

Rights and Responsibilities of Chra in the Garo Society as Reflected in Garo Literature

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Abstract:

This paper will bring to understand the responsibilities of chra-depante in the socio-political system of the Garos. Though the Garo society follows the matrilineal system yet the male wields greater power in exercising power in the society. The property belongs to a daughter who is known as *nokna* (heiress). The husband of the *nokna* is called *nokkrom*. If the mother of the *nokna* is *A-king nokma*, then she (*nokna*) becomes the *A-king Nokma*. A daughter is the heiress to the parents' property but her husband or *Nokkrom* exercises his power on behalf of his wife.

The Garos follow the matrilineal system of inheritance and descent but not matriarchal. The society is ruled by the *Nokma* but the *chra-depantes* or the male relatives of the heiress have the final authority in decision making. A *chra* is either a maternal uncle or a brother or a male cousin of the *nokna*. However, the maternal uncles of the *nokna* usually wield more power than her brothers. In certain cases, when the *nokna* or the heiress is found to be undeserving, the *chras* collectively play an important role in decision making as to to whom among the daughters the heirloom will be given. The *chras* have the authority to withdraw the *Nokmaship*, if the *nokma* is found to be undeserving. The Garo Hills Autonomous District Council cannot register *Nokmaship* without the consent and agreement of the *chras*. This paper aims to highlight the duties and responsibilities of a *chra*, his roles and functions, and the *A-jikse a-king* or a plot of land given to *chra* by the clan in return for his work and sacrificed for the clan or *ma-chong*.

Keywords: Nokpante, Responsibilities, A-jikse.

Introduction:

The Garos, one of the indigenous tribes of Northeast India settle mainly in Meghalaya, Assam, Tripura and also in Bangladesh. They practice the unique tradition, culture, economic and political system where they chose the leader from among their community whom they called *Nokma* or the village chief to look after the entire village. The Garos have the oral tradition of having migrated from Tibet. The origin of the term 'Garo' is uncertain with varying conjectures and theories by various authors and historians. In the book *The Garos*, Playfair states that the leader of the Garos during the migration was named Garu, and that he gave his own name to the tribe (7). Most of the Garos prefer to identify themselves as *A-chik* which literally means *hill man*.

Being a matrilineal society, the properties of the family is traced through the female lineage from generation to generation. The youngest daughter is the default heiress to the parent's properties, but some cases it is the discretion of the parents to name the heiress known as the *nokna*, and who will become the *A-king Nokma* or the chief and custodian of the clan. In Garo society, an *a-king* is the territory occupied and owned by a certain clan. So the *A-king Nokma* is the head of that territory. The

husband of the *nokna* is called the *nokkrom*, who executes the powers and functions of the *A-king Nokma* on behalf of his wife. Apart from the family of *A-king Nokma* being the head of the territory, the position of *nokna* and *nokkrom* are the same in other ordinary families.

Although the Garo society follows the matrilineal society yet the male is given more importance in decision making than women. Any any decision making in the Garo family relating to ancestral property and matrimonial relations are done in consultation with the *chras*. In the family of the *A-king Nokma*, the *nokna* inherits the whole property and becomes a *nokma*, yet the *chras* decide that is to be done for the welfare of the people under that *A-king Nokma*. A *chra*, is by birth, considered to be an important person to his clan as mentioned by Dhoronsing K. Sangma in his poem *Depanteko Dingdingani*, meaning, 'Lullaby for a son:'

'Angni chata a-wea dedea, Angni re-jak dikila apara, Matcha helbikbikana ba-a dedeko, Do-reng gakasiana neng-a do-mako, Nang-na sepi kangsari angane, Bobilna skang chilna ba-jok dedeko, Matchana ja-man chakna neng-jok angdeko. (*Depanteko Dingdingani*, 64)

The above lines can be interpreted as when a son is born to a family he comes along with a shield to protect his family, as a comforter, the savior of mother and family members. He is born to look after his entire clan or *ma-chong*. He is born to protect his family members during the times of danger. He is the one to show his nieces and nephews the right path. This lullaby shows how the people is entrusted on the *chra* and his capacities. He has to take full responsibilities of his whole clan or *ma-chong*. Julius R. Marak, in his book *The Garo Customary Law* writes: 'The *chra* are the most honoured and respected persons in whom the authority is vested in the Garo matriarchal society' (146). He also adds 'the male lineage is always respected and honoured by the females' which shows the dominating nature of man over the female.

Nokpante:

When the boy child is born, he stays with his parents only up to eight to ten years and after that he is sent to a *Nokpante*, a bachelors' dormitory, where he is trained to be a young qualified man to be able to stand by himself and take care of the whole family, clan and the society. A *nokpante* is an institution for young boys, where they learn the basic skills and knowledge in all fields of life. Here they are taught the rituals and religion too, as mentioned by Mignonett Momin, 2003, in his book, *Reading in History and Culture of the Garos*, 95. Therefore a *nokpante* is a place where the young boy is trained to become a better human being having all skills and knowledge and become a responsible and successful person in life. In olden days the *Nokpante* was used as a village courtroom, where the *nokma* and *lasker* used to settle and judge the law-breakers and wrong doers. Milton S. Sangma, in his book, *History and Culture of the Garos*, (1981), mentions that Bonepa Janepa was the then chief in whose *nokpante* the Garos decided to change from patrilineal to matrilineal (173). It is also believed that the custom of taking the nephew as *nokkrom* for the *nokna* was first announced there. Since then, the custom is being followed by the Garos till date.

The reason for switching to matrilineal is narrated in a story by Keneth M Momin in his book, *A-chikni Chanchibewale Seanirang* (1972). According to the Garos, they happened to be patriarchal before, but while on their journey to Garo Hills, they came across many places and fought against many invaders who attacked them. While settling near the valley of Assam, they could not live peacefully and had to fight every day, and most of the males died and few survived. So it was difficult for them to follow the patrilineal system since many male members lost their lives. Bonepa Janepa being the chief, ordered the

people to assemble for a meeting in his *nokpante*. There they decided to switch from patrilineal to matrilineal, and to take nephew of the family's father as the *nokkrom* or the husband of *nokna* (109). Simison R Sangma, in his book, *Bonepani Nokpante* states that the young boys assisted their uncle in fetching waters, collecting firewood and making bed for him. The young boys were trained to honour and respect their uncle while still living in *nokpante*, and punishment was given if someone was found naughty and not doing his duties (4).

Responsibilities of Chra:

Chra, being a male relative, has a numerous duties and responsibilities over the *ma-chong* and *ma-chong's* property. Mihir N Sangma, in his article published in *A-chik Ku-rang* magazine, Dec 1998 – Feb 1999 issue mentions regarding the rights, duties and responsibilities of a *chra* as follows:

1. The *chra* has the right to look after and take care of a *king* or a *king* land, a whole plot of land belongs to the whole *ma-chong* which is controlled and look after by the *nokma*.
2. The *chra* takes care of the ancestral property which has been inherited from one generation to the other through female lineage. So the *nokma* owns the property.
3. He has the right to choose and select husband to his niece or *nokna*, to be the *nokkrom*. The *nokkrom* has to live with his wife in his in-laws' house and take care of his in-laws till death. *Nokkrom* exercises the power of *nokma* on his wife's behalf and became the custodian of wife's property.
4. According to Garo culture, if any daughter or niece has reaches a certain age, then the parents of the girl give responsibility to the *chra* to choose and bring a husband for her. Then the *chra* goes to the would-be husband and do all the necessary things, and 'Do-sia' or the marriage ceremony takes place.
5. It is the duty of the *chra* to settle and bring peace, if he finds quarrel between the sisters or brothers. If he finds any disputes arise and misunderstanding between their sisters, nephews, nieces and parents, he tries to solve the problems and maintain peace among them.
6. If anyone from his family or *ma-chong* faces any debts or cannot repay, or get delaying to perform *Mangona*, the last rites after death, it is the responsibility of *chra* to fulfil the same.
7. He has to arrange *on-songa*, substitute wife or husband after the death of a spouse. According to Garo customary law, if a woman or wife dies, the *chra* has to arrange a substitute wife to the husband, to maintain the *a-kim* bond thereafter. But if the man refuses and chooses someone else, than he has to leave all his property and go away with his new wife from his in-laws house, which also his house after marriage. But he cannot take away even a single property with him. That customs is known as *a-kim wata*, or freeing from *a-kim*.
8. According to customary law, the daughter inherits the property, but if any of the *chra's* sisters or nieces has no child it is the responsibility of *chra* to arrange for the adoption. He talks with the nearest relatives and bring a child for adoption. This way of adoption is called *deragata* or *choka*. The adopted daughter inherits the property.
9. During the religious ceremony, it is the duty of *chra* to observe all kinds of rituals.
10. The *chra* looks after the welfare of all families of the motherhood.

Julius R. Marak, in his book *The Garo Customary Law* states that any of the *chras* not taking the responsibilities of the *mahariis* not regarded as *achra*. The duties and responsibilities go vice versa, because for the hard work and sacrifices made by a *chra*, every niece or sister also takes care of him. In some cases, the *mahari* decides to give a plot of land as a return gift for all the hard work and

sacrifices that the *chra* has done for the maharis. And this plot of land is called A·jikse land or A·jikse a·king.

A·jikse Land:

A·jikse land is a plot of land given as a gift to a *chra* for his hard work and dedication towards his maharis. It is called A·jikse land because the *chra* can construct a house and live there with his wife and children. However, since the property belongs to female line, the wife of the *chra* becomes the owner of that particular land given by the maharis of her husband.

Conclusion:

The paper highlights how a *chra* is important in Garo society. Since birth he is given much respect and the whole family and ma·chong depends on him and expect numerous duties and responsibilities from him. It is he, who by one side rules all over the maharis, because without his consent knowledge and agreement, even the District Council cannot register Nokmaship. If the *chra* finds the *nokna* and *nokkrom* failing to fulfil their duties of taking care of their parents, he has the power to nullify their heirloom and elect another female as the heiress. Though the property belongs to the female line, it is seen that a woman becomes a *nokma* just for namesake, the actual power being exercised by the man, that is, her husband the *nokkrom* and the *chra*.

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