortable enough with my presence. I talked with them

directly, moved from house to house and observed their day-to-day happenings. I also have participated in different sides of Garo life such as the Church, school, market, gatherings, etc. and visited some other Garo settlement areas and informally discussed with them their cultural situation and other issues. It was an opportunity to cross check the given data on the overall changing cultural situation of the Garo.

I maintained a diary and took notes of all the happenings during the field study. I had participated in the rally and discussions on the International Indigenous Day in Dhaka and the following cultural events at the National Museum auditorium, and a discussion on indigenous cultural rights in the CIRDAP auditorium. For observing Garos culture and their lives, I have travelled to Mymensingh, Sherpur, and Netrokona which are the core areas of the Garo indigenous people of Bangladesh. This was to get to know their overall life-style in Bangladesh.

**1.3.2 Face-to-face interview:** According to C. Seltiz (1964) ‘there are several types of interviews, among them informal interview is widely used for data collection in cultural study.’ As for the face-to-face interview, I sat down with an informant and held the interview in an ordinary day with the use of an interview guide. There was nothing more formal than this, although the interview was based on a clear plan that I kept in mind and used a minimum of control over the informant responses. I tried to get people to open up and let them express themselves in their own terms at their own pace. The informants were purposively selected among the residents of the villages. I included older and younger people as well as the better off and the poor Garos. At the beginning of the interview I introduced myself to the informants. Here I have explained the objectives of the study and asked for their consent on the research activities. While I was interviewing, additional questions were coming but I tried to hold the interview in my particular research areas.

While interviewing I had to breakdown many questions to make them understand clearly. I have used some informants as key informants. The key informants have given me the clear and detailed information for all my questions. In studying these two villages, I have tried to cross check with the interviewees for the critical issues or findings later.

**1.3.3 Case study:** A case study is an in-depth investigation. I have conducted five case studies during my fieldwork, of them two are from Pirgacha, two are from Gaira and one

is from Dhaka. Case studies are focused mainly on ceremonial events in their own marriage, but it also focused on their social, economic, and choices on gender roles and post-marital residences. Before taking the case, I tried to build a rapport with the respondents. Some of the people who have given me the case study information told me not to mention their actual name as some information is quite personal. These cases have not been given separately here, but the information is used in writing the entire thesis.

#### **1.3.4 Comparative method of study**

The comparative method is widely used in social research, which is mostly concerned with comparing similarities and dissimilarities of a particular situation (Bernard Russell: 1988).<sup>12</sup> From a comparative perspective, this investigation intends to compare Garos' marriage rituals and related culture between the Garos living in *lamdani* (village: Pirgacha) and the Garos living in *Abori* (village: Gaira). The plain land village Pirgacha is neighbouring some Bengali more and near to Modhupur town, with a lot of influence from urbanization and modernization; on the other hand, the remote village Gaira is far away from towns and comparatively has less Bengali neighbouring, and it is close to the Modhupur Reserve Forest. This comparative method leads us to look upon the present trends of Garos' changing situation.

#### **1.3.5 Historical documents and oral history**

I have collected information from secondary sources such as published books, census reports, journals, articles and souvenirs published on the Garo situation. Actually the literatures on the Garos of Bangladesh part are not still adequate.

There are no (at least I have not seen) precise historical documents on Garos' social, political and cultural lives. For secondary sources I have contacted Missionaries, Union Parishad, NGOs office, CARITAS library, Dhaka University Library, the Anthropology department study room, and also visited the Tribal Cultural Academy at Birishiri, and photocopied some documents and books written on the Garos from these places.

**Expert Opinion:** Besides all of these sources, I have also shared my views on my field study with some experts on indigenous issues from my country who are prominently

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<sup>12</sup> Bernard Russell quotation is taken from my Master Monograph, on Rural Power Structure and Rural Development, in the Department of Sociology, University of Dhaka.

known for their work on indigenous peoples' rights movements and have done some research on indigenous communities. Their shared experiences and their views helped me a lot in finding information on Garo people.

#### **1.4 Theoretical aspects, literatures and conceptual framework of the study**

According to Fredrik Barth, culture is nothing but a way to describe human behaviour (Fredrik Barth, 1994). Scholars have used various terms to identify culture: Durkheim as 'collective consciousness'; Parsons as 'orientations that guide action'; Mead as 'characteristics of behaviour of human beings and social groups'; Taylor as 'complex whole of capabilities and knowledge acquired by human beings'; Karl Marx as 'class consciousness'; Max Weber 'beliefs and conceptions'; and Mannheim as 'mental structure'.<sup>13</sup> According to functionalists, culture is a system that enables human interaction. Surely, the list could go on or take another form, but what it shows is the plurality of the points of view. In fact, the concept of culture is rooted in behaviour, rites, rituals, institutions, language, every day habits, religion, festival, artefacts, song, dress, mental life etc.

All cultures are inherently predisposed to change and, at the same time, to resist change. There are dynamic processes operating that encourage the acceptance of new ideas and things while there are others that encourage changeless stability.<sup>14</sup> Before examining the related concepts of the study, I want to explore some theoretical models on cultural change. Many prominent scholars have designed theories on cultural change, so there exists different theories such as August Comte's characterization of evaluation from theological culture to metaphysical to scientific culture; Herbert Spencer's cultural evaluation; Karl Marx's thesis, anti-thesis then synthesis where economy is the base; Sorokin's recurrent circle; Parson's specification of pattern variables as a way of cultural developments associated with social differentiation; Max Weber, Emile Durkheim, Parsons, Anthony Giddens, Habermas all of these characterize different understandings of cultural change. In this study, for analysing Garos' cultural changes, the theoretical discussions will help us to understand cultural change

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<sup>13</sup> Hans Haferkamp and Neil J. Smelser (ed), Social Change and Modernity, California: University of California Press, 2003.

<sup>14</sup> O'Neil, Dennis, Cultural Change: An introduction to the processes and consequences of culture change, Palomar College, San Marcos, California, 1997



in the way that scholars intend. However theoretical discussion will not be my main task as I am mostly interested in exploring the causes of Garos' cultural changes and Garos' comparative cultural situations. Here, I want to describe the models of cultural change, rather than focusing on some scholar's specific theory of cultural change. According to Hans Haferkamp and Neil J. Smelser (2003) model'-s of cultural change elements are as follows:

- a. Cultural change that is part of a specific social movement
- b. Cultural change apparently occurring largely as a result of a imperceptible shift in socialization pattern
- c. Cultural changes occur sometimes fairly abruptly, on a distinct social movement or set of social movements.<sup>15</sup>

According to O'Neil, Dennis there are three general sources of influence or pressure that are responsible for cultural changes.

- a. Forces at work within a society
- b. Contact between societies
- c. Changes in the natural environment

Finally O'Neil, Dennis (1997) mentioned that cultural change that occurs as a result of contact between societies which are categorised as; a. Diffusion b. Acculturation c. Transculturation<sup>16</sup> (It seems these are much more relevant to Garos' cultural changes)

O'Neil, Dennis (1997) also mentioned that when majority culture traits diffuse into a society on a massive scale, acculturation frequently is the result. In this situation the culture of the receiving society is significantly changed. However, there often is a syncretism, or an amalgamation of traditional and introduced traits. While acculturation is what happens to an entire culture when majority cultural traits overwhelm it, then transculturation is what happens to an individual when he or she moves to another society and adopts its culture. O'Neil, Dennis (1997) also mentioned that according to some anthropologists cultures are organic whole consisting of interdependent components like the figure 1., below. In response to change of one component other components of the culture usually change. This interdependency of cultural components is also seen active in Garos' cultural change.

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid. Hans Haferkamp and Neil J. Smelser, 2003.

<sup>16</sup> O'Neil, Dennis, California, 1997: Ibid

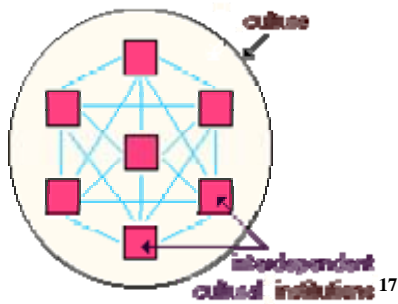


Figure 1.

This Figure 1, shows that all the institutions of culture are interdependent to each other like what we see in this circle.

The theoretical framework discussed above will give us a springboard for qualitative analysis of the data on Garos' cultural changes especially in terms of marriage. Finally following the relevancies, for analysing Garos' cultural changes, mainly I intend to make use of diffusion, acculturation and transculturation theoretical models of cultural change in this thesis.

### 1.4.1 Related literatures of the study

According to anthropologist Tone Bleie there is very few published literature about Garo and their culture. The books and booklets, which exist on Garo, pay considerable attention to the violation of minority rights and forest degradation (Tone Bleie: 2005). The first article about the Garos appeared in 1793, and was written by John Eliot, an English man ( Bal Ellen :1999). Since then, the other literature we have on Garos began during the middle of the British colonial period. Later some government officials, missionaries and anthropologist studied the Garo community. Following that, research and documentation that we have are of different types of literatures on Garos, but most of them are on the Garos living in the Indian side. Zahidul Islam (1986), in his Master's thesis has categorised literature on Garos into three divisions such as historical, empirical or descriptive, and evaluative of change. Almost all the early literatures on Garos intended to be administrative or for Missionaries purpose which are kept in the District record room of Mymensingh, Tangail and in Birishiri Tribal Academy in miscellaneously. It can be said that the early literatures on Garos are the major contribution by British Officials for administrative purposes to control and govern the Garo effectively and later some Garo

<sup>17</sup> Source: [http://anthro.palomar.edu/change/change\\_1.htm](http://anthro.palomar.edu/change/change_1.htm) 2008

and non- Garo (Bengali and Indian) scholars have done some research on the Garo situation. According to the purpose of my study, I have mostly tried to concentrate on the writings on marriage rituals and cultural changes of the Garo community.

Following my experiences with secondary sources on the Garo situation and from the experts' opinions, I want to categorize literatures on Garos into two divisions such as literature from British colonial period and the post-British colonial period. During the days of the British period, the most important writings on the Garos are by Major Playfair, the then Deputy Commissioner of Garo Hill. His book 'The Garos' (1909) is the most detailed, reliable and systematic writing on Garo. According to K.A.N Chowdhury, following this book (The Garos, 1909) some other books and articles have been written on the Garos, such as by William Carey (1919), Reverend Baldwin (1934) and others of the importance (K.A.N Chowdhury:2007). Missionaries have worked in different tribes; these are somehow kept in the Churches and are also important sources in this regard.

The British colonial period ended in the subcontinent in 1947. According to Zahidul Islam, 'after British Period very few researches are conducted in Garo living areas of Bangladesh rather most of the researches on Garo people was concentrated in Hill Garos of Indian side' (Zahidul Islam:1986). Some renowned scholars and their works on Garos are; Robbins Burlings (1963, 1997), T. C Sinha (1966), P.C Kar (1982), D.N Majumder (1978), Ahmed R. and M. Shamsun Naher (1987), Milton Sangma (1992), Julius Marak (1985), Abdus Sattar (1978), T.M. Kibriaul Khaleque (1983, 1985, 1995), Zahidul Islam (1986, 1995), Ellen Bal (1999,2000), Tone Bleie (1985,1987,1991,1995,2005). Here it is noted that Tone Bleie comprehensively worked in many indigenous communities of Bangladesh i.e. Oroang, Rajbashi, Santal including a little bit on the indigenous group Garo, I am working with and the most important thing is that she has worked on marriage rituals, which is one of my present areas of interest. In Bangladesh there are some other secondary sources on Garo situations such as district Gazetteer, census report, statistical yearbook, development projects findings, donor comments and others.

#### **1.4.2 Conceptual framework of the study**

To avoid varying interpretations, here the key concepts have been defined based on textual analysis and field experiences. These are as follows:

**Indigenous people**- there is no universal definition of the concept of 'indigenous' and is a new term worldwide. According to Benedict Kingsbury (1998), it is impossible to formulate a single globally viable definition that is workable and not grossly under or over inclusive.<sup>18</sup> However, there are a number of criteria by which indigenous people can globally be identified and from which each group can be characterized. According to the International Labour Organization (ILO) Convention no.169, people are considered indigenous either;

- they are descendants of those who lived in the area before colonization; or
- they have maintained their own social, economic, cultural and political institutions since colonization and the establishment of new states. In addition, the ILO Convention says that self-identification is crucial for indigenous peoples.<sup>19</sup>

Another widespread and popular definition is given in the Martinez Cobo Report to the UN Sub-Commission on the Prevention of Discrimination of Minorities (1986)<sup>20</sup>, indigenous people may be identified as follows: Indigenous communities, peoples and nations are those which, having a historical continuity with pre-invasion and pre-colonial societies that developed on their territories, consider themselves distinct from other sectors of the societies now prevailing in those territories, or parts of them. At present, they form non-dominant sectors of society and are determined to preserve, develop and transmit to future generations their ancestral territories, and their ethnic identity, as the basis of their continued existence as peoples, in accordance with their own cultural patterns, social institutions and legal systems.

Following the above discussion, the Garos are certainly an indigenous people. They have their separate geographical location, social structure, culture, language, beliefs and rituals.

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<sup>18</sup> Benedict Kingsbury 'Indigenous people in International law: A constructive approach to the Asian controversy'' in American Journal in International Law, 1998:3,pp 414-457, From Compendium HIS-3005, Autumn 06, UiT.

<sup>19</sup> Definition of Indigenous people <http://www.iwgia.org/sw641.asp>

<sup>20</sup> Special Rapporteur (1972-84) of Sub-commission on Prevention of Discrimination and Protection of Minorities

These characteristics set them apart from the mainstream Bengali and other communities, but officially in Bangladesh state Garos are not recognized as an indigenous community.

**Tradition-** Tradition is a long-established custom or belief, often one that has been handed down from generation to generation in a community. More specifically tradition is collective memories transmitted from generation to generation, about reactions to things that existed in past worlds. According to Bjorn Bjerkli, the concept of ‘tradition’ is closely related to the concept of ‘culture’. Tradition becomes visible, bridging the past, the present and the future. In the past they did it like that.<sup>21</sup> According to H. Patrick Glenn, the most obvious and generally accepted element of tradition is what S.T. Eliot has called its pastness which involving not only a perception of the pastness of the past, but of its presence. The traditional societies are regularly distinguished from modern or post-industrial or even post-modern ones. Traditional thinking is contrasted with progress or independent thinking. Traditional forms of education are distinguished from new, innovative technique of education. Traditional people are distinguished from the kind of people it is presumed that most people want to be, at least in the western world.<sup>22</sup> Here traditional means the long established beliefs, customs and practices, which distinguished Garos from modern society and are remaining in the Garos from generation to generation.

**Ritual** - According to the Oxford Learner’s Dictionary ‘ritual is performed as part of ceremony and always said in the same way.’ The ritual is an established formal pattern of behaviours or actions observed regularly and precisely (Encarta Dictionary). Here ritual is used as part of Garos ceremonies, which is said in the same way when it is performed.

## 1.5 Limitations of the study

According to Stephen G. Gomes (1988), in an ethnographic study there are always some difficulties such as the selection of a representative respondents, finding expected cooperation and building rapport with the people, and these are eventually reflected in the quality of the data to be obtained. As an outsider and a man with a different culture and background, I was not free from these bindings. I do not know the Garos’ language,

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<sup>21</sup> Bjorn Bjerkli, *Land use, Traditionalism and Rights*, in SVF-3026 compendium 2, 2007, UiT

<sup>22</sup> In the article *A theory of tradition? The Changing presence of the past*, in SVF-3026 compendium 2, 2007, UiT

although almost all the Garo speak Bangla, which is my own language, so I might have missed some of their discussion while I was in a group of Garo people, because among them they speak in their own language. I have interviewed respondents in Bengali; may-be if I would be a Garo and could interview them in their own language then the given data would be more valid, although I had my guide and all the Garos can speak in Bengali.

According to Professor Anwarullah Chowdhury, 'for ethnographic study, generally researcher needs patience and past experience with a long time participation and observation' (Anwarullah Chowdhury: 1988). For me time was a factor because I had only two and half months for the actual field investigation. During my fieldwork period, the months of June and July there were sudden rain and scorching hits of the sun, which interrupted me a bit. Moreover during that time my country was under State emergency (from 11 January 07 to present) although it did not hamper my fieldwork much but people were in a panic on the state issue. Alongside, that time one Bengali family was abducted from an indigenous living area of Chittagong which was also a concern for my family members while I was living in the field area. The most important thing to mention is, that during the fieldwork time, in Bangladesh there was a heavy flood, which badly affected almost all the areas including a bit of my field areas as well.

In the field, at first I had some problems mixing with the people and having intimate conversations with people and specially figuring out with how to approach the Garo villagers. The situation was quite unfamiliar to me as I have never been in these villages before although it was not very far from Dhaka. So with the limited ideas about the Garo culture in the earliest days of my fieldwork, I felt quite inconvenienced. Fortunately, soon after it was well with the help and hospitality of the Garo families. Within some days, I was able to become a welcome guest to them and also make some connection to people I had previously known.

One thing I want to mention here is that there are some studies on Garo of Bangladesh but almost no work has been conducted on the causes of Garos changes and Garo marriage rituals, so to collect information on these issues was a bit of a hardship for me. Moreover,

while I was in the field I did not get chance to take part in a marriage ceremony as Garo marriages are normally held in November and December.<sup>23</sup>

I was a researcher there and tried to mix with the people as cordially as possible, but one thing was obvious and that is my own identity. I am not a Garo but a Bengali whose are mostly viewed by them to be exploiters. Again, while I was talking with informants some other people were coming to see what we were discussing and sometimes were following us, sometimes it was a little bit bothersome.

My guide had good connections with the people and good knowledge of the roads and residences of the areas. Every place in the villages where I was going, for the information, he introduced me to the people, so my job was much easier then. The friendly atmosphere of the Garo villagers made my stay enjoyable, and as I am not a Garo and writing a book on Garo culture, some Garo people found it very interesting. After a little bit of discussion they offered tea and sometimes Garo rich beer *Chu*. Almost all the villagers, whom I have talked with, requested me to visit their village whenever I got the time. Actually, my first inconveniences upon arrival disappeared when I myself got to know these nice people.

## **1.6 Strategies for data analysis and structure of the thesis**

The study is analysing information from both primary and secondary sources. Secondary sources are going to be used in the analysis of the past social and cultural situation of the Garo people. Primary data are the outcomes of the actual fieldwork. The data collected from the respondents needs considerable organization in there to be meaningful analysis. Besides this qualitative data, some socio-economic information of Garos has been analysed. Finally, the information from the same code and category are assembled under one heading. For a systemic and academic analysis with my research questions and priorities, the empirical data are being categorised in the following structure.

Empirical data and secondary sources related to history and the ethnic situation of the Garos are analysed in the next chapter (ch. 2). Garo marriage rituals and their comparative changes are analysed in the chapter 3; analysis related to the causes of Garos' cultural changes are presented in chapter 4; chapter 5 is the conclusion and major findings, where

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<sup>23</sup> Usually Garo marriage held in November and December as it is the dry season and end of cutting their crops. In the later part of the thesis I have discussed widely.

the main research questions of the study will be analysed with the findings of the entire thesis.

Before addressing the main research questions that arose in this thesis, it seems better to consider briefly: Who are the Garos? The next part of the thesis will declare the Garos' presence and their existence from point of view of their background. Here the main questions to answer will be: What is the historical background of the Garos and what are their distinguishing characteristics?



## Chapter 2

### **Historical and Cultural Background of the Garo Adivasi People of Bangladesh**

The Garos are one of the well-known ethnic communities of the Indian subcontinent. Their present population around the world is approximately half a million; most of them are living in Northeastern India mainly in Garo hills (Chowdhury, K.A.N:2007). Nowadays, about one-fifth of the total population of the Garos lives in Bangladesh which constitute less than one percent of the total population of the country. According to my respondents, in Bangladesh the number of the Garo population was much higher before. Over the course of time, and for different reasons many Garos left Bangladesh to migrate to India such as for Partition in 1947<sup>24</sup>, Communal violence in 1964, and lastly in the liberation war of 1971 and many of them did not come back to Bangladesh.

Garos are mostly known to the outside world for their matrilineal social organization especially for their distinct kinship system (Burling: 1997). They have their own language, culture, shared history and experiences. Their mother tongue is Garo, which belongs to the Bodo group of Tibeto-Burman stock (Burling: 1997). According to my respondents from Modhupur the Garos have settled down in the Garo hill areas thousands years ago. From the written documents, under British India in 1866, Garo hill constituted a separate administrative unit for control over the area, but within some time that administrative unit became a peaceful law abiding subject. Traditionally, Garos have many festivals and ceremonies, but in earlier days they had (it is said) some cruel beliefs and practices, such as human head hunting and others which have now stopped (Chowdhury K.A.N:2007). The heading of the Chapter easily notifies the subject matter within the chapter, but according to research guidelines this chapter will lead us to know who the Garos are and what are their main characteristics as well as some of their past and present situation which will definitely support us to walk through the main enquiries of the study.

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<sup>24</sup> Before 1947 India was ruled by the British for more than two centuries and in 1947 India got independence and created two new sovereign countries named India and Pakistan. That time today's Bangladesh was the part of Pakistan as East Pakistan. During this partition there was a big riot between the Hindus and Muslims, consequently many Hindus and tribal people left Pakistan and vice versa. In 1964, again there was a communal war between India and Pakistan mainly between Hindus and Muslims. Later in 1971, East Pakistan, the then Bangladesh fought against Pakistani domination and achieved Independence. During these war periods many people left for India and took shelter there.

## 2.1 The Garo people and their origin

The people who are known as Garo to outsiders prefer to call themselves *Mandis* (Tone Bleie: 2005). Garos<sup>25</sup> are a distinct ethnic community who also prefer to call themselves *Achik*.<sup>26</sup> According to Bal Ellen (1999) Garos can easily be distinguished from Bengali by their looks and they resemble Southeast Asians such as people from Thailand or the Philippines. From other sources, the Garo were once a nomadic tribe of the *Bodo* group of Mongoloids people and are said to have an ancestral relationship with China. According to some anthropologists, hundreds of years ago, the Garos started settling in the inaccessible forest areas of the Garo hills and the tribe permanently got the name Garo, but later many Garos have abandoned their houses there and started to live in forest zones in downhill (plain land) areas (UN, SDNP: 2004).<sup>27</sup>

There is very little information about the history and origin of the Garo, whatever we have, is mostly from oral tradition, as well as different explanations about their history and origin. Garos were mostly unknown to the outside world before the British colonial period and even at the early period of the British rule. While examining the name and origin of the Garos, pioneer Garo scholar Major Playfair says the 'Gara' or 'Ganching' sub-tribe first received their appellation of 'Gara' and that name was extended to all the inhabitants of the hills and it became corrupted from 'Gara' to Garo (Major Playfair: 1909). While talking about the Garo origin Bal Ellen says, despite many differences, which exist between many Garo sub-groups, Garos believe they all have a common origin and always belonged to the same people (Bal Ellen:1999).

According to Garo mythology, thousands of years ago the Garo migrated from Tibet to the Indian subcontinent and set up their inhabitation in the place that we call now Kuchbihar. While in Kuchbihar, Garos food habits consisted of meat, especially human meat, for meat they were very offensive to plain land inhabitants. The Kuchbihar king, having failed to stop them from their habit of taking meat, then did not allow Garos to stay in His kingdom

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<sup>25</sup> In this study Garo term is used to recognize this people. The Hilly Garos prefer to call themselves 'Achik' and plain land Garos 'Mandi' but all these people are known as 'Garo' to the outsiders.

<sup>26</sup> Hilly people

<sup>27</sup> Sustainable Development Networking Programme (SDNP) is a global catalytic initiative launched by the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) in response to Agenda 21, which articulated the need for improved information dissemination to support sustainable development. See [www.sdnpsd.org](http://www.sdnpsd.org)

and oppressed them.<sup>28</sup> Later they moved from Kuchbehair to Kamrup, the king of Kamrup proposed to marry a nice Garo girl named 'Jugi Cilchi' which the Garo refused. So the army of the king attacked them and then they went and took shelter in Garo hill of Mehgaloya. Later on, they scattered to the Bangladesh part.<sup>29</sup>

Indeed, it is not ascertained as to when Garos have entered in the Indian subcontinent; the most popular belief is that Garo have migrated from Tibet, although there is no historical evidence to support this belief. According to some Garo experts, in addition to physical features, language and many cultural straits support Tibeto-Chinese connection of Garos (Chowdhury, K.A.N:2007).

According to Garo legend over the course of time, Garos moved to areas nowadays called Bangladesh and established the Garo Kingdom in Monsing by the Garo chief Monsing and present days Mymensingh<sup>30</sup> is only a derivation and corrupted name of Garo Kingdom Monsing. According to some of the respondents, the Garo people were identified as 'Ghaura',<sup>31</sup> by the *Zaminder*<sup>32</sup>. By the course of time, this 'Ghaura' ward has taken the position Garo.

While talking about the Garo territory, in the pre-British and British period, Garo living areas, especially the Garo Hill, were a united territory, but in 1947 when the British partitioned the Indian subcontinent into two countries (India and Pakistan, the then Bangladesh) the border was drawn through the areas of the Garos. From that period, they had to cross the border to move from one house to another or to visit their kin from the other side and this has continued up to the recent past. But nowadays the border between India and Bangladesh has tightened, also around the Garo living areas. It has brought a big change in Garos' lives, which have disconnected them from the Indian Garos. But from the 1960s onwards, and especially since the 1980s, many Garos have started to migrate to the principal cities of Bangladesh, especially Dhaka and Chittagong for jobs and some of

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<sup>28</sup> Banglapedia, 2006, (the national encyclopaedia of Bangladesh) has also mentioned that Garo decorated their house with human skulls and also traded in human skulls which support this mythological description.

<sup>29</sup> This mythological description about the Garo settlement is mainly give by my key informant Mr. Pronath Mrong (Teacher, Pargacha High School), Pargacha, Modhupur.

<sup>30</sup> Still today, almost all the Garo people of Bangladesh live in the Greater Moymensingh district (North eastern part of Bangladesh).

<sup>31</sup> Impolite and self-willed people

<sup>32</sup> Usually Land lord but in Indian sub continent it has some different meaning and use before and after the permanent settlement act in 1797 during the British colony.

them are doing well and pursuing a good education for their children as it is the best way of securing their future (Bal Ellen: 1999). Undoubtedly, Garos are different from other indigenous communities and belonged together, but at present there is a variety, differences and disagreements among themselves; like all other people of the world (Bal Ellen: 1999). In this circumstance, I want to actually argue that further detail research is needed on Garos' historical background, as there is no sufficient information on Garos' history and origin.

## **2.2 Contemporary official status of the Garos as well as other indigenous people in Bangladesh state**

Following international institutions and activities nowadays, many states began to protect indigenous peoples' rights and interests, but in this respect Bangladesh is still far behind. While talking about the government's attitude towards the indigenous people in Asia, including Bangladesh, Benedict Kingsbury (1998) mentioned the attitudes of governments in Asia to the application to their state of the concept of 'indigenous people' which differ considerably, but strong opposition has been by China, India, Bangladesh, Myanmar, and for the most part Indonesia.<sup>33</sup>

In Bangladesh the estimated total population is 143.3 million<sup>34</sup> of them 98 of the people are Bengali and predominantly Bengali speaking people. There are 2.5 million indigenous people of 45 different ethnic groups<sup>35</sup> although in different sources the number of indigenous groups differs from between 29 to 65. All these groups mostly have different cultures and languages. The Government of Bangladesh does not treat these groups as 'indigenous people' but rather as 'ethnic minorities'. According to the statement of the Government of Bangladesh in the UNPFII 'Indigenous people by definition are original inhabitants of any given territory or country. While ethnic minorities in Bangladesh may not fit this definition, the government has always been sensitive to their problem, according them priority action.'<sup>36</sup> This statement reflects that the GoB is negative towards recognizing these peoples as indigenous, as this recognition claims some special status for them. According to Justin Kenrick and Jerome Lewis (2004) ' there is no reason to assume

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<sup>33</sup> Benedict Kingsbury Ibid. from Compendium, HIS-3005, Autumn 2006, UiT.

<sup>34</sup> IWGA: the indigenous world 2004, According to IWGA it was the total number of population in 2002.

<sup>35</sup> Kibriaul Khaleque, 1998 (SHED)

<sup>36</sup> Statement by Dr. Iftekhar Ahmed Chowdhury, Ambassador and permanent Representative of Bangladesh to the United Nations(UN) at the second session of the Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues, New York, May 21, 2003.

that all people are claiming indigenous status and seeking a privileged position. Rather, the majorities are seeking equal rights based on an acceptance of the legitimacy of the economic and social basis of their ways of life.’<sup>37</sup>

The constitution of the Peoples’ Republic of Bangladesh, Article 6, part 1 declared that the citizens of Bangladesh were to be known as Bengalis<sup>38</sup> which officially means the Bangladesh state does not recognize the existence of any indigenous communities. According to Bal Ellen (1999), this makes it all the more painful, that even now Bangladesh is generally considered the country of ethnic Bengalis, instead of a multi-ethnic nation, which it really is. According to the constitution there is only provision in Article 28 and clause 4 which make special provision in favor of women or children or for the advancement of ‘any backward section’<sup>39</sup> of citizens. In this ‘backward’ provision, nowadays, indigenous people of Bangladesh are getting some special opportunities and rights although the constitution does not specify who or what constitute ‘backward’. The state also moved to some amendment, which changed the nationalism from Bengali to Bangladeshi and moved for an Islamisation process but created many more minorities. As a result, people from other religions were also facing problems with their political rights and the brutal reality, which was severe in 2001, when the Islamic alliance parties came in to power.<sup>40</sup>

While talking about the vulnerable situations of the plain land Indigenous peoples (including Garo) of Bangladesh, Raja Devashish Roy (Chakma King/Chief) mentioned that ‘in the first phase, the indigenous peoples of the lowlands are dispersed in small pockets of settlements that are surrounded by areas inhabited by Bengali-speaking people. Secondly, the self-government system of the lowlander indigenous peoples is not formally recognized by law, apart from their personal laws governing family matters and their laws of inheritance. Thirdly, the lowlander indigenous peoples have no direct representation at national levels. Fourthly, instances of land dispossession suffered by lowlander indigenous

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<sup>37</sup> Justin Kenrick and Jerome Lewis (2004) Indigenous peoples’ rights and the politics of the term ‘indigenous’ in the compendium SOA-3006,2007

<sup>38</sup> The constitution of the People’s Republic of Bangladesh,1972, Dhacca, GOB

<sup>39</sup> Ibid

<sup>40</sup> According to the daily Prothom Alo, October 2006, Indigenous people living in 10 villages under Durgapur Upazilla in Rajshahi district demanded security of their vote and life. They alleged, due to the forced bar of a group of political cadres , most of the indigenous voters of three villages could not reach the voting centre in the last national election(2001). In other villages, they also faced huge obstacles in this respect.

peoples are perhaps even more widespread than in the case of the CHT. The Special Affairs Division of the Prime Minister's Office is entrusted to look after their welfare but these peoples have no say in the affairs of this Division. Although their leaders have time and again demanded the recognition of their land and self-government rights – such as in the Adivasi Declaration of 1997' (Raja Devashish Roy: 2002).

Although, during the Shekh Hasina's regime (1996-2000) some new provisions were created for indigenous people under the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT) peace treaty, but it did not focus about lowlander indigenous people; later the treaty was neglected by the following government. Like other indigenous groups, this is the official status of the Garos of Bangladesh, which they do not recognize as an indigenous group. Although, United Nation Permanent Forum for Indigenous Issues (UNPFII) has recognized the Garos as one of the indigenous groups of Bangladesh and continuously pressuring the Government of Bangladesh to ratify ILO convention 169, still today it is denied by the Government. Moreover, following the previous path, Bangladesh abstained from voting in the historic declaration for the Rights of the Indigenous People by the United Nations (UN) General Assembly in 2007.<sup>41</sup> All these things reflect the views of the Bangladesh state on the Indigenous issues. Moreover the Garo people of Modhupur are constantly fighting against some court cases<sup>42</sup> and for their inhabiting forested land right<sup>43</sup> which was declared to be a National Park<sup>44</sup> by the government, and some people also have occupied some of the Garo lands as an industrial zone. In fine, it needs to be mentioned here that

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<sup>41</sup> UN General Assembly, September 2007

<sup>42</sup> On 25 February 2001, (The Daily Bhorer Kagoj , 26.02.2001, Dhaka) about 275 Garos of Modhupur received summons from the district commissioner's office to produce their lands paper in court within six months. Most of the Garos failed to show their land papers as they are living their hundreds years without any documents. Garo also claimed that false charges were filed against them for decimation of the forest with collaboration with rich and influential neighbouring people.

<sup>43</sup> According to Banglapedia (2006) Garos historically did not own land. Whatever land they hold in possession, they do so without any ownership documents. They also do not pay rents for land. According to another source: in 1878, Garos of Modhupur recorded their landownership in government official books for the first time, (Sarah Jennings, 2005) . According to some of my respondents of Modhupur, government plays a double standard role for Garos land rights. Garos pay rents for their land but government mostly do not recognize their rights.

<sup>44</sup> In 1982 the Bangladesh government announced that a national park (popularly called Eco-park) would be built on 40 sq miles of the Modhupur forest. This would remove thousands of indigenous people from their homestead; however, due to successful opposition the project was stopped. In 1999 it was started again with 3000 acres of land and the boundary wall was created without consultation with the inhabited indigenous people. It violated ILO 107 (Bangladesh has ratified ILO convention 107 in 1972) which affirms indigenous people's right to be consulted, to express views and to participate in decision making process on the outcome of matters affecting their lives.

like the UN Universal Declaration of Human Rights 1948,<sup>45</sup> the constitution of Bangladesh also guarantees the equal rights for all her citizens with some special opportunities being offered to the ethnic minorities. These include special quotas in educational institutions and public services.

### **2.3 Garos' religious beliefs and festivals**

While discussing Garos' historical and cultural background, usually Garos' religious beliefs and festivals come up as some of the most important aspects; as I mentioned earlier the traditional Garo religion is *Sangsharek*. According to Banglapedia, Garos' traditional religion is not concerned with worshiping idols and they do not bother about sin and virtue, gods and goddesses, heaven and hell. They believe that some trees, stones and hills are the abodes of the spirits and therefore. After death, the Garo observed different vows before and after the funeral rituals so that the soul of the dead person cannot do them any harm. Garos attend the ceremony after the funeral and pray for the departed soul and offers gifts (Banglapedia: 2006). Looking and talking about Garo religion, Major PlayFair describes them as animistic. He wrote, 'like all animistic religions, that of the Garos consists of the belief in a multitude of beneficent and malevolent spirits, to some is attributed the creation of the world, to the others the control of natural phenomena, and the destinies of man from birth to death are governed by a host of divinities whose anger must be appeased by sacrifice, and whose good offices must be entreated in like manner' (PlayFair: 1909).

Today most of the Garos are Christian. Bal Ellen (2000), describes, 'Today Christianity is of great importance to the Garo community. More than ninety percent of the Garos proudly consider themselves Christian.' Christianity has a significant influence upon the Garos and a part from missionary activities, they established schools, hospitals and under takes many welfare activities. Actually, Garos conversion to Christianity started in the early nineteenth century when American Baptists Missionaries had established their mission at the Garo Hill and then some other missionaries started to work in the Garo communities. With the influence of Christianity, they shifted from their old beliefs of *Shangsharek* but they attend mostly their basic traditions and social customs.

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<sup>45</sup> All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights. And all are equal before the law and are entitled without any discrimination to equal protection of law.

There are many festivals among the Garos which are mostly connected with various phases of cultivation and harvesting as they are agriculture based. Almost all the festivals involve sacrifices. Garos' main festivals are; *Wangala*, *Rangchugala*, *Agalmaka*, *Michitata*, *Gitchingpong* and recently the Celebration of Christmas. In order to Banglapedia for protecting them against spirits Garos performs religious rituals in the form of festivals under different names while sowing seeds and harvesting crops. The largest among these festivals is *Wangala* (Banglapedia: 2006). Nowadays *Wangala* and celebrating Christmas has become the most popular festival among them. To understand the cultural framework of the Garo people, here I have analyzed two important festivals of the Garo; *Wangala* and the celebration of Christmas.

In the Garos the greatest festival for all is *Wangala*. This usually comes in October but each village sets its own time, there are two or three weeks during which *Wangala* is being performed in one or another nearby village. *Wangala* celebration lasts many days in a single village. *Wangala* comes when most of the harvest is well finished; at the end of the rain and before the beginning of the cold season. On the occasion of the *Wangala* many people buy new clothes and repair or decorate their houses. For the meat of the feast, people must buy a cow from the village market usually several households cooperate in buying a cow. After conversion to Christianity long time celebration of *Wangala* was stopped, but very recently the Church usually pays some amount of money for buying the cows, pigs and for arranging the festival.<sup>46</sup> On the beginning day of the *Wangala* people slaughter the cows and pigs, and in the evening people from all walks gather in a place mostly in *Banepani Nokpanthe*<sup>47</sup> to enjoy the food. In this *Wangala* feast, usually young people are involved in serving beer, rice and meat curry and following the feast there are festivals of dances. The next day is called *Churugala*. Mostly *Nokrom* arrange this ceremony in his own house. In *Churugala* there are some special practices such as offering rice beer to God at the back of the house. The important ceremony comes at the next day called *Satsatsoa* which is performed in the house of *Nokrom*. For *Satsatsoa* a large crowd

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<sup>46</sup> According to the Daily Star after a seventy years long slumber, the Garo community woke up with the thumping of drums and stepping of feet belonging to the contingents of dancers in consort with the rhythm of *Wangala*. What the Garo lost with the advent of missionary efforts in Christianization is now seeing a revival. Article: Garo Celebrate *Wangala* after Seventy years in Haluaghat. **Source:** The daily Star Magazine, 02 January, 2004. Feature Article by Mustafa Zaman.

<sup>47</sup> According to Banglapedia almost every big Garo village has a big decorated house at its centre which is called *Nokpanthe* (bachelor house) called. This is mostly used for residence and recreation of the young man of the village. However girls are not allowed to enter in this house. (Source: Banglapedia:2006)



of villagers assembled there, rice beer, curry and rice are served for them in liberal quantities. After the feast, the young boy and girl crowded in front of the *Nokrom's* house and beat their drums in a steady throbbing rhythm. During the *Wangala* celebration period the villagers, especially the old men visit one house after another and are hosted accordingly. At the end of this festival they burn some special things (not said) for God and hope the harvest of the following years will be fine.



Garo man with *Chu* (rice beer) pot and Garo woman playing traditional flute in *Wangala* festival, Source: [www.indianetzone.com/8/garo\\_tribe.htm](http://www.indianetzone.com/8/garo_tribe.htm) Date: December 07.

Like *Wangala*, after they converted to Christianity, in Garos, the celebration of Christmas has become the most important annual festival and is widely celebrated (Bal Ellen: 1999). For celebrating Christmas the urban dwelling Garos mostly go back to their own villages. Pre-Christmas celebrations are also popular among them. Churches and other organizations arrange cultural shows and invite the people for meal.

#### **2.4 Matrilineal Garo lineage and kinship organizations**

Without understanding Garos kinship system and clan organization it is difficult to understand the dynamics of the Garo society. While talking about Garos' kinship system, Burling Robbins (1997) says that in Garo society, each Garo belongs to what an anthropologist would call a 'lineage' a group of people who are regarded as kin who share the same family name. Various scholars have described the division of Garos in different groups and sub-groups. However, the earlier classification is given by Major Playfair (1909) which mostly based on geographical location. He says the main groups of Garos

are; *Akawe, Dual, Machi, Mathabeng, Kochi, Atiagarar, Abeng, Chibak, Ruga Ganching* and *Atong*.

According to Bal Ellen (1999) matrilineal Garos are divided into several linguistic, regional groups or sub-groups. Oral history reveals that Garos are divided according to their kinship rules and maintained a clear distance from each other and these matrilineal rules determined whom one may marry and whom one may not; following these rules Garos are primarily divided in two exogamous groups named '*Sangma*', '*Marak*' and the third group is '*Momin*' (very rare in Bangladesh). These two groups are sub-divided into numerous smaller exogamous kinship groups such as *Chisim, Rema, Toju* and *Nokrek*. Till today, intermarriage within these groups and sub-groups is mostly unacceptable, called *Ma dong*. The important unit in the Garo clan organization is a group comprised of close matri-relations within the *Ma chong*.<sup>48</sup> Professor Kibriaul Khaleque (1983) mentioned that the majority of the Garos belong to two clan groups i.e. *Sangma* and *Marak*. Chowdhury, K.A.N (2007) in his study has found two more clan groups such as *Areng* and *Shira*. So there are five matrilineal decent groups or *chatchi*<sup>49</sup> such as *Sangma, Marak, Momin, Areng,* and *Shira* among the Garos.

Another exogamous social grouping or sub-clans is known as *Ma chong*. The name of *Ma chong* is drawn from mother lineage; means a child belong to the mother *Ma chong* not from the father. *Ma chong* plays the most important role in Garos social life, such as if someone does not have daughter then *Ma chong* selects the heiress or *Nokma*<sup>50</sup> for the property. A list<sup>51</sup> of *Ma chong* is given below;

### **Sangma**

*Hagidag, Mankhin, Chiran, Cisham, Jengcham, Mree, Manda, Arnpang, Cisik, Dalbot, Kaksi, Snal, Jambil Nengminja, Gabil, Micheng, Scu, Simsangthigidi, Awe Rangmuthu, Balong, Daoa, Sampal, Boltak* etc.

### **Marak**

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<sup>48</sup> A group of people descending from one common mather means Mother's lineage.

<sup>49</sup> Clan or group is mostly called *Chatchi*

<sup>50</sup> In Garo property is inherited only by female, traditionally it is by the youngest daughter who is called *Nokma*.

<sup>51</sup> Quoted from Chowdhury, K.A.N (2007). Source: *Jengcham(Sangma) Shuvas*, Garoder Sangskritik jibondhara(Dhaka: Bangla Academy,1994: 57-58) and *Mrong, anjon.*, Garoder Bibaho Bebooster Sekal o Ekal, in Srijon Sangma (ed) *Janira 15*( Netrokona: Tribal academy, Birishiri, 1999:20-21).

*Chambugong, Deo, Koknal, Maji, Kokrek, Napal, Pathang, Richil, Raksam, Rangsa, Dadak, Dafo, Ghagra, Bolwari, Rangma, Rangmothu, Ruram, Toju, Drong Dajal, Khama, Dakogri, Sinthang, Chanda etc.,*

### **Momin**

*Gabil, Chigisil, Dobit, Wacheksi, Darugri, Mrenda, Matchekgree, Jetra, Rema, Gandim, Watri etc.*

### **Areng**

*Dochik, Nabak etc.*

### **Sira**

*Dalbot, Hadima etc.*

Within *Ma chong* there are smaller groups locally known as *Mahari*<sup>52</sup>. *Mahari* includes only the most closely related people within the same *Ma chong* where group consciousness is much more obvious (Kibriaul Khaleque:1983). *Mahari* is also exogamous. Being exogamous and having a preference for cross-cousin marriage, almost all the *Mahari* are related to each other.

## **2.5 Garos' dance, song, dress and food habits.**

For analyzing Garo people and their distinct culture the most relevant things are to analyze their songs, dances, dresses and food habits. Songs, music and dances of the Garos are a composite whole, which is one of the dominant characteristics of their culture. These reflect their traditional life style and everyday life. Actually, songs, music and dances are the most important part of their worship, rituals and ceremonies. The important dances among the Garos are called; *Dokru sua, Ambre-Rurua, Kilpua, Doregata, Chambil Mesara* and *Ajema*. All these dances are performed in religious observances and funeral ceremonies. According to Banglapedia, Garo dances and songs are very similar to those of the Malaysian hill tribe Orang Achlis (Banglapedia:2006). Among the Garos, dance and

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<sup>52</sup> Number of kin under the same *Machong* is called *Mahari*. Member of *Mahari* can trace each other and can be regarded as an extended family.

song has a religious approach and they believe that these are the means of appeasing Gods or spirits (Satter: 1975).<sup>53</sup>

Garo songs are very significant to their way of life, which is mostly devoted to the spirit and composed of the subjects of their surroundings. They have different songs for different occasions, such as for death, birth, puberty, marriage etc. Besides, songs are the means of passing information such as moral songs for teaching moralities, thoughtful songs for teaching the philosophy of human life, simple songs for dealing with different season's of life, occasionally songs are for dealing with festivals and religious ceremonies. Among the songs *Gong Doca*, *Damru*, *Raca*, *Noh-aang Amritong*, *Dorata*, *Chaori-Shika*, *Kara Sogla*, *Casi Rimang*, *Namil*, *Nipillah* are mentionable. For singing these songs they use different types of instruments, which make the function more colorful. Cultural life of the Garo passes through all these songs.



Garos Musical instrument, 'Drum' Photo: Rafiqul Islam Date: June 2007

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<sup>53</sup> Abdus Sattar is a Bangladeshi scholar who has written lots on many indigenous groups and their cultures of Bangladesh. There are some different remarks on his writings. Many indigenous people do not agree with his discussion and comments on indigenous issues, although there are some scholars on indigenous issues who also have some catastrophe on his writings such as Dr. Kibriaul Khaleque who considers his writing to be like an amateur and not from a researcher's point of views. ( Philips Gain, (ed.) SEHD, Dhaka, 1998)

Like any other indigenous group Garo also have their own dress. According to Benglapedia, in the past, Garo used to put on the barks of trees. The common dress of modern day Garo males is *Jana* or *Nengti*, although the Garo people of a relatively higher status wear short skirts woven by them. The women cover their breast by knotting a piece of short cloth on their backs. The male also wear *Gamcha* or *dhuti* and many women put on *Sharis*, skirts and trousers (Benglapedia: 2006). Their clothes contain both religious and natural marks such as leafs, flowers, eye of Gods etc. The names of their dress are *Gando*, *Katib*, *Salchak*, *Marang*, *Unpon*, *Riking* etc., (Sattar: 1975). Along with the dress they use different types of ornaments. According to my field observation, nowadays, there is almost no difference between Bengali and Garo dress.

Regarding Garos' food habits, in the neighboring Bengali community, there is a saying that 'Garo ate what they found.' According to Benglapedia, there are some exaggerations about Garos food habits, but in fact they ate all animals except cat, which is their totem (Benglapedia: 2006). But nowadays Garos' food habits have changed a little bit. Their favorite dish is dried fish, rice, pork, rabbit, ass, beef, chicken, which they produce themselves. *Chu* is their most favorite food item without drinking *Chu* any kind of function or ceremonies remains incomplete.



Garos' *Chu* (rice beer) making pot Photo: Rafiqul Islam Date: June 2007

The Garo people have their own sports and games. They build houses in elevated platforms and decorate the rooms with the horns of buffalos and deer. According to Banglapedia, in the past, they used to decorate their house with human skulls. These skulls were of men attacked and slain in the plains and were symbols of power, aristocracy and heroism (Banglapedia: 2006).

Analysing Garos' historical and cultural background reveals that over the course of time Garo has acculturated many traits from other cultures but still there are many traditional practices in their cultural lives. In this circumstance, Garos' recent cultural existence can be mentioned as amalgamation of traditional and introduced traits. On the other hand, the earlier discussion also reveals that the change of a component of Garo culture has invited changes in other components such as Garos' conversion to Christian has invited changes in their traditional religious rites which brought a big change in overall Garo culture. Following Garos' historical discussion the most cultural changes of the Garo community can be attributed to acculturation and to historical events.

## **2.6 Garos of Modhupur, the plain land Garos (village: Pargacha) and the forest surrounded remote Garo (village: Gaira)<sup>54</sup>.**

According to Bal Ellen' the North central Bangladesh ( my study area is a part of this area) is as flat as possible exception of few hillocks here and there, where the Garos are living for long past and also in the nearby plain as long as they remember. Practically there are many differences between the two (remote hillocks Garos and the plain) groups' (Bal Ellen: 1999). Garos are widely known as hilly people, but they live both in hilly areas and in the plain land. In fact, in Bangladesh most of the Garos are living in the plain lands. Major PlayFair divided Garos into two categories; hill Garos and plain land Garos. He wrote 'I have the hill Garos in mind, for those who inhabit the plain belong to a different category, and have lost many of their characteristics (Play Fair: 1909).

Very few researchers studied the Garos residing in the plain land and most investigators thought that if they knew one Garo they would know them all, but there are many differences between the hilly Garos and the Garos living in the plain land (Bal Ellen: 1999). It is also clear in the names, which they prefer to describe themselves; hilly Garos prefer to call themselves *Achik* and the plain land Garos prefer to call themselves *Mendi*. In Bangladesh most of the Garos are living in the plain land with the exception of a few foothills in the northeastern border areas. Modhupur is the place where both plain land Garo and forest surrounded raised land Garo lives in. There are approximately 15000 Garo in Modhupur, located in Tangail district, which is about 150 kilometers north of Dhaka.

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<sup>54</sup> Comparative characteristics of the plain land village Pargach and forest surrounded raised land Garo village Gaira are analysed in the first Chapter at point 1.3

Modhupur almost seems like a 'Garo island' on the map of Bangladesh and is isolated from other Garos of Bangladesh (Bal Ellen: 1999).

Although there are much more similarities, but quite a different natural environment accustomed the plain land Garos and forested Garos into different practices. Garos of Pirgacha are accustomed to the plough for cultivation and grew wet rice in their field like their Bengali neighbors. In Pirgach one can easily get some of the webs of the modern facilities.



The Garos of Pirgacha was used to the traditional cultivation methods now many of them are using modern cultivation methods with machinery plough. Photo: From Pirgacha, by Rafiqul Islam Date: June 2007.

The forest surrounded raised land Garo, some decades ago, were accustomed with shifting cultivation but due to government pressure to not practice *Jhum*<sup>55</sup> cultivation, they now also switched to plough cultivation. Here Gaira is far behind from Pirgacha. In fact, the Garos of Gaira are almost fully agriculturalist subsistence people, with low levels of integration in the national and regional system. They continue to live a far more traditional lifestyle that is much less interwoven with the process of modernization, compared with the Garos of Pirgacha. Levels of education and participation in non-agriculturalist jobs are significantly higher in the Garos of Pirgacha than the Garos of Gaira.

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<sup>55</sup> Cleaning the Jungle and left the bushes to dry and burn and then cultivate for years and then move to a following patch (slush and burn method).



The Garos of Gaira are mostly used to traditional cultivation methods

Photo: From Gaira, by Rafiqul Islam Date: June 2007.

When the Garos were practicing *Jhum* cultivation, the land was owned and controlled communally. The transfer to wet rice cultivation led to privatization. In Pirgacha and Gaira, there are some big landowners, middle and small peasants as well as some landless. In both these villages, wet rice cultivation is practiced but more recently pineapple has become a very popular crop. The Gaira is a village, which is mostly surrounded by forest where people are sufferings from land rights and they are trying to acquire their formal land rights.

An analysis of Garos' cultural and historical background in this chapter will be followed by the third chapter of the thesis, which will analyze the Garos' marriage rituals and its comparative changes between the Garos living in forest surrounded remote areas and in the plain land areas.



## Chapter 3

### **The Changing Different Marriage Rituals of the Garo Adivasi Community**

In Bangladesh, different groups of people attend different types of rituals for establishing their marriage. Here, Adivasi people, especially the Garos are significantly different and enriched with their traditionally colourful rituals (Bal Ellen: 1999). This ritualistic part of Garo marriage related to some other aspects of Garo culture, is the main focus and will be analysed in this chapter.

‘Marriage’ is a social institution that involves men and women as partners, which is a fairly stable and neutral term, although around the world there are differences regarding its types and how it forms. The Garo marriage system is inter-woven with the pattern of their social and cultural norms. In the Garo, by marriage, a permanent relationship is established, not only between a man and a woman but also between the two *Ma chongs* of the husband and wife. Even after the death of a spouse’s, the deceased spouse *Ma chong* is under obligation to provide a replacement for the surviving man or woman, particularly from the close relations of the deceased (K.A.N Chowdhury: 2007).

For establishing a marriage, different types of ceremonial rituals are being practiced among the Garo. With the passage of time, the forms and ritualistic parts of the Garo marriage have changed and have been assimilated into some other cultural traits i.e. Christian, Bengali and other cultures. In the Garo, the suitable time for marriage is November and December, as it is the dry season and end of cutting the crops. As I have mentioned earlier the main focus of this chapter is to analyze Garo marriage and related culture, particularly to answer how Garo marriage is established and what are the different steps and rituals practiced and there will be comparative analysis between plain land Garos and forest surrounded remote Garos.

However, Garo marriage is poorly researched and understood. The researches that we have, paid considerable attention to the demographic factors, dowry, and the socio-cultural notion of genders, rather than ethnographic documentation of the marriage rituals. Recently, some scholars have written on marriage of different ethnic groups of Bangladesh, among them Tone Bleie 1995,1985; Kibriaul Khaleque 1984; Ahmed R. and

M. Shamsun Naher 1987; Garo scholar Jengcham (Sangma) Shuvas (in Bengali)1994; Anjon Mrong (in Bengali)1999; Marak 1985; Majumder 1985; Robbin Burling 1997; Bal Ellen 2000,1999; Zahidul Islam 1992; K.A.N Chowdhury 2007 are mentionable. Among them, Ahmed R. and M. Shamsun Naher, Tone Bleie, Kibriaul Khaleque and the Garo scholars Jengcham (Sangma) Shuvas , Anjon Mrong, have paid much more attention to marriage in their studies.

### 3.1 Essential rules of Garo marriage

Like other communities of the world, marriage is a significant event in the Garo's social and cultural life. Marriage is almost universal among the Garo, I have not listened any one who had never married over the age 70. Once married, the men and women will spend the rest of their lives within that marriage. In the Garo, having second marriage (two wives at the same time) is very uncommon, but not impossible. It was not so in the early period either, only the very rich and powerful men could marry two or more wives. Usually, a man should marry when he has become an adult and is economically secure in order to run his household independently. Garo men marry later on average, than the national average. In the national average men marry at age 24.9 and woman at 17.8<sup>56</sup> but in my study of the villages I have not found any man or woman who was married yet at the above mentioned ages.

While analysing the essential rules of the Garo marriage, it needs to be emphasized that in the matrimonial Garo community, marriage is strictly exogamous; marriage within the same clan is not allowed, which means the husband and wife must belong to different clans or *Mahari*. Thus a *Marak* cannot marry a *Marak* and breaking this rule is considered to have committed a sin and will be punished by the *Ma chong* people<sup>57</sup>. This type of marriage is known as *Ma'dong*, where '*Ma*' means mother and '*Dong*' means to live with. According to Major Playfair, in the theory, marriage is strictly exogamous among the Garos, and the husband and wife must belong to different steps and motherhoods. Thus a *Sangma* cannot marry a *Sangma*, a *Marak* a *Marak*, a *Momin* a *Momin*. The children invariably belong to the mother's step and motherhood. Great importance is attached to

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<sup>56</sup> Census Report, 1991, Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics, Dhaka

<sup>57</sup> In the Garos within the same *Ma chong* marriage is unacceptable. According to Banglapedia (2006) if someone violated these exogamous rule he is ousted from the village

this rule, and those who break it, and marry within their own clan are considered to have committed a social sin (Play fair: 1909).

At the beginning of the last century, the pioneer Garo scholar Major Playfair has also observed that this exogamous rule of Garo marriage is changing, according to him; ‘the inevitable rule of exogamy is changing. I am told that many persons are breaking away from the old custom, and that nearly 10 percent of marriages, nowadays are in violation of the rules of exogamous marriage. Some persons even go so far as to marry within their own motherhood, though this breach of rule is rarer than the first, and is looked upon with proportionate disapproval by the orthodox’ (Play fair: 1909).

In my fieldwork in Modhupur (2007) I have also noticed the derivation of exogamous rule of the Garo marriage. Nowadays, a mentionable number of young Garos are marrying within their own *Ma chong*. This derivation is also common in other Garo settlement areas. According to K.A.N Chowdhury (2007) (who did his doctoral fieldwork in Netrokona district) ‘Marriage between a man and woman belong to the same clan is not uncommon. If there is marriage within the same clan, the couple is ridiculed as *Bacdong*. In the past it was treated as an offence, and those couples were not allowed to stay in the village. They were chased away from the locality. With the passage of time, now community has accepted this derivation. But somehow until today marriage in the same *Ma chong* is strictly prohibited and one who breaks this law is called *Ma dong*’ (K.A.N Chowdhury: 2007). After marriage the husband moves to his father-in-laws house, although after the death of the wife, the husband does not have the moral right to stay in that house. However, this practice is rarely applied. According to Banglapedia, after the death of a husband, the waiting wife can claim anybody without a wife in the husband’s clan to become her new husband. Moreover, if, on consideration of any special situation in the clan, someone marries a minor girl, he can have a sexual relationship with his mother-in-law during the period until his wife attains maturity. In the past there was a practice of group marriage and free sex in the Garo society (Banglapedia: 2006). However, in my fieldwork I have not found such practices in the Garo society.

On the other hand, in the neighboring Bengali Muslim community, *Gosti* or clan exogamy is not practiced, but sometimes village exogamy is noticed. According to Tone Bleie, importantly, the Muslims in this area (particular area, where she did her doctoral fieldwork

in Bangladesh) do not practice village exogamy. Also they value cousin marriage (Tone Bleie: 1995). These matrilineal rules are more or less equally important to both Christian and non-Christian Garos. Beside these matrilineal rules, in the Christian Garo marriage the essential points to keep in mind are as follows: a) the partner must be Christian; b) a Christian Garo must never marry Bengali Muslim; c) if marriage takes place between a Christian Garo and non-Christian Garo then the non-Christian Garo must be converted to Christianity, but if it is with Bengali Muslim then the person will be turned out of Church. On the other hand, it would be a terrible disgrace for a Muslim woman to marry a Christian Garo. This could lead to her punishment or even being disowned by her family. According to Bal Ellen, these days practically all young Garo people choose their own life partner. Nevertheless, one basic rule is still taken very seriously: a Garo should always marry a Garo. In reality, even this rule is not always followed. In the case of a marriage to another (Christian) non-Bengali- a Kkasi, for instance – Garos tend to be quite flexible but marriage between a Bengali Muslim man and a Garo woman is judged very negatively (Bal Ellen: 1999). In the Christian Garo, marriage is usually placed in the Church. Remarriage and divorce are also taken place in the church in consultation with the Priest. In all the familial matters, the priest's advice is always valued in the Christian Garo community.

### **3.2 Changing forms of Garo marriage**

Garos' different types of marriage systems have changed a lot and with the passage of time the old forms of marriage have mostly been stopped, whereas now they are practiced with some new forms of marriage. According to the nature of the inheritance, two types of marriage are observed among the Garos. One is called *Nokma* marriage and the other is called *Agati* marriage.<sup>58</sup> Although in the Garo marriage, exogamy tradition is maintained but they allow *Nokma* to marry cross-cousin. For the *Nokma*, her parents select a husband from the father's sister's son or mother's brother's son, but non-heiress daughter chooses her husband from other clan. According to the Garo scholar, Burling Robbin, marriage of heiress daughter (*Nokma*) to a real sister's son of the father of the girl is always preferred, but when such a spouse is not available, a classificatory sister's son from various distinct relatives can also be selected from the father's *Ma chong*. This means, for instance, two

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<sup>58</sup> the marriage of a non-heiress daughter

people may be simultaneously close matrilineal cross-cousins and distant patrilineal cross-cousins (Robbin Burling: 1997).

Nowadays, the most practiced forms of marriage among the Garos of Modhupur are love marriages<sup>59</sup> and arrange marriages<sup>60</sup>. In my research areas, the most popular type of Garo marriage is arranged marriage. This type of marriage is usually arranged by the parents with the help of a matchmaker. The matchmaker may be a friend or relative and can be of any parties. In my research area in Modhupur, I have noticed an exceptional form of marriage where a Garo woman had married a Bengali Muslim man who became more or less accepted by the Garo community.

Christian missionaries have brought lots of changes to Garos' various forms of marriages. Following the conversion to Christianity, recently the Garo people mostly practice the Christian rules and rituals for their marriage. As quoted earlier, in the Garo, there were practices to marry mother-in-law and also the stepdaughter after the death of their husbands. According to Kibriaul Khaleque 'in Garos.... but sometime the mother and her own daughter become the co-wives of the same man at the same time. It was curious that sometimes the mother and her own daughter beget children from the same man (Kibriaul Khaleque: 1984).<sup>61</sup> In fact, after the death of the husband, the practice of marrying a mother-in-law and step daughter upholds Garos in group solidarity and social networking where every member of the society is caring for each other.

Christian marriage rules and regulations do not allow Garos' to practice traditional forms of *Sangsharek* marriage. Before conversion from *Sangsharek* to Christianity in the Garos there were other forms of marriage such as 'marriage by Capture' and *Thunapp'a* marriage<sup>62</sup> which has now stopped and is negligible, but still today it has some influences upon the Garo marriage. In the *Sangsharek* Garo<sup>63</sup>, nowadays, two kinds of marriage are

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<sup>59</sup> marriage by elopement

<sup>60</sup> marriage through the consent of both the families and the person concerned

<sup>61</sup> Prominent Garo scholar, Professor Kibriaul Khaleque in his article '*Religious Syncretism among the Bangladesh Garos*,' claim this situation was continuing among the Garos but now the situation is different. This statement describes Garos' distinctive matrilineal and traditional marriage system.

<sup>62</sup> It is one type of *Sangsharek* Garo marriage where marriage held through food offering to the man

<sup>63</sup> In my study villages I have not observed any young man or woman practicing *Sangsharek* religion, only very few old aged people are practicing this religion.

being observed; marriage with the help of *Kamal* and marriage by compulsion.<sup>64</sup> In the Garos, most of the marriages are performed according to Christianity but in some traditional *Sangsharak* ritualistic practices i.e. killing fowls and drinking *Chu* are still observed but it varies from area to area. Marriage according to Christian rituals is called *Dosia Bia*.

### **3.3 Contemporary rituals and steps for establishing Garo marriage**

Garo marriage is a long social process, which starts through four preparatory ceremonial steps and finishes in a big wedding feast. The first preparatory step of Garo marriage usually starts with the proposal for marriage. In the Garo community, without in exceptional cases, proposals for marriage must always come from the bride's side, not from the groom (Anjon Mrong: 1999). On the other hand, in the neighbouring Bengali Muslim community, marriage proposals' coming from the bridegroom's side is very uncommon. According to Professor Tone Bleie for Bengali Muslim marriage, when the senior kin considers the boy or girl to be approaching a mature age, a *Ghotok* or a mediator is chosen to collect information about a potential spouse and eventually to make the formal proposal (*Bibaho prostaab*) (Tone Bleie: 1995). In the Garo, regarding marriage, at first the boy/girl expresses his/her choice to mother, uncle or brother. In this context, currently the boy or girl's uncle or someone informs the liking to the respective boy/girl and parent. In the past, following the choice of the girl, some people from her clan and family members must capture the boy and bring him to the girl's house to live as a couple after some ceremonial rituals. Now this practice has been ceased (Anjon Mrong: 1999). After this proposal, if both the parties are keen on the marriage then another preparatory step of marriage begin.

*Godhuly Sangma from Modhupur described her marriage proposal, who works in a beauty parlour and lives in Badda, Dhaka told me; 'I married a man from Jalchatra, when I was 20 years old. We knew and liked each other in the early years. Following our liking, one of my relatives formally proposed to my parents-in-law, who live in Jalchatra, about*

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<sup>64</sup> Marriage by capture is now continued in another way what is mentioned as 'marriage by compulsion'. As only the aged people are practicing the *Sangsharek* religion, so rarely this type of marriage is held, especially if someone practices *Sangsharek* and his or her spouse is dead. My respondent Jostina Nokrek from Pargacha told me, nowadays people are shy to hold this type of marriage but if marriage is needed then they hold it at night.

*our marriage. Following the proposal, with some others ceremonies we married in our village'.<sup>65</sup>*

**Panchini or Jamai Jiggasa<sup>66</sup>** is the next preparatory step where a group of people from the bride's side which must include her mother and maternal uncle with other kith and kin visit the boy's house 'termed seeing and asking the boy'. This time the visitors bring some presents (usually clothes) for the boy and for his parents, but it is not obligatory to bring this gift. Although within the gift, the compulsory things to bring are betel leaf, nuts and some sweets. Sometimes *Panchini* is seen as a big feast in the bridegroom's house, which depends upon the financial condition of the groom's family, but usually this is the only feast from the groom's side. If the boy's family does not have that much financial ability then they slaughter one cock and one hen for the guests and entertain the guests as best they can. But slaughtering two chickens is related to the wishes for would be couple. Following the *Panchini*, a few members of the boy's side, which must include his parents and a maternal uncle, visits to the girl's house with some presents for the bride (usually clothes) and her parents. Anjon Mrong (1999) mentioned that this time the bride's family entertains them with *Chu*. Soon after *Panchini*, the wedding day and time for the other ceremonials are fixed. The date of the marriage is fixed in the church or in the bride's house with the presence of both sides' parents and a Priest.

*Himaloy Sangma from Gaira told me; 'she married a man from Chunia, the nearest village, when she was 19 years old. In our Panchini program my parents accompanied ten or twelve others, including my maternal uncle and younger brother when they went to the bridegroom's house with some presents for my parents-in-law. Later, I heard from my younger brother that it was a nice program with a big feast. Actually, before Panchini our marriage was finalised by both sides' interests and through a formal proposal.'<sup>67</sup>*

Seemingly, in the neighbouring Bengali Muslim community, Professor Tone Bleie observed at a pre-fixed meeting (usually in bride house) for the final agreement (*Paka*

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<sup>65</sup> This is the part of a case study taken in July, 2007 which shortly represents a *marriage Proposal* of a Garo woman living in Dhaka, from Modhupur. This case also represents that in Garo marriage usually held in their origin village in case of someone lives out of the village.

<sup>66</sup> These are Bengali wards which means asking Bridegroom and Seeing Bridegroom House, I asked my respondents what are the Garo wards of *Jamai Jiggasa*, they told me *Singaga* and *Hamgaga* but my respondent Madhuri Mrong from Pargacha told me simply they are used with these Bengali wards.

<sup>67</sup> This is the part of a case study taken in June, 2007 which shortly represents the *Panchini* ceremonial of Himaloya Sangma from remote Garo village Gaira, Modhupur.

*Katha*), the date of marriage, place of marriage, the number of guest to be entertained and presentation (*pon*) are all agreed upon (Tone Bleie: 1995).

**Ban Prokas**<sup>68</sup> Following the *Panchini*, the couple must be trained<sup>69</sup> in the Church in child rearing, husbandry activities, and other things to become a happy couple. Would be couples will be trained for 21 days. On every Sunday, the Priest of the church will declare the progress of their training and message of their marriage what is called *Ban Prokas*. After three Sunday if any one of the community does not veto of their marriage, then with some sacred rituals the Priest will declare them as husband and wife. Though, I was told by an old informant that this type of *Ban Prokas* was not practiced and nor necessary in Garo marriage rituals, in the near past and till today in some Garo settlement areas it is not under practise.

**Turmeric and oil bath**<sup>70</sup>: not obligatory but sometimes it is seen as a preparatory step for the wedding; the rite of turmeric and oil bath for the bride and the bridegroom. The bride and groom are separately seated on a *Pira* and are massaged with turmeric paste and mustered oil from the face to toes by the female attendants. The turmeric is initiated for activating the couple's fertility. Soon after the bath, having wedding clothes on and having been beautified with cosmetics they go to the Church. For wedding clothes, they usually use *Bokbondo*, *Ghagra* and a scarf<sup>71</sup> they also use Christian wedding clothes. As a last preparatory step the Priest performs some sacred verse from the Holy Bible and declares the bride and bridegroom as husband and wife and asks for God blessings with good, happy, and fertile life for the new couple. During the wedding the Priest reads the regulation of the marriage in front of the couple, relatives, and friends. Then the wedding rings are exchanged and the signatures of the couple and two witnesses from each side are taken. According to a local Garo elderly people this type of turmeric and oil bath in the Garo marriage ceremony is less practiced and very new.

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<sup>68</sup> These are also Bengali Wards, here it means training for couple and taking opinions from the community in the Church, I asked if there are any Garo wards for which represent this wards or ceremony but they told me they do not know any alternative to this one.

<sup>69</sup> Possibly this type of training for the couple is a Catholic Christian influence .

<sup>70</sup> Possibly this practice is a neighbouring Bengali Muslim influence.

<sup>71</sup> It is Garos' coloured traditional wedding costumes



In the neighbouring Bengali Muslim community, this ceremony is called *Haldi*, and it is an important preparatory ritual (Tone Bleie: 1995). In Bengali Muslim, the bride also decorates her hands with *mehdi* or henna. Sometimes it is also practiced among the Garos. There is no probation of ‘dowry’ among the Garos, but sometimes the bride family gives something as a gift for an educated and employed groom such as utensil, pillow, bed sheet, quilts etc., especially when the new couple are supposed to live in a new house.

**Wedding feast:** Marriage is placed normally in the Church or in the house of the bride. If the marriage is held in the house of the bride, then the wedding feast is held at that house. Usually, the wedding feast is quite a big feast where kith and kin of the bride and the guests from the bridegroom’s side are gathered. Wedding feast is normally held on the day of marriage. Here, the bride’s relatives slaughter a pig and sometimes cow as well. For wedding feast, sometimes the groom’s family also shares the expenditure or offers a pig for the feast. Heavy rice, pork with some vegetables and rice beer is usually offered for the guest. There must be drumming and music. After the feast, the young people have a dance with a special Garo cloth. All of the guests enjoy the event. At this stage, the bridal couple usually feed each other in the presence of all the guests. In the wedding feast *Chu* and pork must be served for the guest. After the feast, the guests wish the new couple with presents. I asked them ‘why pork and *Chu* are a must, they replied, ‘pork’ is a must as they are Catholic Christian and the *Chu* is a favourite for long past in the Garo community.

At the end of the marriage, the bridegroom usually moves to his parents-in-law’s house. The bride’s mother and elder sister with a group of followers welcome and wish the new couple well. For welcoming the bridegroom, some time the young members of the bride’s family make a wonderful gate with new red clothes at the entrance of the house where they use banana tree as a pillar for the gate. For the *Bashor Ghor* the bride’s kith and kin decorate a room with different types of coloured papers and while entering through the decorated gate, usually the bridegroom has to pay some money to the people at the gate. This type of welcome and ceremony is also seen among the neighbouring Bengali Hindu and Muslim marriages for welcoming the bride.<sup>72</sup>

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<sup>72</sup> Some of my respondents told me this type of ceremony to welcome the bride is very rare and recent. I guess it is an influence of the neighbouring Bengali community.

This tradition of moving the bridegroom to the bride's house is changing and today many Garo young men (as I have mentioned earlier) dislike this tradition. In my research area, I have noticed some brides have moved to her parent-in-law house and many have started living independently in new house. Here, it can be said Garos are influenced by their neighbouring Bengali community where a bridegroom moving to his parents-in-laws' household is neglected and very unpopular. In Bengali, it is the norm that a wife moves to her father-in-law's household. According to Bal Ellen, today more and more Garo young men resist moving to their in-law's household and it is becoming popular to establish own independent households, instead of moving in with parents of either partner (Bal Ellen: 1999).

*The careful investigation of an individual unit of the Garo marriage (case study) reflects as follows; Kolpona Marak a Garo woman, who lives in Pirgacha village; married Shudir Marak, a Garo man from the same village nearly four years ago. She told me before our marriage we know and like each other. Then in 2003, with the consent of our parents we marry at Pirgacha St. Paul Church. While marrying in Pirgacha St. Paul Church she wore traditional Garo dresses and a scarf on her head. In their marriage her maternal uncle formally proposes to my husband parents for the marriage. Before marriage some days they were called by the Church to learn some basic thing about the family life. In their wedding feast almost fifty guests was invited. Wedding feast was held in her parent house but one pig and some rice was given from the bridegroom side. In their wedding party some non Garo people was also invited. In their wedding party they got many things as presentation. They both are from Marak clan. She is Kama (Marak) and her husband is Ritchil (Marak). She told me being a Marak to marry another Marak is not suitable but our Mahari is different, I am from Kama and my husband from Ritchil. I am an Agait daughter, after our marriage one year we were living with my parents now we have our own house. Now they have one boy who got his father's name. After their marriage her parents pray to Kalkame as this is the powerful God looks after all the living things in the earth. Both of their family are agriculturalist but now her husband who completed HSC from Modhupur Degree College and working for an NGO. In their house there are electricity, Television and mobile phone.<sup>73</sup>*

### **3.4 Traditional Sangsharek rituals of Garo marriage**

Before conversion to Christianity, the Garo people were practicing the *Sangsharek* rules of marriage (Kibriaul Khaleque: 1984). In the Garo, for marriage there was a traditional practice of 'bridegroom capturing', which has stopped now. Regarding this type of

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<sup>73</sup> This is a case study taken in June, 2007 which shortly represents the ceremonial events of a single Garo Marriage from the Garo village Pirgacha, Modhupur.

marriage, at first, the girl expressed her choice to her mother, uncle or brother. Then the girl's uncle or someone kin who follows the boy's movement and following her choice, one night some people from her clan and family members must captured the boy and bring him to the girl's house to live as a couple after the ceremonial rituals. An old man who is still practicing *Sangsharek* religion told me the efficacious wards, which are said by the *Kamal* for establishing the marriage;

*'Akasher sathe Matir*

*Pa her sathe Sagor er Jemon Shonporko*

*Emon Shomporko jeno hoi tomader'*<sup>74</sup>

Which deep relation we see between sky and earth  
Which deep relation we see between Sea and mountain  
We wish such a deep and romantic relation in your future conjugal life.<sup>75</sup>

While the people are returning with the captured man on the way they will shout with joy. After the rituals of the *Kamal* the people will be given food along with the new couple. At this event, the girl's family will give two chickens for the marriage party. *Kamal* will kill these two chickens and will say 'I am sacrificing these two chicken for two of you' then he will keenly observe the stomach of the chicken, if they are full with food then the *Kamal* will declare that this couple will have a prosperous life and vice versa. From that night on, the couple will live together, but if the boy dislikes that girl, then he will leave the house immediately that night. Following his departure, again some young man will capture and bring him to the girl's house to sleep together with the girl. This time some young people will guard around the house so that the captured groom cannot escape from the house. Normally, at this stage, the captured boy does not escape. On the following day some women of the bride's family will visit the boy's family with some fresh food to cook there for the boy's family.

According to the *Sangsharak* rituals, among the Garos there was another traditional practice of marriage, which was termed as '*Thunapp'a* marriage.' According to the ritual of this marriage, for making a proposal to the likings boy, the girl cooks a dish and sends it to the man of her choice by some one female relation. The girl remains in hiding but

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<sup>74</sup> This efficacious ward is told me by the father of Pronob Mornng who is more than 65, one of the Garos of Pargacha who is practicing traditional *Sangsharek* religion. He wanted to be anonymous.

<sup>75</sup> For doing this translation my key informant Pronob Mornng help me a lot.

follows close behind. If the boy takes and tastes the food then it is assumed that the boy has accepted the offer and the girl comes forward and eats with him. If the boy refuses to eat, then the girl assumes that the boy has refused her proposal, but she follows where the boy sleeps, and then the girl goes to him late at night and lies down with him. If the man still refuses the girl, then he leaves the village for a few days and if he relents, he becomes her husband from that night without any ceremony. This type of marriage is called *Thunapp'a* marriage means 'sleeping together'. Although, Garo scholar Anjon Mrong (1999) described this type of food-offering proposal of marriage was observed among the *Machis* Garo.

Another type of marriage is observed among the very poor Garo, which is the marriage with the help of *Kamal*, but they also follow the clan exogamy and others. In this type of marriage, the couple starts to live together and to make the marriage official the couple goes to the house of the *Kamal* and informs him about their marriage. In such circumstances, any kind of above-mentioned ceremonies does not take place. In this case divorce also takes place in front of the *Kamal*. I am told by some of the respondents that nowadays the *Snagsharek* Garo feels ashamed to practice all the traditional types of marriage rituals. As only the old people are practicing the *Sangsherak* religion so these practices of marriage rituals are rarely occur in the community. Afterward, if someone who practices *Sangsharek* needs to marry, they try to do it in hiding. In this situation, it is quite difficult to predict the future existence of these traditional marriage rituals.

On the other hand, I was told that, nowadays, if both the bride and bridegroom (Christian or non-Christian) are affluent, highly educated, and living in the city as an outcome, some of these marriage rituals are performed in a different way. I have noticed that well educated man or women are quite free from the traditional ritualistic influences, especially if the parents are not educated.

### **3.5 Comparative Changes in marriage and related cultures between the *Lamdani* Garos and the *Abori* Garos.**

Comparative analysis of the marriage rituals of the Garo Adivasi community involves many factors. In recent decades, Garo people have been influenced differently by many factors such as Christianity, formal education, government policy, occupational

diversification, integration with the modernised economy and other factors which have brought comprehensive changes in many aspects of the Garo lives, including their traditional marriage system and rituals. In some places, these changes happened in higher levels and in other places to lower degree, but all of the Garos have accepted some changes in their culture especially in marriage rituals. Through comparing Garo marriage and related cultures, this part of the study highlights comparative changes and continuity of the marriage practices among the Garos, which will lead us to understand the overall cultural changes in the Garo Adivasi community.

In both the study villages, most of the people have converted to Christianity and share the Christian rites and rituals for establishing their marriage. Garos from Gaira mostly attend the Jalchatro Catholic Church, whereas Garo people from Pargacha attend Pargacha St. Paul Church. In this regard, I asked the Catholic Church's father Euzine E. Homrich who responded 'there is no basic difference between the Christian Garos living in Pargach and Gaira.'<sup>76</sup> In the remote village, there are a few more people still practicing their traditional *Shangsharek* religion and the Garos of Gaira are a bit strict on their own traditional practices for establishing their marriages. On the other hand, in the plain land village, almost all the people are Christianized and much has changed in their ritualistic practices. In Gaira, not all people are Christian; here people (both Christian and non-Christian) based in their traditional religion (*Sangsharak*) have slightly different rituals and rules in marriage than in Pargacha. In Gaira, there are few families who practice *Sangsharek* religion, but mostly they do not follow their traditional rules of marriage, which they can name.

Garos, follow clan exogamy, but marriage within the same clan is not absent in the village; Pargacha. Almost all the people of Pargacha are Christian and rarely are someone punished for marrying in his or her own clan. The Christian Garos of Pargacha also consider it to be forbidden and they think for marrying in the own *Ma chong* someone's name will be cancelled from the Holy book of God. At the same time, socially they are treated as unholy. On the other hand, if it happens within the Garos of Gaira, the villagers take the following punitive actions: often they are hard to allow them to live in the village; they will be treated unholy for the rest of their life; even their entry into someone's house and

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<sup>76</sup> Father Euzine E. Homrich C.S.C who is an American and living Pargacha for almost fifty two years. He is the head priest and most respected and accepted person in the Garos of Pargacha.

mixing with other people will be treated as unclean. I am told and also noticed cooperatively that fewer numbers of people from Gaira had married into his or her own clan.

No dowry system is practiced among the Garo community. Although not compulsory, but recently the bride's family contributes in cash or kind for the welfare of the couple according to their prevailing economic conditions. In my field investigation, I was told and also found, in Gaira, that this system of giving gifts is less practiced than the village Pirgacha.

I have not noticed, in either of these villages, that a mother and a daughter are living as co-wives that had been before. But in Gaira, to some extent, there are practices of providing partners for deceased husbands or wives from the nearest relatives.

As I mentioned earlier almost all the Garos of Modhupur have converted to Christianity, but their religious practices are quite complex nowadays. They like to be recognised as Garo Christian, but in other ways still today they worship some living and non-living things. They have very strong cultural rites of offering efficacious things like eggs, fowl, liquor, pigs etc. For sickness and bad calamities they worship for the evildoer god. There are also some rituals to prolong life, to obtain children and others. In comparison to Pirgacha, Gaira is much more used to these traditional practices as this village is less modernised and a few people still practice traditional Garo religion (*Sangsharak*).

In the matrilineal Garo community, women are much more influential and children take the name of their mother's lineage and treated accordingly after the mother. But the main authority of the family or community is traced through male. Here, women were active both in households and in outside activities, but recently they are mostly absent in the main income generating activities such as ploughing, carpentry activities, etc. Women contribute to collecting firewood, cleaning up firm, cutting, weaving, plantation, etc. Here women are important according to the customary norms, but women cannot take final decision. Like neighbouring Bengali community, for education nowadays, male children are given first preference. These trends or notions are more or less observed in both the villages but in Pirgacha there are some women working for beauty parlours, NGOs,

running small shops, teaching in the schools and involved with indigenous rights movement, where Garos from Gaira are quite far behind.

Regarding inheritance, I noticed in Gaira there are much less instances of transferring family property to the son where they answered that this is their custom. On the other hand, in Pargacha there are comparatively more instances of transferring property to the sons. I was told for old age support and others, they transfer their property to their sons as after marriage nowadays daughters are moving into their parent-in-laws' household.

Although traditional religious articles and Christianity are found dominating in the Garos' cultural life, but I have observed some practices in their marriage rituals which might be influenced from some other religions such as Hindu and Muslim cultural traits. For example sometimes for welcoming newly married couples they make decorated gate with banana trees in front of their house, which is what is mostly seen in the Bengali Hindu and Muslim marriage systems. In this respect, I have observed Pargacha is much more influenced than Gaira. Following my observation, there is a bit of difference in the age of first marriage for men or woman, the *Lamdani* Garos marry earlier than the *Abori* Garos. I was told this is due to tradition and economic insecurity that young *Abori* Garo marries later than *Landani* Garo.

Some variations are found depending on availability and affordability. People of Gaira are comparatively more dependent on forest and agricultural products, whereas people of Pargacha are quite more used to market products. The Christian Garos from Gaira consider *Chu* as nourishing drink, but people from Pargacha are comparatively less fond of this traditional liqueur as they have interacted more with neighbouring Bengali Muslims, where alcohol is hated. In wedding ceremony, if the plain land Garos invite Bengalis then they prepare pig free food and do not offer *Chu* for them as the neighbouring Bengalis people are not used to them. The Garo from Gaira are less restricted in their food habits. Here it is relevant to mention from Bal Ellen that some decades ago different groups of Garos (including hillock and the plain land Garos) are kept a distance from each other. At present the situation is different; today it is much more important to be Garo (Bal Ellen: 1999).

Analysing Garos' marriage rituals and comparative changes reveal that the Garos have mostly acculturated Christian rites of marriage but still there are some traditional practices in their marriage. In this circumstance, Garos' existing marriage rituals can be mentioned as an amalgamation of the traditional and Christian traits. Christian religion, which has defused modernity and western values over the Garo society, has abruptly changed in their traditional way of lives. The earlier discussions also reveal that the changes in Garos' marriage rituals also invite the changes in their traditional matrilineal social system. This thing shows the interdependence of the cultural institutions of the Garo community. There might have influences of some other factors, but these types of changes are bringing greater changes in overall Garo culture. On the other hand, as an element of cultural change transculturations is also working in Garos' cultural changes. While the numbers of the Garo villagers are moving out of the villages for many purposes and staying outside and returning with different cultural values are also influencing Garos' culture especially the marriage rituals.

### **3.6 Garos' cultural identity**

While analyzing Garos' cultural changes, usually Garos' future cultural identity situation becomes one of the most important aspects. Like many other indigenous communities of the world, in my field investigation I have observed that due to cultural changes, Garos have lost many old distinctive traits and developed many new cultural traits from outsider cultural elements. Although in many of their memories, it is still fresh in their minds that once they had distinctive traits and still today they differentiate themselves based on their own remaining traditional culture. Following their cultural changes, they are emphasizing and sharing the emerging and quite a new culture. In this context, Garos cultural identity is considered to be a major concern. Identity is the particulars about a community. Here, it includes characteristics that distinguish the Garo Adivasi from other communities. According to Fredrik Barth (1994) 'the sense of identity is of necessity constructed in answer of these experiences: How the group of people is different from the surrounding others, positioning, singularity of the fund of culture-of knowledge, skills and values as manifested in the group. The symbol of identity are demonstrated by how the scale and life style homogeneity within the group shared, image, unity, historically constructed metaphors and emblem, fatherland, flag and others.'<sup>77</sup>

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<sup>77</sup> Fredrik Barth, 1994, University of Bergen, in SOA-3006 compendium 2007, UiT



According to Katherine Verdery, 'identity is not only relevant in inter-ethnic relations in the daily routine of public interpersonal behaviour; it is also claimed and made relevant in the more formalised sectors of social life. Furthermore, it is expressed in mass media and in voluntary associations and it is also displayed in a growing cult of idioms like language, dress, folk song and cultural history etc.'<sup>78</sup>

Ironically, with the integration of modernization and after the conversion to Christianity, in the course of time, Garos, especially the young people, have forgotten many of their traditional norms, customs, dances, songs and pattern of dress. In this context, it can be said that in the future they may experience cultural identity crisis. On the other hand, it has also been observed, recently through education and awareness raising works by many indigenous rights based organizations especially UNPFII, that they are slowly and gradually realising the need and importance of their cultural identity and trying to overcome this problem.

According to Bal Ellen, Bangladeshi Garo society has strong sense of identity. Not so long ago people at times felt ashamed of being Garo. They knew that others looked down upon them; they were seen as being primitive, underdeveloped. Today, the people are much more proud of themselves and do not hide from being different. Some believe it is because of their religion that they have managed to maintain such a distinct identity. Garos feel that religion links them to a much larger world outside Bangladesh. This provides them with a sense of security and belonging (Bal Ellen: 1999). Bal Ellen also added that contemporary Garos differ in many ways from those of the nineteenth century. They have, however, perhaps never been as aware of their distinct identity as they are today (Bal Ellen: 1999).

Further socio-cultural changes among the Garos are underway that are likely to have implications for ritualistic changes in the future. The next Chapter will make an enquiry into why the Garo society is changing.

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<sup>78</sup> Katherine Verdery , Johns Hopkins University, USA, in SOA-3006 Compendium, 2007 UiT, Year : not available

## Chapter Four

### Important Factors for Garos Cultural Changes

According to O’Neil,Dennis all cultures change through time. No culture is static. It is now clear that cultural change is very complex. When analyzing the transformation of a culture, it has far-ranging causes and effects (O’Neil,Dennis: 1997). Following the research findings, it is obvious that Garos’ overall lifestyle and culture are changing with the influence of some internal and external forces. While the Garo society is changing then they are discarding many things from their old culture and adapting new traits from other cultures. It is evident that there are many factors responsible for Garos cultural changes such as Christianity, formal education, government policy, integration with the modernised system and economy, modern agricultural equipment, occupational diversification, Bengali settlement, changes in livelihood, economic insecurity, migration to the city, work and income, infrastructural development, roads and highways, influence of national culture, influence of the media, TV, radio, film etc. Here modernization is a complex process, which is influencing many other factors and somehow changing the traditional setting to a new setting. In the following pages I will analyze ‘why the Garo culture is changing’ and more specifically some of the factors responsible for Garos’ cultural changes.

#### **4.1 Christian missionaries sapped (to some extent) Garos’ social roots and traditional culture**

Almost all the Garos are now Christian. Christianity has influenced and changed the Garos a lot.<sup>79</sup> Christian Missionaries and Churches were established in the Garo living areas long ago and supported the Garo people in many ways. Christian missionaries’ introduction of schools, hospitals, rice banks and finally Garos’ conversion to Christianity has directly influenced their culture. But nobody can tell exactly from when the Garos started to transform themselves into Christian. Although the first missionary was established in the Garo area was a Baptist Church in Birisiri in 1892, it was followed by the Catholics who founded their first Church in 1912, only a few miles away from the Birisiri. Eventually,

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<sup>79</sup> According to some sources with the lack of understanding of Garos and their culture, the Christian missionaries simply wanted to turn them in to faithful in their own fashion. Remodelled through conversion, the Garos had long been forced to live in absence of Garo sensibility. Nowadays, the consequence of conversion to Christianity left in its wake a community in cultural crisis. Finally the distinct cultural characteristics that stemmed from Garo life and beliefs are now in a crossroad. **Source:** The daily Star Magazine, 02 January, 2004. Feature Article by Mustafa Zaman.

the Catholic Church became the biggest Church among the Garo in Bangladesh (67 percent) and Baptist (29 percent) (Bal Ellen: 1999).

The villagers told me that after converted to Christianity they believe in one God and also ‘the God has created the world, Adam and Eve from the Garden of Eden are their ancestors.’<sup>80</sup> Although Garos were used to believe in *Me’ mang*, they can still name and somehow they practice many *Sangsharak* rites and make their offerings as well. Here an important contradictory behavior is *Mansa puja*, which they perform if the patient recovered. Christianity does not allow all these practices. The villagers told me Christianity insisted them for new beliefs that separate them from the *Sangsharak* beliefs and practices. Sometimes traditional dances are also seen here as being incompatible with Christianity. In most Baptist Churches, the Garo musical instruments are banned as well. But people explained that the young boy plays Garo drums in the Church and sometime even inside the Catholic Church.

According to the villagers, Catholics could drink Garo *Chu* but the Baptists are forbidden from taking any drink. It was a strike on the older custom as *Sangsharek* needs *Chu* for their sacrifices and they use it in all their festivals. Like all these forbiddances; in Christianity still there are many contradictions with Garos beliefs and practices.<sup>81</sup>

In Garos, Christian missionaries came with western values and tried to modify Garos way of life, including their marriage, inheritance and even their individual naming system.<sup>82</sup> Now they do not practice their old marriage system, such as bridegroom capturing and others. Seemingly, they no longer observed the old marriage ceremonies, whereas Christian laws of marriage substitute them. In the matrilineal Garo community, according

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<sup>80</sup> It is difficult for me to know, do they really believe in this Christian speech or not, but they told me they believe in it.

<sup>81</sup> This type of contradiction is also seen in other indigenous communities of Bangladesh. Recently the Murang indigenous group of Bangladesh has introduced a new religion, which is called *Crama*. Twenty years ago Menlay Murang introduced this religion. Before they had traditional animistic religion but later converted to Christianity. According to Menlay Murang the new religion or faith emerged by compounding Christian beliefs with the existing animistic practices of the Murang people. (Source: the Daily Star. .26.09.2006 feature Article by Mustafa Zaman, Dhaka, Bangladesh)

<sup>82</sup> In my field area I have observed some Garos who are familiar with western naming practices are now using for their sons and daughters. Nowadays some Garos are naming their children ‘Robert’ and ‘Mary’ which names are shared by hundreds or even thousands of people among the English speaking Western people. In the Garo naming practices, normally they do not reuse the name of the living person even sometimes they do not use the name of dead person. This western naming practices show that, significantly Garos have adapted to Christian or western values.

to their inheritance system, only women inherit property, but nowadays there are many instances of transferring land to their sons. Like this, in other aspects of Garo life, recently men are playing much more vital role which has weakened the traditional Garos matrilineal system. In my research area Pirgacha, Modhupur almost all the Garos have been converted to Christianity and there is a Church and missionary high school, which is directly influencing Garos social and spiritual life. In addition to modernization and globalization, according to Shashi (1994) Christianity has changed the spiritual life of the Garos and placed them in a world of modernity. It has also sapped their traditional culture, thus loosening the convert's mental and social roots (quoted from K.A.N. Chowdhury: 2007).

According to the villagers, Christian missionaries have worked for Garos' economic uplift, once they were very poor and suffering from indebtedness to the moneylenders. In this situation, in many places missionaries have arranged cash loans for the Garos, which helped them towards self-reliance and helped them to refrain from resorting to moneylenders. According to Bal Ellen 'Christianity provides Garos' with an important identity marker, it has a major impact on their socio-economic, psychological, cultural, and political situation; it influences their outlook on life and on the world, provides them with a sense of belonging to world that extends far beyond the borders of Bangladesh, offers new educational and professional opportunities, and regulates relationship with their society and with others' (Bal Ellen: 2000).

Finally, Garo cultures have changed a lot under the influence of Christian missionaries but there are some other views on the influence of Christianity. According to K.A.N. Chowdhury, it is probably more due to Christianity that they are able to maintain their separate identity in a society predominated by Muslims in Bangladesh. It is because of the fact that Christianity has provided them a sense of belonging to a world at the same time allowed them to remain distinctively Garo' (K.A.N. Chowdhury: 2007). Although it is not my major concern here, but since Christianity has brought a lot of changes to Garos, I asked one old respondent who had been converted to Christianity at his early age; 'Why have you been converted to Christianity?' He replied that like others he has been converted with the help of Christian missionaries to become modern and to articulate him into a greater Christian society. According to Banglapedia, one of the major reasons why Garos have adopted Christianity is their immediate economic gain in the form of direct

financial assistance offered to the newly baptised Christians. Christian missionaries converted Garos in to Christians and those who accepted the new religion were given blocks of land areas with ownership (Banglapedia: 2006).

#### **4.2 Influence of neighboring patriarchal Bengali society**

When people live together they influence each other. Garos have obviously been influenced by Bengalis (Bal Ellen: 1999). Garo is a distinct matrilineal community. According to Baldwin, it is said Garo adapted the matrilineal system about 500 or 600 years ago at a gathering held at the *Banepani Nokpanthe* (Bachelor Dormitory) situated at Misikokdok hill in Garo hill, and for some reasons they shifted from the patrilineal to matrilineal system (Baldwin, 1934; quoted from K.A.N. Chowdhury: 2007). But it is not exactly known when the matriarchal system began among the Garos and we also do not have enough information to support the transformation of Garos from a patrilineal to matrilineal system.

According to my field investigation, the Garo living areas of Modhupur were fully covered by forest. During those times, the Garos were surviving with the things they collected from the forest and also by hunting in the forest. There were no Bengali people in that area. Later, many Bengali people came from other parts of the country and settled in the areas. As a result, forestland declined. At that time, Garos were not used to wet rice cultivation. Decades ago, with the Bengali settlement, the Garos came in contact with Bengalis and learned about wet rice cultivation, specially the use of the plough. Nowadays, almost all the Garos are agriculturists, and accustomed to wet rice cultivation.

There is no absolute Garo village in Modhupur now. Almost everywhere Bengalis are living alongside Garos. Bengalis presence and influence in the day-to-day life are profound and in every corner of the Garo life. Looking around Garos lifestyle, the observable thing is that in the day-to-day contact with Bengali people they have been much more influenced and changed in their food habits, dress, songs,<sup>83</sup> language, and behavior, and even in their housing pattern. In my research areas, Garo language is spoken only in household affairs and Bengali is commonly used for all other purposes. Many

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<sup>83</sup> According to Shubhash Changchum, who wrote an article on Garo culture claims Garos song are taken over by many Bengali songs such as *Rabindra Sangeet*, *Nazrul Geety* and even by *Pollee Geety*. **Source:** The daily Star Magazine, 02 January, 2004. Feature Article by Mustafa Zaman.

Bengali wards have entered in Garo dialect. With modernity and Bengali influence, Garos have also changed their housing structures. I have noticed that there are many houses constructed of brick, cement, tin, mud, straw and other materials, which means that today Garo houses are almost similar with Bengalis.

According to Robbin Burling, traditionally Garo men wear a narrow piece of cloth ‘*Ningty*’ but now they put on *Lungi* and women put on *Sari* and *Kamiz* instead of their traditional skirts. Even the traditional cooking has disappeared; they now use *masala* of different types following the Bengali recipes. The small material objects of daily life are no longer different from those of their Bengali neighbors<sup>84</sup> ( Robbin Burling:1997).

The interviewees of the villages told me that, while living around the patriarchal Bengali neighbors, young Garos dislike traditional practices of going as son-in-law to their bride’s parents’ house. Some of my informants responded, they think it (matri-local residence) is not normal and it does not allow men to use their potentiality and more authority. Some of them mentioned that this system makes men dependent on their wives. Since the men are dependent and have less authority over family affairs, then men feel uninterested in doing potential duties; rather they spend time in gossiping or drinking *Chu*, in addition, some respondents mentioned this is one of the reasons of their ‘backwardness’. In my research areas in Modhupur, I also noticed that mother is giving land to their son instead of giving it to the youngest daughter, *Nokma*. My observation is that the Garos are aware of the negative attitude of the Bengalis on the matrilineal system and opting for patriarchal the choice.

According to Bal Ellen, especially among urban middle class Garos, we can witness the tendency of naming children after their fathers. This is a significant break in Garos kinship. Today, parents defend their choice by explaining that the name is the father’s but the *Ma chong* remains the mother’s. This trend, if continued, will lead to serious complications where present day kinship rules are concerned’ (Bal Ellen: 2000).

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<sup>84</sup> As I have analysed in Chapter 2.

### 4.3 Formal education changed different aspects of Garos' lives

According to my field investigation, another important cause for Garos' cultural changes is the introduction of formal education. Formal education is a recent idea to the Garo villagers, although they were knowledgeable of their own indigenous ways.<sup>85</sup> The mass populations of the villages are literate although most of the older generation people did not attend any formal schooling, but many of them have learned from adult literacy programs. With the introduction of formal schooling, Garos took the opportunity to be educated which has influenced and changed Garos in different aspects of their lives. For education, especially higher education, people have to move from one place to another, there is no exception here with the Garos. In my study areas, many educated Garos have moved from villages to towns and are living there permanently. Another thing, there are few professional opportunities for educated people in the villages; moreover city life is much more attractive than to live in the villages. For a better future and employment, many Garos moved from village to nearby cities.

Here it is necessary to mention that the Garo children have to start their formal schooling in the Bengali language instead of Garo.<sup>86</sup> The villagers told me that at the beginning the children feel a bit difficulty and barrier to understand the Bengali dialect in their school. But recently, as the Garo children face troubles with the Bengali language, most of the missionaries' have appointed Garo speaking teachers in their schools. Pronob Mornng, who is a teacher, told me that in primary school they explain the lessons in Garo language to help the children and also added that such trouble decreases when they go for upper classes of study. Here the GoB policy of facilitating education in Bengali is promoting that assimilation of Garo into the mainstream Bengali society, as language is the core way to assimilate indigenous group into majority culture. If we look at the Sami people of Norway we find that the government of Norway also took the language issue as a major object for Norwegianization. According to Henry Minde, the policy of Norwegianization was introduced in the field of culture with school, as the battlefield and teacher as the

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<sup>85</sup> Some of the respondents from Modhupur told me before introduction of formal education they were used to learning from their elders through storytelling, songs, proverbs, legends, rhymes and others.

<sup>86</sup> Garo have their own language but they do not have alphabet. According to the respondents the Garo are divided over whether to adopt Roman or Bangla alphabet when it comes to forging a written form of their own language. Among them the one who converted to Christianity prefer Roman alphabet to the Bengali script and the rest are willing to adopt Bengali Alphabet in written expression of Garo.

According to Banglapedia (2006) following Garo legend they had their scriptures written on rhinoceros skin. Those scripts were lost during a journey. While hunting the Zominder of Mymensingh found a few torn pages of the manuscript in a cave of the Garo hill and published them in the news paper *Saurav*.

frontline soldiers. It appears as relatively certain that the Norwegianization policy succeeded in reaching its goal in 'traditional districts' i.e. in the coastal Sami districts, at any rate with regard to the objective of a change of language, and partly a change of identity (Henry Minde: 2003).<sup>87</sup>

According to my observation, after receiving education in Bengali the educated young Garo people are much more accustomed to Bengali and influenced by the Bengali culture. According to K.A.N. Chowdhury, the educated and city living Garos are less accustomed with traditional practices than the Garos living in the villages. City living couples are much more patri-local than the village living Garos (K.A.N. Chowdhury: 2007).

#### **4.4 To a smaller extent the influence of Urbanization**

Urbanization is a process, which automatically influences different aspects of human life including social, economic and cultural life. My research areas are not urban areas in the sense of the access of urban facilities but one can easily feel some touch or wave of urbanization in Pirgacha. My research village Pirgacha has a good road connection with the *Upazila* headquarter; easily one can buy urban commodities from there without spending much more time on it. There is electricity; so affluent Garos are able to afford a TV, VCR and other things for entertainment purposes.

To some extent urbanization is breaking their household-based economy and kin system. Many Garo villagers use mobile phones to communicate with others and read newspapers regularly. While doing my field investigation, I have noticed that dependence on agriculture has decreased, although still today Garos' main source of income comes from agriculture. In the cities, the majority of Garos get jobs as maids, cooks, gardeners, guards, and drivers, but it is surprising that many Garo girls from Pirgacha are employed in the beauty parlors in Tangail and Dhaka city. Some of the girls are working as a maidservant in Bengali and in foreigners' houses in Dhaka city, and many other men are working as guards, drivers and workers in offices. Many villagers have the idea that if their children can go to Dhaka city then they can get a job and would be able to support their family

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<sup>87</sup> Henry Minde, Assimilation of the Sami- implementation and consequences, in Compendium 2, HIS 3005,2006, UiT.



financially.<sup>88</sup> According to S. Drong, among the expatriate community of Dhaka, especially in the diplomatic areas of Baridhara, Bonani and Gulshan, Garos have a good reputation for being educated (often knowing some English), hard working, and honest. Foreigners are known for paying their workers well, so these jobs are considered good opportunities (S.Drong:2004).

Garos generally live in certain areas of Dhaka city, such as Badda, Cocacola, Komlapur, Mohammadpur. These Garos have some place to meet and interact with each other there in the city. According to Robbin Burling a number of universities have Garo clubs, events, and magazines created by Garo students in order to meet each other and unite (Robin Burling: 1997). The Nokmandi community center in Farmgate is the most popular of them, which has hostel, bank system for the Garos and also organize cultural programs for them.<sup>89</sup> Besides, there exist Garo movements within Dhaka to keep the culture alive. There are other views as well, according to some respondents; some of the city living second generation is not much concerned with their roots and culture. Being a Garo means to them some differences regarding food, clothe, inheritance, dialect and so on. These types of changes in lifestyles and in thinking are inviting greater changes in their traditional pattern of life.

In the early days, Garos physical mobility was limited, but now they are much more accessible to the larger society. A respondent who came to Pirgacha as a bridegroom and is living there for more than forty years told me that, there was no market in these villages except Modhupur *Bazar*, which was almost 10 kilometers away from here. Since there was no road connection to reach that market, at that time people had to walk long distance to that market. From Modhupur *Bazar* they used to buy salt, kerosene, tobacco, dried fish, cloths, earthenware pots etc., in exchange of selling their timber, paddy and other items. But nowadays, there is a village market in Pirgacha and also some small shops inside the villages. Increased numbers of Garo villagers, both male and female, are now moving out of the villages for many purposes and staying outside the Garo villages. When these

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<sup>88</sup> There are some dark sides of this rural urban migration, which in this case is prostitution. I am told by an NGO activist that some Garo women who have come to Dhaka not found jobs, and out of desperation turn to this profession.

<sup>89</sup> According to Sarah Jennings (2005) this *Nokmandi* centre is set up by the Catholic Church and is now supported by several other churches.

people return, they bring along with them different cultural values that are influencing Garos cultural values. Here I have noticed, comparatively female Garos have much more mobility than the Bengali women. According to Robbin Burling, Garo women are more independent and there is no restriction on their movement. While ideas of purity and pollution have serious impact upon Bengali culture, Garos are not barred by such social prohibition. They are always free not only to move about their own villages, but to travel to other villages as well (Robbin Burling: 1997). As a result of this social mobility, nowadays, Garo marriage with other village brides or grooms has increased a lot.

#### **4.5 Influence of government and non-government development initiatives**

Garos have a different ethnic origin and they are citizens of Bangladesh. In Bangladesh every *Upazila* has different government departments for supporting the citizens, such as in education, health, agriculture, police, livestock, sanitation, social welfare, youth development, women's affairs, rural development and cooperatives, Anser- VDP (Village Defense Police), engineering etc. Every *Upazila* is divided into unions and unions with wards, which is composed of two or three villages. Through this administrative set-up all the above mentioned government department are mobilizing their development activities<sup>90</sup> in each and every village; there is no exception to this process in my study villages under Modhupur *Upazilla*. Through this process the influences of state run activities are evident into many places of Garo lives. The government works in Garo community are integrating them in the broader context of Bangladesh society. With very little exception, the state promotes Bengali cultures and works for Bengali or Bangladeshi nationalism where Garo as an indigenous group has very little provision (see chapter 2. p. 28). It is assumed that to the GoB the Garo culture is inferior and less important<sup>91</sup>, so the GoB policies and development initiatives in many ways influence and change Garos' traditional lifestyle. Without recognizing Garos' ethnic origin, the GoB is running all the activities in the same way, irrespective of Bengali and Garos settlement areas. In this regard, there is a similarity between the Norwegian Sami and the Garos of Bangladesh, where Sami culture was also considered to be less important and inferior. Henry Minde in his article described this

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<sup>90</sup> While talking about government development works Sonjib Drong, general secretary of Bangladesh Adivasi Forum, mentioned 'some so called development work has been done in this area, (indigenous people living areas of Bangladesh) which affected negatively instead of doing welfare of the indigenous community. He mentioned it while addressing the publication ceremony of a book. Source: The daily Jai jai Din, Dhaka, 10 October, 2006.

<sup>91</sup> In the past Garos have been looked down on by Bengalis. In the Children's text books by National text book Curriculum, it is mentioned *Upojatis* (sub-human) ate unclean foods such as red ants, rat, snakes etc.

thing, according to Brygfjeld, the assimilation of the Sami was an indisputable civilizing task for the Norwegian state, because of the Norwegian superiority. Here the Labor party government, in other wards followed up the Norwegianization and assimilation policy of the previous non-socialist government (Henry Minde: 2003).<sup>92</sup>

According to my observation, while the GoB policies is promoting Garos' including other indigenous groups' assimilation into the majority Bengali culture, then the Garo are thwarted from government patronization to flourish in their own culture and implicitly forced for observing the majority Bengali culture. It became more clear with the statement of a respondent Gulmara Marak<sup>93</sup> who told me that after the British period, all the governments did very little to reserve Garos' rights and interests but during the Pakistan period, the government policy was very harsh. At this time, lots of indigenous land was acquired by the Pakistan Government for some government projects without compensating and negotiating with them. In another way it has also continued at the beginning of the independent Bangladesh. Here, Gulmara Marak mentioned that following independence, Bongobondhu Shekh Mojibur Rahman as the father of the nation and that time the Prime Minister of the country did not pay much attention to indigenous peoples' rights, although many indigenous people of the country attended in the liberation war in 1971.<sup>94</sup> Later President Ziaur Rahman initiated Bengali settlement in indigenous areas, including Garo settlement areas.

Interestingly, these forced assimilation initiatives make Garos more aware and active for claiming their indigenous rights and identity. At this time some indigenous groups of Bangladesh have become more active for their identity and self-determination and involved in an armed movement, especially *Shanti Bahini* in the CHT. According to the literature on tradition and identity in the reading list of the MIS program 'though it is probable that without contact between societies, there would be no concern for identity and the concern with identity arises from external contract; identity is then constructed by explicit or implicit opposition. The other becomes essential in the process of self-

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<sup>92</sup> Henry Minde, (Assimilation of Sami:Ibid)

<sup>93</sup> Gulmara Marak is an indigenous rights activist from Modhupur, He is related with Adivasi Odhiker Andolon (Indigenous Rights movements)

<sup>94</sup> According to Gulmara Marak M.N Larma who was a former parliamentarian and leader of indigenous movement meet with Prime Minister Bongobondhu Shekh Mojibur Rahman claiming their indigenous rights in 1971 after the newly independent Bangladesh

understanding. At the same time the ‘other’ is an ongoing menace to internal cohesion.’<sup>95</sup> According to my observation, forced assimilation and opposition between Bengali and Garo worked much for building Garos’ awareness and identity. It also happened with the Australian Aboriginal people. As Henry Reynolds (1999) mentioned, many assimilation policies were used by the Australian government i.e. the aboriginal children were taken out of their family for especial schooling to make them Australian, which later described as ‘Stolen Generation’. This has made the aboriginal people much more active against government assimilation policies.<sup>96</sup>

### **NGOs in Bangladesh**

In Bangladesh, NGOs have come to play an important role in the lives of all the people, whether Garo or not. There are many NGOs working in the Garo areas of Modhupur, such as Grameen Bank, BRAC, ASA, Proshika, NSDP, CCDB, and others. Christian NGOs such as Caritas, World vision, YMCA, WCA are active in the Garo villages of Modhupur. These NGOs run a numbers of awareness building and development programs for the villagers and also provide jobs for many Garos, sponsors for the children and scholarships for the students and others. Besides, in Modhupur NGOs have launched many programs such as; micro credit schemes, adult literacy, family planning, saving new born lives, sanitation, immunization, crop diversification, income generating training and other programs. Obviously these programs are bringing qualitative change in Garos life but through all these activities NGOs are also influencing the changes of the Garos’ traditional lifestyles.<sup>97</sup>

### **4.6 Traditional Garo culture is disappearing with the influence of modernization**

According to Professor Trond Thuen, cultural changes are brought about by numerous processes of modernization during which the continuity of distinctive cultural repertoires has been partly broken (Trond Thuen:1995). It is general that all over the world, old traditional cultural practices are mostly disappearing, whereas the modern and majority cultures are

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<sup>95</sup> ‘Between Traditions: identity, persuasion and survival’ In methodologies and methods in indigenous studies, Compendium SVF-3026, part law, UiT

<sup>96</sup> Henry Reynolds , Why Weren’t we told, in Compendium HIS-2005, Autumn 2006, UiT

<sup>97</sup> According to an available source the role of NGOs has not been very comfortable. People belonging to the poorer section of the ethnic communities, lack the services of the established NGOs. Very few initiatives have so far been taken in local, district or national levels to address the situation of the ethnic minority people especially whose situation is much worse. Although several Church oriented education and health facilities are working there, unfortunately these facilities are denied to the people who may refuse to convert to particular faiths. **Source:** The Daily Newage, Dhaka, 2 August,2005. The role of NGOs.

becoming stronger; this is also going on in the Garo society. In fact with the contact with the modern society and the majority culture, the traditional culture of the Garos is changing and they are adopting many traits from other cultures.

Electricity, which is a benchmark for modern life, is introduced in the village Pirgacha some years ago. Almost all the houses have electricity unless the family is too poor to afford it. People reported that, it was a great thing for them when electricity first came to their place; many Garo families bought television, VCR, cassette player and so on. In television, usually they watch Bangladesh Television (BTV) but sometimes with the support of antenna they watch Indian channels, English channels and others. People now move around less in their spare time, they rather enjoy watch television. Indirectly, this culture is prohibiting Garos usual social mixing by inspiring people living themselves into their houses. According to my observation through this small screen (TV) global culture is revealed to the Garo community.

In my field investigation, it is observed; Garos are now using various modern methods of cultivation, which has directly and indirectly influenced their traditional method of cultivation as well as has influenced their traditional culture and lifestyle. Once they were used with *Jhum* cultivation and then gradually they moved for wet rice in the method of plough cultivation. At present they are using machinery plough and introduced with various types of rice farming and using modern pesticides and chemical fertilizers.

For using these modern inputs in farming, they have achieved some modern skills and professional knowledge. According to Majumder, this type of modern method of cultivation has reduced traditional divisions of labour between male and female in the family and finally has changed a lot. (Majumder, 1985, quoted from K.A.N. Chowdhury 2007) In *Jhum* cultivation, women were directly involved and associated with farming but plough cultivation has reduced the women's activities in the household and domestic arena. Modern inputs into agriculture have brought economic well-being which is enabling them to enjoy other modern facilities. In my research villages, I have seen that there are some power tillers (see Chapter 2 p. 38), which are used by the Garo farmers.

For any illnesses, Garo used to use their traditional healing methods, which are hundreds of years old. Nowadays, the modern medicine has replaced that traditional knowledge.

Traditional knowledge is closely connected with people's personal experiences, which have best been preserved by way of using the environment. Like Garos, indigenous peoples' modernization is eradicating traditional knowledge and skills of other indigenous people of the world. While talking about Sami people of Norway, Nils Jernsletten mentioned that in the Sami people modern reindeer herding, fishing, and travelling represent a relatively new development.<sup>98</sup>

In these circumstances the Garo, which was a self-sufficient isolable whole with a distinct social structure and culture, are now changing a lot. Finally, Garos are becoming more and more exposed to modern culture and the lifestyle of the neighbouring Bengali society. They seem to have lost their traditional matriarchal system, clan organization, family as well their traditional religion. Finally, their traditional social structure and communal economy are breaking down for socio-economic mobility and diversification towards a hierarchically differentiated modern society.

While talking about the effect of modernization and globalization, Raja Devashish Roy mentioned that the visibly growing trend of privatization and marketization of the hitherto largely subsistence-oriented indigenous economy, with linkages with the worldwide phenomena of a globalized process of uniform trade and property laws, may well undermine indigenous peoples' rights (Raja Devashish Roy: 2002).

According to most of the respondents from Modhupur with the influence/effects of the above mentioned causes, the Garos' lives are changing rapidly in many places, such as in terms of livelihood, nature of agriculture, lineage, family structure, matriarchal to patriarchal society, pattern of leadership, inheritance, religious aspects, communication and others which are working as ultimate factors for structural changes in the Garo society.

Although it is not much of my concern here, but I asked my informants 'How their culture would be preserved from possible endangerment?' They eagerly answered and mentioned that to preserve the Garos' own being we need-government patronization, Garos' consciousness and willingness to preserve their culture, control over their resources, self-determination, revival of their political organizations, necessary support services, written form of their language, education in their own language, media facilities, research works, support by the civil society and others. Here, two things they mentioned importantly which

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<sup>98</sup> Nils Jernsletten, Sami traditional Terminology: Professional Terms concerning Salmon, Reindeer and snow, in Compendium 1, SVF 3026, 2007, UiT.

are; firstly they want their constitutional recognition and secondly they want a separate Ministry for the plain land indigenous people of greater Mymensingh, Sirajgonj, Dinajpur, Rongpur like what we have for the indigenous people of Chittagong Hill Tracts. While I was asking them about Garos cultural preservation, I guess the Garos did not open up much more as I am a member of the neighbouring majority Bengali society.

## Chapter 5

### Conclusion and Major Findings

Garos cultural changes are the main focus of this study, which is observed significantly through and related to Garo marriage rituals. Garo marriage is related with their social values, kinship system, and many other societal factors, which are important for understanding their traditional culture, marriage rituals and changes therein. The Modghupur, where the study villages are located, was not studied much more before, so very few historical documents on Garos' early cultural characteristics of this area were found. Whatever literary works there are, have not given central importance to the changing Garo culture and marriage before. After the independence of Bangladesh, Garo marriage was discussed in some studies that are mostly general type, but recently, a few professional researchers and anthropologists have written precisely on Garos' culture and partly on their marriage rituals. Besides my fieldwork those literary sources have helped me in writing and understanding the Garos. In the following pages, the summery and the major findings of the research will be analysed based on the research questions set up in the first chapter, especially within modernization and with a comparative perspective.

#### **5.1 Garo people have a distinct origin but they are discarding many of their traditional cultural traits**

Matrilineal Garo community has a distinct cultural origin, which has been living in Bangladesh from time immemorial. The study reveals that Garos' cultural characteristics such as song, dance, food habits, beliefs, kinship, inheritance system etc., are now under transition. The process of these changes had started before and over the course of time it has been assimilated with some other cultural traits.

It has also revealed that long ago, the study villages were absolute Garo living areas but later some other ethnic communities have settled down there such as Bengali (Muslim and Hindu), and a small number of Hajong and Koch; as a result, a number of the Garo population has had to move. Findings show that Garos of Pirgacha and Gaira are mostly divided into two matrilineal exogamous groups such as *Sangma* and *Marak*. These groups are divided into many *Ma chong* (sub-groups). The Garos were used to forest life, but now they have been much more exposed to plain land and wet rice cultivation. Although the Garos were living



with neighboring Muslim and Hindu communities, but they have not converted to Islam or Hinduism rather they have converted to Christianity.

In the study villages, most of the people are poor compared to the national average and they are directly dependent on agriculture, but comparatively, today they are using much modern agricultural equipment than before. It is also found that agriculturalist Garos' festivals are celebrated to protect the crops from damage and to increase the fertility of the soil. These festivals can be divided into two categories: a) traditional Garo festivals. b) festivals, which have been adopted from Christianity and are celebrated on developed beliefs. Although Garo has a distinct origin and are recognised as a distinguished indigenous group, but official (constitutionally) in Bangladesh State, they are still lacking recognition and are now claiming for their official recognition and land rights.

## **5.2 Changing Garos' marriage transactions invites changes in Garos' matrilineal social system**

The study findings show that the Garo marriage system has changed significantly. Nowadays, Garo practice very few traditional rituals for establishing their marriages, but can name some of their traditions. Before conversion to Christianity, Garos were used to the traditional forms of marriage such as 'Marriage by Capture' and Thunapp'a marriage (marriage through food offering) which has stopped now and negligible, but still today it has some influences upon their marriage system. Despite many changes, in Garo marriage, these traditional arrangements are still following: a) in the matrimonial Garo community marriage is strictly exogamous, marriage within the same Clan is not allowed, means husband and wife must belong to different clan or *Mahari*; b) after marriage, the bridegroom usually moves to his parents-in-law's household; c) traditional *Sangsharak* ritualistic practices i.e. killing bowls and drinking *Chu* are still observed in the Garo marriages; d) marriage between a Bengali Muslim man and a Garo woman is judged very negatively. It is also evident that these rules of Garo marriage continuing, but nowadays each and every person do not strictly follow them.

Today, at a Garo marriage, the following ceremonial steps are being performed: a) *Bibaho prostaab* (proposal for marriage); b) *Panchini or Jamai Jiggasa* (asking Bridegroom and Seeing Bridegroom House); c) *Ban Prokas* (Training for marriage and taking opinion of the community in Church); d) Turmeric and Oil bath (not obligatory but some time it is

seen as a preparatory step) before the marriage is placed; e) normally marriage is placed in the Church according to the Christian laws; f) wedding feast; g) bridegroom moving (usually) to his parents-in-laws' house. It is also observed that Garo people who are living in the city come to their village to perform marriages for their children. Following the above-mentioned discussions, it is evident that Garo marriage is a community and village affair.

Findings reveal that the young people are not very interested in being *Nokma* or *Nokrom* and without being *Nokma* other daughters are given the share of the family property and sometime sons are also getting property. So it appears that the Garos are not considering giving property to their sons as a violation. It is also noticed that the Garo women are getting married to Bengali Muslim men.

In earlier times, in case of death, the deceased spouse *Ma chong* was providing a replacement spouse, but now it is not practiced. I have not noticed, mother and her daughter living as co-wives which was practiced before. The young Garos are interested in love marriage rather than arranged marriage. In love marriages, young Garos select their life partner themselves. After marriage, young men today are not interested in moving to his wife's parents' house; rather they are living in an independent house. Nowadays, after marriage, sometimes the bridegrooms are moving into the bride's house.

Through these changes in the Garo marriage transactions, when matrilineal Garo society is turning to a patriarchal one, than the role of women in the Garo society is also changing. Moreover, while the Garo society is changing from a matrilineal to patriarchal one, this change invites many changes in their social and cultural life such as inheritance, gender roles, post-marital residence etc. During my fieldwork, I have noticed, following their matrilineality, still today the Garos prefer to take their mother lineage's name but with the notion of this change; what will happen in future?

### **5.3 Traditional Garo culture is diminishing under modernization and comparatively remote Garos' culture and tradition are to some extent in less detriment**

The Garos were a self-sufficient isolable whole with a distinct social structure, which is now changing a lot especially under the numerous modernization processes. Garo has become more and more exposed to modernity and especially the lifestyles of the neighbouring

Bengali society. It seems to me, that Garos are about to lose many of their traditional ways under this modernization process. Their traditional social structure and communal economy are breaking down for socio-economic mobility and diversification towards a hierarchically differentiated modern society. Actually, intended and unintended consequences of modernization process appear as an outcome of many changes in their social structure i.e. in the Garo community women were actively involved in income generating activities, especially in agriculture. But under the umbrella of modernization and neighboring Bengali influences, nowadays, women are much more engaged in house work which is also making them less important and a weaker section in the society. Garos have been modernized in the mode of agriculture. In the Garo areas, the development of communication was a challenging success under modernization. Nowadays, they are used to many modern communication systems and also there are good *Kacha* and *Pacca* roads for transportation. Modernization has affected Garos inheritance system as well. Finally the disappearance of traditional Garo religion and the rise of Christianity is also a modern article in the Garo lives.

From a comparative analysis, it is evident that the Garos between the study villages do not have a big difference in distinguishable cultural traits, except Christian and non-Christian differences, although Gaira is a remote and less developed village compared to Pirgacha village. On the other hand, although there is not a big difference, but Garos living in plain land have more changes to their traditional practices than the Garos living in the remote areas. For instance, I found Garos of Gaira are much more negative towards anyone marrying in the same *Ma chong* than Pirgacha. I am told and also noticed; cooperatively less numbers of people from Gaira have married into his or her own clan.

Finally, it is also evident that in Gaira, at a Garo marriage there are (to some extent) few influences of traditional Garo articles and a few different rituals and rules in marriage than Pirgacha. In both the study villages the Garo people who were practising the traditional *Sangsharek* religion mostly do not follow their traditional rules of marriage as they had before, because they felt ashamed. It seems to me that the Garos' of Pirgacha are much more influenced by modernity than Gaira. In both the villages, the relationship between Christian Garo and non-Christian Garo is that of friendship and goodwill, but before they had kept a distance from each other.

#### **5.4 Following some inevitable causes Garos' culture is changing and after accepting these changes, nowadays Garos' cultural identity is rising within quite a modern set**

The study findings show that the following factors are responsible for Garos' cultural changes; formal education, conversion to Christianity, Bengali settlement, changes in livelihood, economic insecurity, migration to the cities, infrastructures development, roads-highways, urbanization, influence of national culture, influence of media TV, radio, film and government policies etc. With the influence of these factors, the Garo lives are changing rapidly in many places such as marriage system, livelihood, nature of agriculture, lineage, family structure, matriarchal to patriarchal society, pattern of leadership, inheritance, religious aspects, communication and other aspects which are working as the ultimate factors for structural changes in the Garo society. All these change are not sudden for the Garos people, some respondents have shown the logic in accepting these changes but sometimes they also find these changes as a contradiction within them.

Following the theoretical perspectives described in the first chapter, it is quite obvious that the Garos cultural changes occurred to some extent abruptly and also in the socialization process. Here Christian formation in the *Sangsharek* Garos' abruptly changed the Garos culture on a large scale. On the other hand, in social movements and in the gradual process of modernization and globalization, Garo adapted to imperceptible shifts in their socialization process. In fact, modern and western cultural elements defused into Garo community and slowly they have adapted to or been acculturated in Garo culture to suit a new situation; for example, Christianity brought Garos in with western values, which was accepted as religion and part of Garos life, but now it has become their everyday life. As a result, the vast majority of the Garos are used to Christianity instead of their ancestral *Sangsharek* religion and see themselves as a part of Christian society. On the other hand, the Garos have to adapted Bengali language and articles, somehow as a force acculturation. In fact, change in a single component invites change in other components of the Garo culture. i.e. with the introduction of electricity to the Garo community now people move around less in their spare time, they rather enjoy Television at home. Indirectly this culture is prohibiting Garos usual social mixing by inspiring people living themselves in to their home.

On the other hand cultural change is an inevitable result of old cultural patterns being replaced by new ones. For instance, not many Garos today know how the traditional 'capture marriage' was placed. Centuries ago they were used to this traditional way of marriage. Since

then, the Christian ways of marriage have replaced them and the traditional knowledge has lost its importance. This sort of integration of cultural traits inevitably slows down and has modified Garos' cultural changes. Besides all these, through transculturation, it seems to me that individuals of the Garo community have interacted a lot with people with an outside cultural origin, especially the majority Bengali people, which has subsequently created a lot of changes in their traditional culture.

In this situation, being Garo and their socio-cultural identity is a big issue here. From my observation, to understand this situation we need to go deeper into their ongoing socio-cultural existence. Before having been influenced by many other factors, the Garos' traditional life was in tune with their local communal ways. Now they cannot avoid modern cultural and to some extent the urbanised ways. Also this involvement cannot keep Garos' from being affected by and from adopting non-Garo socio-cultural ways of life. Here it is observed that still today Garos maintain a separate cultural identity under their own traditional festivals, rituals and their own matrilineal values which bring them closer to each other and their roles in these traditional festivals and rituals are strong in maintaining their cultural identity. From other points of view of Christianity, today enabling Garos to maintain their separate identity it provides them with a sense of belonging to the world. In these circumstances, the Garos unity and strong self-consciousness about their cultural identity could resist the ongoing effects of different assimilation processes. Finally, it needs to be mentioned here that like many other indigenous communities of the world, the Garos are guarding their cultural identity, but in such a situation; What will be their future position, it is left here unresolved.

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## Glossary

*Adivasi* -This word is used for Indigenous/Minority peoples in Bangladesh

*Abori* - Remote Garovillage

*Achik*- Hilly

*Agati* marriage - the marriage of a non-heiress daughter

*Bacdong* - marrying one's relative

*Bashor Ghor* - Nuptial Chamber or dreaming first night for the newly couple

*Bibaho*- Marriage

*Bibaho Prostab*-Marriage Proposal

*Biri*-Locally made Cigarette

*Boshi Bea*-Marriage following Christian Rituals

*Bokbondo, Ghagra*- Traditional Garo costumes

*Chu*-Rice Beer

*Churugala* -ceremony of rice beer: *Chu*

*Chatchi* -Clan or group is often called as *Chatchi*

*Dhuti, Gamcha, ,Sharis*- Traditional Bengali dress

*Ghar*-Home

*Ghaura*-Impolite People

*Ghatak*- Mediator

*Jhum*-slush and burn method of cultivation

*Kacha*-made of mud

*Kamal*- Head man

*Lamdani*- Plain Land Garo Village

*Ma' dong*- marrying own mother

*Mandi* -Another name of Garo

*Ma' chong* -A group of people descending from one common Mather, means Mother's lineage, within a same *Ma chong* marriage is unacceptable

*Mansa Puja*- Sacrifice or offerings to the spirit after the patient recovered

*Mehedi*- Henna

*Mimang*-Spirit of Goddess

*Nengti or Jana* –A narrow piece of Cloth

*Nokma*- Heiress daughter

*Nokrom*- Husband of (*Nokma*) heiress daughter

*Nokpanthe*-Bachelor House

*Paka Katha*- Final agreement

*Pacca*-Cemented

*Pira*- wooden made flat thing for seating

*Pon*- Presentation

*Sal*-A long type of Tree

*Shangsharek*- Garos' Traditional religious beliefs

*Satsatsoa*- Important ceremony in *Wangala* where villagers assembled and rice beer, curry and rice are served for them in liberal quantities

*Upazilla* - Sub-District; It is the administrative unit of the country. There are 64 districts in Bangladesh. Districts are divided into several sub-districts are called Upazilla. In Bengali zilla means districts and Upazilla means sub-districts. In Bangladesh there are 460 Upazillas.

*Wangala*-Main Garo Festival which Celebrated after cutting the harvest

*Zaminder*-Landlord

# **Appendix**

## **Appendix 1: Some interview themes and questions**

### **1. Personal information**

Would you please tell me your name?

How old are you?

Which classes have you been Studied?

What is your Profession? Is it different from your ancestor? If yes, would you please tell me why?

Does your income sufficient for your daily family needs?

### **2. Marriage**

Are you married?

In which age boys and girls are treated, as he or she is fit/eligible for Marriage?

Which factors are more prioritised for selecting the partner for marriage and why?

In a Garo family who is more influential of holding the decision for marriage and why?

Nowadays for establishing a marriage (from beginning to end) what rituals and steps do you observed, please tell me widely?

In marriage what are the traditional rituals you practised before? Are all of those still important and observed? If these are stopped now, why?

Regarding Marriage which ritualistic changes are now observed and why? Please tell me widely.

Would you please tell me widely about the following aspects?

Condition for selecting the place of Marriage

Period of Marriage

In/ out-group Marriage Rituals

Gift/ Dowry customs in Marriage

Residence after Marriage

Spiritual Beliefs in marriage

## **Historical background**

How long the Garos are living here? Would you please tell me widely the history of the Garo people?

When the Bengali people are started to settle there? Why? How do you feel living with Bengali neighbour?

## **Garos culture and changes**

What are the Garos' main cultural traits? Is it different or similar to other culture? Would you please tell me something about Garos kinship system, Dress, Dance, Song and Food habits?

What are your main festivals? Would you please tell me widely about the celebration of *Wangala* and Christmas festivals?

Do you see young Garo people are interested to learn and observe Garo culture? If not then Why?

Do you speak any other language then Garo? When and why do you learn and use that?

Does your ethnic background ever made an obstacle or advantage to you to achieve some one goal? Why and How?

Do you see Garo society is changing in different ways? If yes, would you please tell me detail about the factors responsible for these changes?

## **Cultural preservation**

Do you think Garos' traditions and culture what is changing, need to be preserved? If yes, what measures can be taken for the preservation of the Garos tradition and culture?

## **Appendix 2. Selection of the respondents**

In selecting the respondents following category, age, gender and place of living have been observed. I have interviewed seventeen respondents in an in-depth way, of them nine from Pirgacha and eight from Gaira. I also have conducted 5 case studies, of them 2 from Pirgacha-2 from Gaira and 1 from Dhaka city.

<b>Respondents category,</b>	<b>Age,</b>	<b>Gender,</b>	<b>Village</b>
1.School teacher	40	male	Pirgacha
2. Local government representative	35	male	Gaira

3. Women leader of the community	35	female	Pirgacha
4. Person related to Church,	70	male	Pirgacha
5. Heiress daughter ( <i>Nokma</i> )	35	female	Pirgacha
6. Heiress daughter ( <i>Nokma</i> )	30	female	Gaira
7. Person practicing <i>Sangsharek</i> religion	65	male	Pirgacha
8. Person practicing <i>Sangsharek</i> religion	60	male	Gaira
9. Newly married women	25	female	Pirgacha
10. Newly married men	20	female	Gaira
11. Person working as <i>Nokrom</i>	50	male	Pirgacha
13. Person working as <i>Nokrom</i>	45	male	Gaira
14. Non- <i>Nokrom</i> category	50	female	Pirgacha
15. Non- <i>Nokrom</i> category	40	female	Gaira
16. Garo human rights activist	30	male	Pirgacha
17. Elderly person	70	male	Gaira

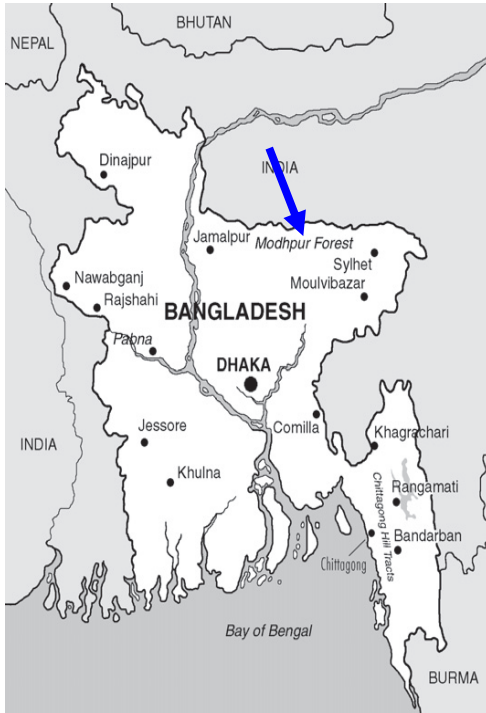
### Appendix3: Indigenous People including Garo Living areas on the map of Bangladesh



Source: [books.google.com/books?isbn=2831705541](https://books.google.com/books?isbn=2831705541)

Community and Forrest management in South Asia, Profile- Bangladesh. December, 2007.

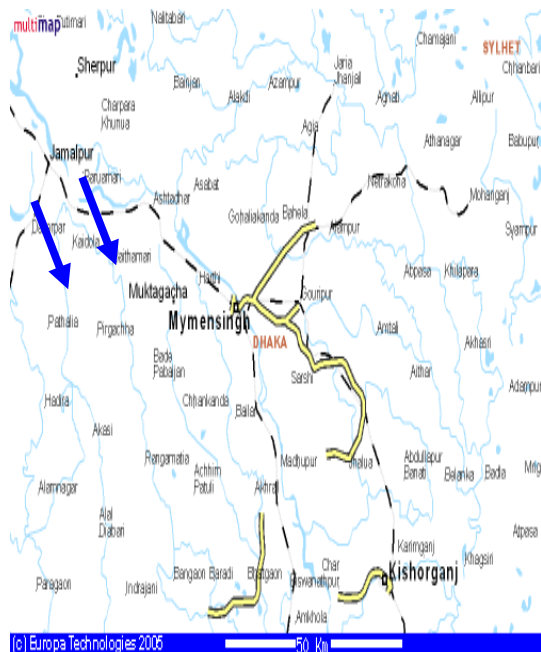
### Appendix 4. Modhupur on the map of Bangladesh



Source: The Indigenous World 2006

[www.uwip.org/download/down.php?f=The%20Indigenous%20World%202006.pdf](http://www.uwip.org/download/down.php?f=The%20Indigenous%20World%202006.pdf)

**Appendix 5: Research Villages; Pirgacha and Gaira on the map of Modhpur**



Source: this map Sent by Abdul Haq through an ordinary e-mail, Bangladesh 2007

**Appendix 6. Pineapple Garden in Pirgacha recently it becomes a popular crop of Garo**



Photo: Rafiqul Islam      Date: June 2007

**Appendix 7. Pirgacha Missionary High School where many Garo students are studying**



Photo: Rafiqul Islam      Date: June 2007



**Appendix 8. Handloom Sales centre in Pirgacha**



Photo: Rafiqul Islam      Date: June 2007

**Appendix 8. Kacca road in forest surrounded remote village of Gaira**



Photo: Rafiqul Islam      Date: June 2007