

Funeral Rites of the Garos: Unveiling Cultural Assimilation Amidst Christian Influence

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Abstract

This paper analyzes the funeral rites and ritualistic practices associated with death among the Garo community of Northeast India, a community that has undergone linguistic divisions and witnessed fragmentation due to colonialism and subsequent conversion to Christianity. Employing an ethnographic approach, this research meticulously examines funeral rituals and practices through engaged participant observation, comprehensive interviews, and meticulous document analysis. Qualitative analysis reveals distinct patterns and themes, casting a revealing spotlight on the symbiotic relationship that exists between tradition and Christianity. The study finds that the Christian Garos have retained social customs such as matrilineality and the kinship system. However, a noticeable departure from their indigenous animistic belief system has taken place, with numerous deities being replaced by a single God, and fundamental beliefs like life after death seemingly abandoned. Nevertheless, upon closer examination of funeral rites, certain traditional elements are found to persist, reflecting the complex cultural assimilation within the emerging Christian identity among the Garo people. The primary contribution of this research lies in uncovering how these remnants of tradition persist, despite the transformative impact of Christianity on the religious and cultural landscape of the Garo community.

Keywords: Assimilation; Christianity; Cultural dynamics; Funeral rituals; Garo community.

Introduction

Rituals concerning life and death constitute an integral facet of every society (Geertz, 2017; Giddings, 1990; Pratama, 2023). The universal inquiry into the existence of the soul and its fate after death compels societies to formulate beliefs and adhere to specific rituals and practices (Hertz, 2016; Johnson, 1995). Many societies and communities operate under the belief that the soul persists post-mortem in an alternate dimension or state. Some societies endorse the idea of the soul undergoing reincarnation or being reborn in forms other than human. These rituals and practices linked to death are primarily observed by surviving family members, guided by the aspiration that the departed soul will find its place in the afterlife or, in certain instances, will be reborn into an esteemed form.

The Garo people are a tribal community inhabiting the Garo Hills region of Meghalaya, India, as well as the neighboring states of Assam, India, and Bangladesh (Bal, 2007b; S. R. Marak et al., 2021). They belong to the broader Tibeto-Burman linguistic family and have a heritage of indigenous religious practices passed down through generations. Until the early nineteenth century, the Garos successfully maintained their traditional beliefs and customs. However, they experienced a significant upheaval with the onset of colonial influence in their hilly territories. Initially, the hills didn't attract colonial interest due to dense forests and the prevalence of the life-threatening disease

malaria. Yet, persistent conflicts between the Garos in the hills and non-Garo inhabitants of the plains prompted British intervention, resulting in an expedition to subdue the tribe, met with determined resistance. While the initial colonial intent was administrative control, it gradually paved the way for religious conversion through American Baptist missionaries. The introduction of modern schooling, entrusted to American missionaries, exhibited elements of missionary fervor. The success of this endeavor was evident when two influential young Garo boys, Omed and Ramke Momin, were enrolled in a school established by Captain Jenkins in the Goalpara district of Assam in 1843. Omed and Ramke Momin, the first two Garo converts, played a pivotal role in spreading Christianity within the tribe (Carey, 1919). Assisted by Dr. Miles Bronson, they established the first church in the Garo hills in Rajasimla (North Garo Hills district) on April 14, 1867. The establishment of schools gradually drew the Garos into the Christian faith. By the late twentieth century, nearly all Garos had embraced Christianity, with only a minority adhering to traditional lifestyles (S. R. Marak et al., 2021; Syiemlieh, 2023).

The Garo community has been a subject of study for academic researchers, ethnographers, and colonialists. The earliest records of the Garos are found in the writings of British officials stationed in the then Northeast Frontier, yet regrettably often carry traces of biased colonialist attitudes (Carey, 1919; Eliot, 1799; Playfair, 1909). Ethnographic literature focusing on the Garos has proliferated since then (Bal, 2007a; Burling, 1963; de Maaker, 2022a; Kar, 1982). These studies encompass a range of aspects of Garo community and tradition, including agriculture, marriage, kinship systems, and rituals. Notably, Maaker (de Maaker, 2022a) and Burling (Burling, 1963) have conducted comprehensive research on Garo kinship and the practiced matrilineal system. Additionally, Maaker's (2022b) study delves into death and associated rituals among the Songsareks (Garo individuals who have not converted) in the rural West Garo Hills region of Meghalaya. This research traces shifts in traditional funeral practices due to modernization and the influence of Christianity. Another study explores a segment of the Garo society comprising first-generation converts, highlighting the persistence of specific traditional aspects within their newfound Christian faith.

Maaker's research primarily centers on the upland Garos residing in the hills of Meghalaya. While this present research may share similarities with Maaker's work in discussions about traditional funeral rites, it notably diverges in two significant ways. Firstly, this paper's focus revolves around analyzing funeral rites among the Garos residing in the plains of Assam. The upland Garos that Maaker examined were still undergoing a transition from being Songsareks to embracing the Christian faith. As a result, it was not uncommon for them to incorporate certain traditional elements into their new belief system. Secondly, the distinct aspect of the focus group in this study is their notable detachment from any form of traditional religious practice, largely due to being mostly fourth or fifth-generation converts. This paper thus endeavors to investigate the extent to which traditional rituals have been retained or faded among the plain-dwelling Garos, despite their detachment from the traditional practices of their forebearers. The study's aim is to identify both the continuities of traditional elements and the deviations from traditional practices among the fourth/fifth generation of Garo Christian converts in the plain areas.

Research Methods

The research employs a qualitative descriptive approach for its analysis. Primary data has been collected through personal interviews, specifically discussions. The

interviewees belong to the Baptist denomination and actively participate in their respective churches. Audio-recorded interviews were conducted with Mr. Neville N. Sangma (Personal communication, Santipur, April 27, 2023) from Santipur village, Ms. Grace A. Sangma (Personal communication, Kompaduly, May 12, 2023) from Kompaduly village, and Ms. Ameline R. Marak (Personal communication, Gohalkona, May 17, 2023) from Gohalkona village. These informants span different age groups, and the interviews were conducted in a casual discussion format within a relaxed setting. The informants were encouraged to freely express their viewpoints and opinions, without any interruption through questioning. The study area is located in the Kamrup district of Assam, with the informants' villages predominantly inhabited by Garo individuals. Secondary data has been drawn from available literature on traditional *Songsarek* practices and death rituals. It's worth noting that no *Songsarek* practitioners or adherents of the traditional religion were identified in the neighboring areas where the research was carried out.

Results and Discussion

1. Notions about death among the Garo *Songsareks*

For the Garos, death is just a doorway to another phase of existence. The Garos are of the belief that 'every living object has its unseen counterpart—the soul, known as *janggi* (Q. Marak, 2018a, p. 221). For them, the soul continues to exist in a disembodied form after death and is henceforth called *mi-mang* or *me-mang*. The spirit or the soul of the deceased goes to live in a place called Balpakram which is also called the 'Land of the Spirits' or *Me-mang a-song*. The land of the spirits or Balpakram is only a temporary residential place for the spirit of the deceased for 'it is generally presumed that death will eventually be followed by rebirth' (de Maaker, 2013, p. 147). But just like the living, they have to toil there for survival and hence, eagerly wait to be reborn in the same *ma-chong* (matrilineage). The Garos believe that a soul can be reborn in the form of a human or an animal. The nature of rebirth is believed to depend upon the actions and conduct of the soul in the previous life. Therefore, a person is expected to make good decisions and do noble actions during his/her lifetime to ensure his/her rebirth as a human.

Since death is so closely associated with rebirth and forms an integral part of the belief system among the Garos, funeral rites are a significant aspect of their cultural distinctiveness. The funerary rites and practices among the Garos were observed primarily for various reasons. First, it was believed that the path to the land of the spirits was not an easy one and life in that land was not at all a life of leisure. Therefore, rituals observed by the living relatives were meant to call upon the dead ancestors who would show the newly deceased soul the way to the land of spirits. Second, it was also believed that the newly deceased soul would have to establish itself in the community of the dead. Therefore, customary offerings of necessary provisions like food, seed grains and other essentials would be ritually offered during the post funeral ceremony. The rituals in the post funeral ceremony was also heavily influenced by the belief that the soul of the deceased would be reborn and certain rituals were followed to ensure the rebirth of the soul in the same matrilineage as the present. Hence, funeral rites among the Garos are not only a form of disengaging the dead from the society of the living but also performing rituals to ensure the return of the soul in the highest form of rebirth, that is, human.

2. Funeral rites among the Garo *Songsareks*

a) Duties and responsibilities of the family members and villagers

The Garos can be divided into eleven linguistic groups namely A·we, Am·beng or A·beng, Atong, Ruga, Chibok, Matchi, Chisak, Matabeng, Gara Ganching, Megam, Dual (M. N. Sangma, 1982, pp. 7–9). All the groups share similarities as well as differences in both language and practice. The Garos can further be divided into Christians and *Songsareks*. Among the Garo *Songsareks*, the grandness of the funeral rites depend upon the status of the dead individual. The death of a small child may not garner a large number of people. But the death of a married adult, who could be a father, a mother or any significant member of the clan group attracts a huge crowd. The funeral rites of an elder person may be witnessed by relatives and distinguished personalities from far off villages who come to bid adieu to the deceased person. Since the Garos practice matrilineality and matrilocal residence, when a married man dies, it is mandatory that his matrilineage be informed. The responsibility of informing his matrilineal kinsfolk rests on the members of his wife's household, the house where he has died. This is facilitated by the customary sending of a messenger or in modern times a telephonic information from the wife's relatives to the man's family members. His matrilineal kinsfolk are the most important people whose attendance at his funeral is necessary. Failure to inform a man's matrilineage about his death is a grave offence and may sometimes lead to a scuffle between the two clans. The news of the death is also conveyed to relatives and people of other villages who proceed to the house of the deceased in an organized manner. They carry with them the 'headman's ceremonial drum, as well as two or three metal gongs, and they beat these and blow a horn as they walk single file to the other village (Burling, 1963). In the case of a deceased woman, her in-laws are informed by her household members. The Garo *Songsareks* cremate their dead while the Garo Christians bury them.

If a death occurs in a village, it is a taboo among the Garos to work in the fields, hunt or fish. A person who disregards this taboo is said to endanger himself with a curse or a calamity. The death of a member of a village requires the cooperation and contribution of all abled people. Among the *Songsareks*, women carry rice grains and unginning cotton to the deceased person's household. The rice grains are to help the family of the deceased in arranging food for the visitors. The unginning cotton, on the other hand, is meant for the deceased person's spirit who is believed to carry the cotton seeds to the next life and sow them as s/he starts a new life. These gifts are always repaid back in a similar form by the recipient household when a death occurs in the house of the donor. Although the villagers are expected to contribute small items like rice or cotton, the immediate kinsfolk or cousins of the deceased are expected to offer pigs, fowls and bulls for slaughter.

b) Ritualistic arrangement of the corpse among different Garo groups and customary offerings

A person is declared dead when they stop breathing. It is normal for people to keep watch over a sick person awaiting an impending death. When a person stops breathing, it is believed that the soul has left the body and now exists in a disembodied form known as *me-mang* (spirit or ghost). If the deceased is wealthy, his body is washed by the closest relatives with *chu bitchi* or fermented liquor and laid down upon gongs known as *rang*. A man who is not so wealthy might be washed with water and laid down upon the floor. Playfair (Playfair, 1909) observed that a rupee was placed in each hand meant for the expenses of the spirit during its journey to the land of the spirits. He notes that the Garos living in the plain areas who are called A·we or A·kawes laid the corpse on its back with

‘the hands tied tightly together behind it, and the big toes bound together (Playfair, 1909). Among the *A-bengs* or the Garos inhabiting the hilly regions, the body was laid with the arms to the side and the toes were not tied together. Playfair also notes that ‘a pillow of loose, unginned cotton is placed under the head of the corpse. A young chicken (a cock in the case of a woman, and a hen in the case of a man) is tethered to the big toe of either the right or left foot, with a sufficient length of string to allow it to walk about on the floor (Playfair, 1909, p.117). This, known as ‘*do-jasi kaa*’ (Rongmuthu, 2014, p. 35), is meant as a sacrificial offering to the spirit of the deceased. Rice, a significant part of a Garo’s life, is closely associated with life and death as it is ‘the first solid food that a child takes, and the last food item that one partakes on death, though ceremonially’ (Q. Marak, 2018b, p. 161). Therefore, uncooked rice filled in a basket was placed close to the head of the corpse. Cock’s tail feathers would be planted around an egg placed on the uncooked rice and a pot of *chu bitchi* would also be placed behind the head of the deceased. And upon the floor, near the head, would be plaintain leaves where cooked food like rice and curry would be placed for the dead. The belongings of the deceased person would be ‘hung round about him as he lies in state’ (Playfair, 1909). The Garo *Songsareks* believe that the items are going to be utilized by the deceased person in the afterlife while s/he waits for reincarnation.

c) *Kabe* or *Grapmangtata*: ritualistic dirge or lamentation

Among the *Songsareks*, after the corpse is laid down, the menfolk get busy with preparing the altar for cremation. Meanwhile, the women folk sit by the corpse and sing *Kabe* or *grapmangtata* (lamentation for the departed soul). The womenfolk sing about the good deeds of the departed soul. Some of the lines may describe the road to the land of the spirits to enable the spirit of the deceased to locate his destination easily, that is, Balpakram. This is known as ‘*Me-mang a-songchina dilata*’ (J. L. R. Marak, 2016, p. 201). The Garos believe that the soul goes to live in Balpakram after death. Balpakram is a place geographically located in the South Garo Hills district of Meghalaya. Maaker (de Maaker, 2022a) had observed during his fieldwork in rural West Garo Hills that the people he spoke to ‘did not seem to locate this after world on Earth. None of the *Songsareks* he had spoken had ever travelled to the place and hence he concludes that the ‘ghosts’ Balpakram is a shared imaginary that nobody can state anything about with certainty (de Maaker, 2022a).

The dirge or *kabe ring-a* is sung by women only. Some women are considered to be experts in this. In the case of a deceased male relative such as an elder brother, maternal uncle or a father, the women lament the loss of their protector. They expose their vulnerability through words like (M. N. Sangma, 1982):

*Dandan su-chalpagipa dongjajok,
Agan-ku-sikigipa nikjaginok.
Nono angse am-pana man-jaginok,
Angjong ada am-pana nikjaginok.
Jakilla bipong be-tongo sawa chate on-kuna,
Kokachal ki-pan napongo sawa kotapakuna.*

There is no one to lean on anymore,
No one to teach us.
No one to search for us husbands,
No one to call brother.
Who will repair my broken sickle,
Who will repair my ruined basket

If the deceased was a son, the mother sings *kabe* and ‘bids the spirit to remember its home, so that at the time of reincarnation it may be born into the same family (L. R. Marak, 2014, p. 232). *Kabe* also elates the subject by attributing extraordinary and exaggerated strengths (D. R. Sangma, 1996, p. 89):

<p><i>Apa, stil rongmisiko chakgipahaming,</i> <i>Angde balwa balmisiko wingchakgipahaming</i></p>	<p>My son had the strength to endure hailstorm, My son had the strength to face storms</p>
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It is a common superstition among the Garos that the *Kabe* or *grapmangtata* should never be completed as it would bring death upon the singer. This superstition stemmed from the tale of the first *kabe* which was sung by a sad bird waiting for several days with her kids in their nest for the return of her partner. The bird continued to sing sadly not knowing that her partner had already died and would never return. The song caught the attention of a man named *Eman Me-a* who stood listening below the tree till dusk. As the night approached, the song came to an end and the bird along with the little ones died. *Eman Me-a* was deeply touched by the tragedy of this family. So, after reaching home, he taught his wife the song and asked her to mourn him in that manner after he died. *Eman Me-a*'s wife listened to her husband the whole night. As dawn approached, *Eman Me-a* fell asleep and died peacefully as soon as he completed the song. Since *Eman Me-a* and the bird both died after completing the song, it became a frightful belief that *kabe* should never be completed at all. During the wait for the cremation while singing *kabe*, when one woman stops, another woman continues the song 'never losing the musical strain or the rhythm, as they keep a night long watch over the mortal remains of their kith and kin (Watre, 2007, p. 90).

d) Variations in cremation practices among different groups of the Garos

The number of days a corpse is kept for mourning seems to be different according to different sources. While Playfair (Playfair, 1909) notes that the corpse was allowed to remain for two days and a night and is burned on the second night, Maaker (de Maaker, 2022b) observed that a corpse was ideally 'disposed of on the day of the death itself'. Generally, before cremation or burial, it is customary to wait for the relatives from different places to come and see the face of the deceased for the last time. Hence, a corpse may be laid in wait for the relatives to arrive. When the time for cremation arrives, the body is taken out and laid upon the funeral pyre. Cremation usually takes place at dusk. The post-cremation rituals may be different in different locations. Among the *Akawe* Garos, 'the ashes are placed in a basket which is taken into the jungle and there deposited. It is not emptied, but merely placed on the ground and left (Playfair, 1909). The bones, on the other hand, are wrapped up in a cloth and placed on a *sekrek*, a cone-shaped support made of bamboo. This is then lashed to the *maljuri* post of the deceased's house. A small cloth canopy called *alang* is spread over the bones, and a notched stick fixed so as to represent steps from the floor to the pot. The steps are intended to enable the spirit of the dead to return to the bones should it wish to do so. A daily offering of rice is made to the bones until the post-funeral ceremony has been performed (p.122). The *Atongs* collect the bones or remaining ashes in a pot after the cremation called *grengdik* (*greng* means bones, *dik* means pot) and place it in a hidden position among the arranged seed grains known as *sansae samsuria* inside the house. Except for the mother and the sister of the deceased, the *grengdik* must not be seen by anyone else. The *A-bengs* and *Chisaks* collect the bones, place them in a pot and bury it outside of the house. A small structure made of bamboo known as *delang* is built and food is placed here for the spirit of the deceased. The *Rugas* and *Chiboks* cremate the dead and instead of building a *delang*, bury the bones and cover it with winnowing trays made of bamboo.

3. Post-funeral rites and celebrations: Differences and variations among groups

After the cremation, the Garos believe that the spirit of the deceased continues to live 'with the family in the house until it is send off through proper performance of the *Mangona*' (D.R.Sangma, 1996, p.143). Until it is given a proper send off, the spirit would be trapped in the world of the living in a disembodied form. Therefore, according to the convenience of the family, a celebration by the name of *Mangona* by the *A-wes*, *Delang So-a* by the *A-bengs* and *Chougin* by the *Atongs* is observed in honor of the deceased. *Chougin* is a term used by the *Atongs* which means to bathe in *chou* (*chu bitchi* or traditional fermented drink). Usually, the *chougin* ceremony is held after the harvest as plenty of food is required for the occasion. It is the responsibility of the family members of the deceased to provide the spirit of the deceased with the necessary requirements to start afresh in the afterlife. So, preparations start right after the harvest. After the crops are harvested, seed grains are specifically arranged and kept in the *maljuri* or the centre post of the house meant to be given to the spirit of the deceased, which is known as *sanseasamsuria*. *Chougin* is celebrated for three days by the *Atongs* and on the fourth day debts are cleared and important matters are settled. On the first day, drums are purified through rituals. The Garos believe that the spirit of the ancestors should be invited on this special occasion. On the second day of the *Chougin* festival, a buffalo horn known as *Adil* is blown to summon the spirits.

The urn or *grendik* is taken out from the *sanseasamsuria* and decorated with ornaments. The Garos believe that a spirit, *nawang*, waits for souls travelling to Balpakram to devour them. The ornaments adorned during the *chougin* are meant to be thrown at *nawang* which would distract him and allow the soul to quickly escape the chase. The urn or *grendik* is carried by a woman, and dancing to the accompaniment of drums and cymbals, a procession is formed which goes around the village. This practice is known as *grendik rodila*. The urn is carried by a close kin of the deceased and the procession visits several houses in the village re-enacting the deceased person's visits while s/he was alive. The procession also visits the river and a woman sprinkles water over the urn as a symbolic last bath. When the procession is over, the people gather at the house of the deceased and proceed to burn the *delang* along with the seed grains, *sanseasamsuria*, rice and other materials meant as offering for the dead.

The *Akawes*, as Playfair (Playfair, 1909) notes, during the post funeral ceremony, takes out the bones from the pot and distributes it among the female relatives who then binds the bones with a cloth to themselves and dance during the celebration. The bones are then 'taken into the jungle and buried, preferably on the bank of a stream' (Playfair, 1909). Among the *Rugas*, the women are said to don silver ear ornaments called *penta*, and a dance is performed to remember the dead. The bones which were buried are not disturbed at all and after the celebration, the winnowing tray put over the buried bones along with the bamboo stuck into the ground after the cremation is set on fire. People belonging to the *Chibok* group do not store the bones or ashes. Instead, they make a *gelek*, a round stool made of bamboo and place it at the *maljuri* as a seat for the spirit if it should return to the house. During the post funeral ceremony, they set up four bamboos in the shape of a square. A board with rough paintings of birds and animals made of blood and soot known as *mangpil* or *mangking* which has been used during the cremation and saved for this occasion is hung between the bamboo posts. The *gelek* along with the *mangking* and the bamboo posts are then burned. After the cremation and also after the post funeral ceremony, the *Chiboks* plant a branch of the *mandal* (coral tree) by the 'side of the

principal path to the village. To this branch are fastened the horns of the bull sacrificed. The branch easily takes root, and the result of several deaths in a Chibok village would be planting of an avenue of mandal trees in its outskirts' (Playfair, 1909).

4. *Kima* or effigy: Structures representing the dead

Another important custom among the *Songsareks* relating to death is the carving of a human-like structure out of wood known as *kima*. *Kim*as are 'erected by all the sections of the Garos except the Rugas, Chiboks and the Christians' (M. S. Sangma, 1979, p. 252). A skilled craftsman carves the wood in the likeness of the deceased person. The structure is clothed with the deceased person's best attire and placed in front of the house. The structure may be about two metres long. Heirlooms and valuable ornaments might also be adorned upon the structure. The *kim*as are never disturbed as they are believed to be sacred and resembled the elevated status of the deceased person. Yet, not much attention is given to the maintenance of these structures. They are left unattended exposed to different weather conditions. The *kim*as would naturally be attacked by termites and other such organisms and within some years, the structure would be totally destroyed without a trace.

5. Impact of Christianity on Garo funeral practices

a) Changes in funeral rites after conversion

Maaker (2019, p. 2) observed that Garo Christians perceived Christianity as 'a modern ontology that is in principle superior to the community religion'. Converted Christians tend to look down upon the beliefs and practices of *Songsareks*. They express their dislike for the traditional religion by implying that their forefathers had worshipped inferior and wrong gods. For the Garo Christians, all the deities and spirits worshipped by their forefathers are weaker than the Christian God. Birth and death, according to the Christian doctrine, happens once. They compare death to sleep and believe that all souls will rise up from this state of sleep on the day of judgement as the Bible predicts. For this reason, the corpse is buried instead of cremating and many associated practices prevalent among the *Songsareks* are abandoned.

In most Christian villages, the church bell is rung to announce that someone has died. Immediately, people try to find out the identity of the deceased and proceed to the house to help the family. The practice of bathing or cleansing the corpse takes place in a similar manner like the *Songsareks* but the use of *chu bitchi* has been discarded. The corpse is laid on a bed and not upon the floor irrespective of their wealth and status. The corpse is fully clothed with the best attire unlike the *Songsareks* who lay the corpse naked and cover it with cloth. The use of gongs and the practice of tying a chicken to the toes is absent among the Garo Christians.

Among the Garo Christians, the funeral rites end after the corpse has been buried. The corpse is put in a coffin decorated with garlands of flowers and taken to be buried in the village graveyard after a service officiated by the pastor from the local church. A wooden cross is erected at the head of the grave where the name, date of birth, and the date on which the person has died is written in paint. After the funeral, a small meal may be provided to relatives and visitors from afar. Slaughtering of animals depends upon the availability of resources in the family of the deceased. Other post funeral rites like *mangona*, *delang soa* or *kima* is not practiced by the Christian Garos. In the evening, people gather at the house of the deceased to attend another service.

b) Continuity of traditional elements among Garo Christians

Some traditional elements like community participation and rendering of services to the household where death has occurred is still a common practice among the rural Garo Christians. The tradition of carrying uncooked rice and unginned cotton has been substituted by donations like sugar, tea leaves and other eatables by the villagers. Like the *Songsareks*, the closest relatives among the Christian Garos are expected to offer items of higher value like bags of rice, fowls or pig to be prepared for a meal after the funeral. But unlike the Garo *Songsareks*, animals slaughtered are not associated with any ritualistic practice. It is meant for the purpose of consumption only.

Among the Garo Christians, the taboo regarding work when a death occurs in the village is still prominent. Chores associated with one's household such as cutting wood, building and even husking rice is halted for the day. But many villagers resume the household chores after the corpse has been buried. However, all outdoor activities like fishing, planting or cultivating are strictly prohibited for the day.

Certain arrangements regarding the dead corpse continue to be influenced by the age old traditional customs. The closest relatives bathe or cleanse the body of the deceased with water. The use of *chu bichi* for this purpose has been abandoned as it is considered an intoxicating drink and is incongruent with the Christian beliefs. But the placement of food items as offering for the dead continue to exist. Cooked food wrapped in banana leaves are placed in a *kok* (basket woven out of bamboo) near the head of the deceased. It is interesting to note that although the Christian faith 'denies the dead the ability to claim their earlier earthly possessions' (de Maaker, 2007, p. 521), the Garo Christians continue to follow the tradition of giving money to the dead and place the personal belongings of the deceased upon the grave or bury it along with the corpse.

In rural villages, paper money or even coins are placed near the head of the deceased and buried with the corpse later. Personal items like knives and swords used by the deceased are also buried along with all the other possessions. 'Although the belief in life after death is non-existent among the Garo Christians, utensils like plates, spoons, glass, pots and pans are given away to the dead', said Mr. Neville N. Sangma (Personal communication, Santipur, April 27, 2023). 'The superstition that failure to give the spirits any of their personal belongings may lead to *jaraka*', mentioned Grace A. Sangma (Personal communication, Kompaduly, May 12, 2023). *Jaraka* refers to a belief in haunting by a recently deceased spirit which persists among the *Songsareks* and also the Garo Christians.

The Garo Christians still follow the tradition of *kabe ring-a* or *grapmangtata*. Among the *Songsareks*, the role of *kabe* was to recall the good deeds of the deceased during his/her life. *Kabe* was also sung to direct the deceased spirit on its journey to Balpakram. Balpakram, however, does not hold significance among the Garo Christians anymore. Hence, *kabe* sung by the women among converted Garos mention only the good deeds of the deceased and the loss that his/her absence would cause to the family and relatives.

Young boys and girls took an active participation in funerals and post-funeral celebrations among the *Songsareks*. Post-funeral celebrations, specifically, facilitated the assemblage of youths which would end in selection of partners for themselves and proceeding to marriages. Among the Garo Christians, the youth group continues to play significant roles like rendering their services to the household of the deceased when needed and providing company to the household on the night of the funeral. With their playful and lively nature, they lighten the atmosphere of the household which would otherwise be gloomy and mournful after the loss of a family member. Boys and girls from

youth groups usually spend the night at the house of the deceased chatting, playing cards or sharing stories. In many rural areas, relatives of the deceased continue to stay in the house of the deceased for several days to help the family cope up with grief. 'I have spent many funeral nights with relatives and cousins to help them with chores and also to give them company. The youth group of our village spends the first night after the funeral with the members of the deceased. They help the family to clear the mess of the day and their presence makes the atmosphere less gloomy', said Ameline R. Marak (Personal communication, Gohalkona, May 17, 2023).

Conclusion

Garos today consisting of the majority of Christian converts continue to assimilate certain elements from the traditional practices. Rituals like bathing the corpse before burial, placing food near the dead, *kabe ring-a*, giving money or coins to the dead still exist among Garo Christians. Superstitious beliefs such as failure to provide all personal belongings leading to hauntings that was common among *Songsareks* exist among the Garo Christians too. Many Garo Christians also believe like the *Songsareks* that the spirits of dead relatives and family members visit the house of the deceased and partake of the food prepared for visitors. In some cases, when the huge amount of food prepared for the visitors get spoiled and smells, the food is believed to have been touched by the ghosts. The offering of food to the dead which is taken along with the corpse and left in the graveyard is also another traditional element that is followed by the Garo Christians. In some Christian villages, on the morning after the burial, food may be taken to the graveyard and left there. But unlike the *Songsareks*, daily offering of food is not practiced by the Christian Garos. If any personal item belonging to the deceased is discovered in the house after the burial, one of the family members or a villager will go to the graveyard and leave it there.

Since an afterlife does not exist in the belief system of Christianity, the post funeral rites observed by the *Songsareks* are not practiced by the Christians at all. Because of the absence of the idea of rebirth or reincarnation among the Christians, it becomes unnecessary for them to observe *mangona* or *chougin* festival. The offering of seed grains and other essentials for the next life as observed by the *Songsareks* in *mangona* becomes obsolete and redundant in Christianity.

From discussions with the Garo Christians living in the rural plain areas of Assam who have never been exposed to the traditional religion or the *Songsarek* way of life, it is astounding to note that in spite of an exorbitant cultural change brought by Christianity, tradition has been sustained successfully through some practices. Christianity, as practiced by the present day Garos is not at all a direct consequence of the religious proselytism initiated by the colonialists, but is a result of adaptive and receptive capability of the Garo people to outside influences while retaining pivotal points of traditional concepts.

As a qualitative study, this paper has several limitations. First, the research is limited to a specific location in the Kamrup district of Assam. While the paper may have generalized the findings resulting from discussions with key informants, the views and opinions of other Garo Christians located within the same or other districts may be different. Secondly, practices even among the Garo *Songsareks* vary from one place to another and so, traditional elements carried on by the new converts may likewise be different in different areas. Additionally, the viewpoints of the leaders of the new faith, that is, Christianity, may even be largely different from the views expressed in the paper.

Further research can also be conducted on Garos of Bangladesh who are separated from the Garos discussed above by international boundaries and hence, subject to different cultural contexts.

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