

Traditional Garo Poetry : A Survey

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Introduction :

Garo poetry may be broadly divided into two categories - traditional and written poetry. Traditional poetry is oral and it consists of anonymous compositions by the forefathers from time immemorial. The compositions are recited or sung on certain occasions to an audience, among friends and relatives, and to the gods during ceremonies. They are passed on by word of mouth from one generation to another, they are preserved through oral translation. From the beginning of the 20th century the process of collecting and transcription began. Oral poetry involves tremendous exercise of memory power, command over the language and use of certain devices like stock phrases, rhythm and rhymes. Even so, it is believed among the Garo bards, like Meril D. Sangma of Nengkong, South Garo Hills, that the faculty of mastering oral poetry is a special gift of the gods and spirits. Poets assert that when one is visited by a god, or taught by a mysterious being in a dream, then their tongue is 'touched' and they come to possess the poetic skill. They assert that human effort alone cannot guarantee success in their specialized aptitude.

Before the British occupation of Garo Hills and surrounding areas brought in far reaching changes through education, conversion, administrative and economic measure, every Garo Village had a number of bards and priests, each of whom possessed a repertoire of poems, chants and incantations. The Garos are a farming community, practising indigenous religion, custom and ceremonies; they possess a distinct culture. Traditional poetry thrived for hundreds of year in this way of life before sweeping changes in the society dealt a blow to their traditions. At present bards have become a rarity; it is no longer possible to find a poet who possesses this faculty

with an easy flow of language, who is able to sing effortlessly and develop a poem sufficiently well.

Almost all Garo oral literature existed in the form of poetry, as in other languages, like Assamese and Bengali, which developed their prose only after the British established their rule. Written Garo literature followed along similar lines; prose in Garo developed with the introduction of schools and writing of textbooks, and printing of journals, translation, and production of fiction.

Written poetry began with written literature which developed gradually with the growing number of publications. The first poem that came to be printed was composed by Ramke W. Momin, one of the first Garo Christian converts, who became, with his uncle Omed W. Momin, the first missionary for his community. The poems which survive are those included in the school textbooks; the poems were meant to be recited by pupils, and as such had a simple structure, flowing rhythm and rhymes as aids to memory, to add to beauty and unity. Notable among the poets who followed him are Modhunath G. Momin and Tuni Ram R. Marak before Howard D. W. Momin came on the scene in the early 1940s.

In all fairness it must be pointed out that written poetry and for that matter all written literature, never attained the popular character of its oral counterpart. Oral literature provided entertainment and instruction, mental exercise and pleasure to poets and audience alike.

Type of Traditional Poetry :

Major forms of traditional poetry may be enumerated as follows:

Chronicles (K̄u rama sala): The Garos kept an oral narrative of their immigration from Tibet to Cooch Behar, thence eastwards, their numerous conflicts with local chiefs in the Brahmaputra Valley, inter marriage of some of their members with other communities, crossing of the great river *Songdu* (Brahmaputra), and eastward movement along the South Bank, while some moved to the plain of Bangladesh, and some ventured into and occupied the impenetrable forests that is now Garo Hills. Their history was orally transmitted in narrative verse using rhymed couplets; the narrative was important for the

tribe because it kept alive the memory of the names of their leaders, the cause of their flight from Tibet, and the manner of migration and the various places of settlement. Some passages of this narrative survive, giving us a valuable insight into their past. Authors of Garo history, like J. D. Marak, in his *A' Chik Katta* (Garo History, 1930) and Mihir N. Sangma, the author of *Unpublished Documents on Garo Affairs* base their chapters on the migration of the group from his chronicle. D. S. Rongmuthu's collection of the historical material is found in a number of his books.

Kabe (Dirge or Funeral Wail): The genre called *Kabe*, literally 'heartbreak', is mostly sung by women, who may or may not be related to the deceased, during the vigil before cremation, and latter in post-funeral ceremonies, moving other mourners to tears. Women who are gifted with the language, feeling and empathy, sing dirges to suit every funeral, be it that of a boy or a girl, old men or women. The singer addresses the deceased directly, dwells on virtues and qualities which endear him or her to the surviving relatives. She names the envious and many malignant evil spirit which cause illness and death, and the probable causes of the spirits' jealousy. She reminds the spirit of the dead to remember its home and family, and to be reborn in the same family, which is the highest reward for a soul.

Further, the singer instructs the spirit how to make its way to Balpakram, the land of the spirits and how to outwit, Nawang, the evil spirit which stands on the pathway, waiting to devour their spirits on their journey to the abode. The song concludes with the expression of profound sorrow and heartbreak at the irreparable loss. The spirit of the dead, called *me mang* must travel with the spirit of the bull killed in its honour. The spirit of the bull would carry the belongings of the *me mang*, and give it company on its way up the hills, valleys, across streams on the way to Chitmang hill and Balpakram the beautiful plateau in the south-east corner of Garo Hills, famed as the abode of the *me mang*. The singer tells the *me mang* where it should rest after climbing the hill. It must tether the bull to the *boldak* tree. The *me mang* should take bath and wash off all the soot resulting from the cremation in a stream called *chidimak* 'soot water' in the

Balpakram, flowing through the crack of a rock. Having washed itself, it is directed to eat lunch packed for it by its relatives, and then string the beads given to it. The singer tells the *me mang* to go to its close relatives, who are already in the land of the dead, assures that it will find love and welcome among them. These are usually the contents of a *Kabe*.

Ajea : This genre may be described as a type of song sung especially during the Wangala season observed at the end of the agricultural year of October. Singing of *Ajea* is an important feature of the annual festival of thanksgiving to the gods for the good harvest, though this form may be used and adapted to other occasions. *Ajea* consists of a pair of rhyming couplets, sung to a tune. It is sung by young and old on a variety of subjects. Young men and women may sing on the subject of romance; they may express feeling for each other in a variety of way, such as appreciation of each others' physical attributes, or derision at some real or imagined short coming. The elderly may tease or sing on any topic for the sake of fun and laughter.

Doro : It is serious poetry, dignified and operates on a higher plane than *Ajea*. Its subjects are grave in nature; they include prayers to gods and goddesses, myths and legends, some of them in connection with ceremonies and rituals, often explaining the origin of certain traditions and justifying them. It is a form used for serious and formal communications between individuals and groups on important occasions, such as marriage negotiations, and discussions on disputes.

Dani : A song sung by a group of elderly men immediately after the *cha chat so a* (Burning of incense) ceremonies of the Wangala thanksgiving festival, its subject is the origin of the *rugala* and *cha chat so a* ceremonies. It relates the story of the first men Asi and Malja, who committed offence against gods and fellow human beings and met just retribution. It also contains beautiful images of *matrongs* (wild goats) fighting in the rocky wilds; these animals are highly valued by the Garos because they break rock into particles which turn into soil. Their skull, complete with horns, are tied up on the *trumal*, the sacred post in the house of the *Nokma*, the chief of a village. The song is sung to remind the people not to disregard the instruction of the gods.

The men gather around the *trumal*, the sacrificial post, at the *Nokma's* house for the incense burning ceremony. As soon as the incense is burnt by the *Nokma* amidst music to please Misi Saljong, the god of blessings and distribution, the men start singing *Dani*. Singing the song to the beat of drums, the group proceeds from the *Nokma's* house to the other houses.

Katta Agana (Epic Poetry): It is an epic poem about the heroic past, relating the legends of Dikki, Bandi, Giting, Kanjing, Sore and others, who are the traditional cultural heroes and heroines of the Garos. A poem of epic length and proportion narrates the stories of romance, adventure, war and Dikki's rule over his kingdom.

Some of the most beautiful passages of *Katta Agana* celebrate the beauty, comeliness and strength of the heroes and heroines, and through rich imagery describe their villages and their natural surroundings.

Narration of this poem of great length is done by one or two poets during the hours of the night, lying face upwards on the floor, while the listeners sit around them. They sing to an audience at gatherings in the village, at market places and camps. This is one of the most popular traditional entertainments. Narration usually starts after dinner and lasts till the wee hours of the following morning. The poems are made up of a series of episodes, a structure which is suitable and well adapted for singing through several nights at a stretch.

Katta Bima: Myths and legends of the ancestors and of the ancient past, myths connected with rivers and waris (deep pools), especially of the Ildek river in East Garo Hills, myths of the guardian spirits, gods and goddesses, form the subject matter of *Katta Bima*. Much of this poetry tell stories of unusual events, while also providing imaginative explanations of natural formations, fossils, rivers and pools, hills, etc. Tracing the origin of paddy, cotton, some animals and insects also form the stuff of *Katta Bima*.

Katta Salling: Believed to have been originally composed by a blind man by the name of Salling, *Katta Salling* is one of the most beautiful traditional poems. Its language is pure and chaste; a delicate feeling for man, nature and objects that live among trees and plants,

and those which frequent the *jhum* fields, and rivers and riverbanks, permeates the whole poem. The poem is unique in the sense that its subject matter is mother nature in all her manifestations according to change of reasons. Here man and his activities in the *jhum* field are peripheral to nature and its denizens, in their various aspects. The poet, singing about the dry, hot season, describes the wretched state of bamboos, trees and the dusty mother earth. The poet then proceeds to describe the first rains, noting the changes in the earth and objects of nature, and their effect on the senses. This is followed by sensitive description of the summer rains, the close of the rainy seasons, and lastly the winter.

Besides the above named genres, there are some other forms, such as song of inaugurating a house, chants during rituals and ceremonies.

Characteristic Features of Traditional Poetry :

Metre and Form :

1. Most of the traditional poetry is composed of rhyming couplets, the two lines having an almost identical rhythm, and in many cases the same number of syllables. The two lines complement each other in meaning; they are semantically and syntactically similar, the second line adds a variation, or confirms what has already been said in the first. The couplet forms a unit, which is further unified by the use of alliteration and assonance. This seems to be the basis and the most elementary form, to which variations of different kinds have been added. The number of syllables vary according to requirements. The end of the stanza or section is usually indicated by an unrhymed line, with a rhythm different from the previous lines.

2. Compactness of structure and conciseness of expression characterize much of the traditional poetry to achieve strength. Dilution, wordiness and prolixity are avoided, retaining only the essentials. Much of the meaning is implied and connective words like conjunctions are left out, and ellipsis occurs throughout. Compressed expression is the hallmark of traditional poetry; beauty, gravity and loftiness of style are partly results of compression. The style, in which

superfluity has been banished, is aesthetically satisfying. This is one of the reasons why translation of traditional poetry is exceptionally difficult.

3. Stock words, phrases and expression, even exclamations are the common inheritance of bards; they are aids to memory, and come in handy for the poets while they are trying to recall the next set of lines. The stock phrases also act as a breather for the audience who find themselves on familiar grounds after a passage of extremely concise lines.

4. Traditional poetry is also characterized by frequent occurrence of images and metaphors; poets use them as vehicles of their thought and sensibility. Other figures of speech like symbols, simile, alliterations, personification, metonymy, onomatopoeia, assonance, etc. are employed according to requirement. The use of *aganmitapa*, a figure closely resembling a metaphor, and at times the occurrence of double entendre, further serve to enrich the poems. Using figures of speech and images is a typical mode of composition; the same technique is used in the construction of *aganme apa* or maxim, which also occurs in couplets. The use of images and metaphors play an important role in the conciseness of expression; poets take recourse to them to project their feelings and thoughts rather than speak directly in plain, prosaic language.

5. *Archaic words* : Words and phrases which are no longer in use today, which have been forgotten through disuse, often become a source of difficulty to readers of today. At times it is difficult to guess the semantic contents of passages, leading to insufficient understanding of the whole poem.

Conclusion : Traditional poetry is a valuable heritage, a source of information about the past life, culture and values of the Garos. In the absence of written records, their history may be reconstructed from their chronicles and legends. Myths and chants during ceremonies and rituals give us an idea about their worldview, creation and the place of man and other natural objects in the world. Formal description of the indigenous religion is wanting from the practitioners themselves; however, faith in gods and goddesses, in

the immortality of the human soul, rebirth in benevolent and malignant spirits, which form the basic of rituals and ceremonies, may be deduced from prayers and chants. Those poems which are connected with the ceremonies of the agricultural cycle also provide seminal ideas about the evolution of such ceremonies. Legends, especially those of epic poetry tell us about their homelands, culture and life hundreds of years ago, and about their ideal men and women. Their heroes are handsome, well built, strong and brave, skilful at warfare, loving and faithful to their ladyloves. Heroines are as beautiful and virtuous as they are brave, clever and independent. Regarding style, too, modern written poetry has much to learn from the lofty and sedate composition of the traditional poetry that is studded with the images and other embellishments. For aeons their elevated mode of composition prospered and found favour among the people. It is not surprising that some educated literatures today attempt to write on modern topics in the traditional mode, and some continue to write on traditional subjects in that style.

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