

Supernatural Beliefs Connected with Childbirth Among the Garos of Assam

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Abstract

The following paper is an attempt to look at the various supernatural beliefs surrounding the birth of a child in Garo society. These beliefs, some rational, some not, are present from conception, throughout pregnancy, birth and thereafter throughout one's life. These usually take the shape of do's and don'ts. It is the fear of the unknown and unseen that make them adhere to such beliefs. Modernisation has had an impact on such beliefs too. New beliefs are being adhered to, together with the old.

Attitudes, beliefs and practices which belie scientific explanations are universally present. It usually assumes the form of oral tradition and personal observation handed down through generations. Such amorphous supernatural forces at times take the shape of mana. Mana is thought to inhabit some objects but not others, some people but not others. A farmer in Polynesia places stones around a field, when crops are bountiful, the stones have mana. During a year, the stones may lose their mana (Ember and Ember, 1995:415). People may also possess mana. However, such power is not necessarily permanent. Chiefs who were unsuccessful in war or other activities were said to have lost their mana. On the other hand, objects,

persons or places can be considered taboo. Anthony Wallace (1966:60-61) distinguishes mana from taboo by pointing out that things containing mana are to be touched, whereas taboo things are not to be touched for their power can cause harm. Thus those who touch them may themselves become taboo. Touching a plough and roofing a house are taboo for Kharia women (Roy, 1937:120). Hebrew tribesmen were forbidden to touch a woman during menstruation or for seven days following (Ember and Ember, 1995:415).

Being universal in approach, such beliefs abound in the life of a Garo too. The Garos are a tribe residing in the north-eastern part of India and Bangladesh. In India they mainly occupy

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the Garo hills region of Meghalaya; Goalpara, Kamrup, Darrang and Karbi Anglong districts of Assam; and certain parts of Tripura and North Bengal. In the present study, the Garos of Bakrapur village, Goalpara district have been considered. Data has also been supplemented from the neighbouring villages of Kasumari, Daglapara and Nishangram.

Traditionally the Garos were animists with belief in a number of spirits — both malevolent and benevolent. *Chorabudu* is a benevolent spirit protecting the crops. *Kalkame* is another spirit looking after the safety of human beings. However, the Garos of the four villages studied have embraced Christianity and are now no longer governed by traditional religious beliefs and practices. Another important aspect which takes them away from their earlier beliefs is the access to modern education.

The Garo customs are governed by matriliney. On birth, a child is accepted as a member of the mother's clan, *machong*, or cluster of clans, *chatchi*. Uterine kins have a profound effect on a child's upbringing. The maternal uncle is the most authoritative figure, not only in regulation of the conduct of his sister's children but also in the management of property, selection of mates for nieces and nephews etc. In fact, MBD (Mother's Brother's Daughter) cross-cousin marriage is the most favoured one. Rules of residence are governed by matrilocality. After marriage the bridegroom lives in his mother-in-law's house. Property passes from mother to daughter, with the most favoured daughter called the *nokna* getting the lion's share. If it is the *nokma* or chieftain's family, then it is the husband of the *nokna*, who assumes *nokmaship* at the appropriate time.

Beliefs Connected with Childbirth

Observances and precautions during conception and pregnancy vary with individuals, both in kind and in the strictness followed. For instance, intercourse between husband and wife should stop as soon as the woman realises her pregnancy. In actual practice it continues till late pregnancy. A woman may continue heavy work throughout her pregnancy, which is ill-advised. However they are careful not to exert themselves to avoid miscarriages.

Some of the beliefs connected with pregnancy are :

1. When a child is conceived in light, it is intelligent; when conceived in darkness it turns out to be a dork.
2. Mother should avoid food too rich in protein and carbohydrate, otherwise child will be obese.
3. Mother should avoid cold water and cold food, or else the child will have cold blood.
4. Mother should eat whatever she wants, even unusual food cravings, otherwise the child will have overflowing saliva.
5. Mother should not eat twin fruits, otherwise she will bear twins.
6. Mother should not eat too much of betel nut, otherwise the child will be of ill-health.
7. Parents should not hoard things for the unborn child; otherwise the lifespan of the child will be short.
8. Mother should not sit or stand in the doorway; one doing so, it is feared, will have difficult delivery.

9. Mother should avoid burning firewood from roots; otherwise it is believed there will be breech delivery.
10. Mother should avoid shouting out in alarm. Otherwise, it is believed child will be frightened in every pretext.
11. Avoid eggs in diet. It is believed to lead to a child with deformed extremities.
12. Mother should avoid wrapping things at the end of her skirt (dakmanda), otherwise it is believed the child will have difficulty in breathing.
13. Avoid breaking charred wood, or else child will have black spots all over the body.
14. Avoid eating steamed rice cake in the last two months for fear that the child will have white spots.
15. Mother should not shave hair from armpits; otherwise it is believed first-born will die.

The expectant father has to follow certain taboos too. They include the following :

1. Not to fix lac on knife, spade, axe etc., otherwise child will have black spots.
2. Avoid taking lives of animals during confinement for fear the child may die.
3. Avoid killing snake; otherwise the child will have protruding tongue.
4. Avoid carrying knife under arms: child will have deformed upper extremity.
5. Avoid winding towel around neck during confinement: placenta will be wound round the neck and the foetus will have difficulty in breathing.

Among the Garos, beliefs regarding sex of the unborn child are prevalent too. It is

the fervent wish of every parent to have an equal number of boys and girls — though a family without a girl would pray for a girl. Some of the beliefs are :

1. When the foetus is on the right side, it is a boy: It is afraid of being burdened by the pitcher which the mother carries on her left hip.
2. When the foetus is on the left side, it is a girl: It is afraid of being burdened by the spade and axe, carried over the right shoulder by the mother.
3. When mother dreams of digging up tapioca or sees onion, arums, pumpkin etc., or fishing, it is a girl.
4. When she dreams of knives, spades, axes etc. or carrying firewood, it is a boy.
5. The female foetus continuously hiccups from the fourth month onward.

Child-birth among the Garos takes place in a secluded room with a midwife and other uterine female kins aiding the delivery. For an easy delivery, it is believed, a pregnant woman should continue doing manual labour. Some of the beliefs are:

1. The displaced placenta is softly buried. If thrown across a river, the women will never conceive again.
2. If displaced placenta is thrown away very hard, the child will be frightened at every pretext.
3. The cord-stump after it shrivels and falls off is cleaned and preserved. In infant ailments, the water in which the cord-stump is dipped is believed to have healing powers.
4. When there is lactation before birth, the baby's lifespan will be short.

5. When the baby is long overdue, the ornaments worn by the pregnant women are taken off. Covers of rice-storing jars are also removed.
6. It is believed that a baby that cries lustily at birth will be clever.
7. A baby born unawares is not a good sign. He will get lost in the seas, or Goera, the thunder god will strike him.
8. Fortune smiles on the child when a boy takes after the mother and the girl the father.

Discussion and Conclusion

That care of a baby starts from conception are evidenced from various beliefs concerning it and the dos and don'ts prescribed for the pregnant women. One interesting aspect is the limitations set upon the prospective father too, though anything akin to *couvade* is absent. The prediction of the sex of the child, on the basis of the position of the foetus in the mother's womb and the accompanying reasons can be seen in another light. It emphasizes the division of labour on sex, from the prenatal stage itself. The position of the foetus whether on the left or the right, is however perceived, not as overtly sexist.

The Garos do not like to pamper their children. When pampered, the child turns out to be persistent and follows the parent like a shadow. This is called *moncha nanga* in local dialect. In order to free the child of *moncha nanga*, a thread of the dress of the parent is tied around the child's limbs. This, they believe will stop the child from being under the influence of *moncha nanga*. On the other hand, it is ill-advised for parents to scold their wards continuously or address them as "foolish boy/girl". The child being addressed so, it is believed, will turn out to be foolish.

The Garos have a very real terror of ghosts and evince the greatest dread of going near a burial ground after nightfall (Playfair, 1998:116). This is evidenced by a number of beliefs concerning evil spirits and ghosts. The belief in re-birth is still very rampant. It is only the virtuous that are reborn in one's own clan. One who has been most evil in his lifetime is reborn in another clan or as animals. They have a very colourful image of the soul and how it can leave the body at will. Many folktales substantiate this. Playfair (1998:104) very lucidly described the travails of the soul after death.

It is pertinent to note that the villages studied are all Christianised and recipients of modern education. There are two L.P.Schools in Bakrapur village—Bakrapur L.P.School and Sonaram English School. Besides they have access to the Don Bosco High School and the Nirmala Convent situated less than a kilometre away. They have access to modern allopathic medical facilities too—the Damra Mini PHC. This contact has brought forth a few modern beliefs which are acting as impinging factors. The most obvious of them is the number thirteen: this has come to be regarded as an unlucky number. On the other hand, the number ten is regarded as a lucky number. This can be substantiated by the clamour among the boys of the local club for the number ten jerseys. Students are not given to eat half or part fruit: it will lead to half intelligence. In examinations, it is seen students tend to write with a pen that fetched them greater marks earlier or to wear the same dress, wearing which he/she had been able to answer the paper better. A modern method to scare

away ghosts and evil spirits is the carrying of the holy Bible on outings at night. Many of the villagers are also seen to keep a Bible within reach near the bed. Many elderly women refuse to eat the vitamin tablets given at the PHC during pregnancy, for fear it will lead to an enlargement of the baby's head. In difficult home deliveries, together with jar covers, it is the sofa covers, the almirah doors, the fridge door and the bonnet of the cars that are being left open, albeit for a short period.

Thus it is seen that parents, though opting for regular Sunday Service in church and allopathic medical advice in pregnancy and sickness, still have supernatural beliefs. It is the fear of the

supernatural and unknown and its reprisal that make them adhere to such beliefs, though in degrees differing from person to person.

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