

REVISITING PLAYFAIR'S *THE GAROS*: A CENTURY LATER

Queenbala Marak

Major A. Playfair, on his administrative stint as the District Commissioner of Garo Hills of the undivided state of Assam in pre-independence India, had written a much applauded monograph titled *The Garos* in 1909. This was the first of its kind, and despite other anthropological works carried out since, it is one of the most comprehensive works on the Garos. The present paper attempts to look into his major contributions in the field of culture, custom, law etc. It also tries to focus on the important changes that have come about since. Finally it brings forth issues such as ethnicity and land alienation which Playfair touches in passing and which are the present hotbeds afflicting the society. This is why Playfair is seen to be ahead of his times and the reason why Playfair's monograph has not lost touch a century hence.

Introduction

Tribal researches in India began as early as 1784 when the Asiatic Society of Bengal was established by Sir William Jones to study "nature and man". The British administration, missionaries, foreign travellers, and a few anthropologists demonstrated interest the earliest in the study of tribes and castes of India. Studies on Todas of Nilgiri Hills by W. H. R. Rivers in 1906 and Andaman Islands by Radcliffe-Brown in 1922 established the tradition of writing full-length monograph by British nationals.

Due to the importance of this area from the point of view of tribal administration, the colonial scholars and anthropologists were greatly attracted to study the land and people. This area was different and distinct in terms of customs, manners and values from those the administrators and scholars knew of. The British colonial administrators, therefore, found it essential to know the people whom they were to rule. All these attracted not only the administrators but the military personnel, travellers, missionaries, tea planters and a few others to this land of the "tribes". During this period a number of individuals wrote about the tribes of this region, which were mainly published in the *Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bengal*, which started in 1774 (Vidyarthi 1978: 52).

Studies on Garos started since 1788 when John Eliot was deputed by the British authorities to study the conditions of the Garo Hills. His account of the Garos was published in the *Asiatic Researches* in 1789 under the title, 'Observations on the inhabitants of the Garrow Hills made during a public deputation in the Years 1788 and 1789'. Besides John Eliot, others who compiled reports on Garo society and

affairs mainly for administrative purposes in the 19th century included Francis Hamilton, Thomas Sisson, David Scott, C. S. Reynolds, Moffat Mills, W. J. Williamson, E. T. Dalton and Alexander Mackenzie. John Avery, Austin Godwin and B. C. Allen and others also contributed to the studies on Garos in different journals and reports. However all information about this tribe was scattered and by no means systematic.

In 1903, Sir Bampfylde Fuller, the then Commissioner of Assam, initiated a project of preparing a series of monographs on the important tribes of Assam according to a uniform scheme of treatment for better administration of the hill areas. Major A. Playfair, then Deputy Commissioner of Garo Hills District, was accordingly entrusted with the task of writing a monograph on the Garos. He had been associated with Garo affairs even before he became the Deputy Commissioner of the district, and had investigated into Garo customary rights in respect of forest and other land resources when Garo chiefs protested against the authorities for alleged usurpation of Garo rights while creating forest reserves in Garo Hills. Well-versed in local languages and because of his close contacts with the people, Playfair acquired a deep insight into their social organization and material culture. He examined all previous investigations, procured and added his own and constructed the first ever systematic account of the Garos.

The monograph describes the life and culture of Garos and as the work is based mainly on field research the description is much detailed. At times he makes references to villages from where the materials have been collected. He was also helped by a Garo priest and by a Christian Garo in getting the materials on folklore and religious life.

The Monograph

The monograph is separated into certain sections, such as land and people, domestic life, laws and customs, and a lengthy piece on religion. Folktales and other miscellaneous information such as list of clans and language are detailed as parts of appendices. Due to its comprehensiveness, it is difficult to select and confer herein its important aspects.

In his very first introductory page, Playfair states that Garos can be broadly divided into two, based on basic geographical locations, viz., hills and plains. He takes note of the census specificities while mentioning the two groups, the first, numbering almost double that of the latter.

According to the census of 1901, they were distributed as follows:

Garos inhabiting the Garo Hills district	103,533
Garos inhabiting other districts	56, 898
Total	160,436

[1975(1909):1]

This sub-division of Garos based on geographical location assumes importance as he mentions differences inherent between and among them. Despite the main divisions of Garos into hills and plains, they are found to be further sub-divided on the basis of specific location and dialect. These groups are endogamous, and comprises of Akawes, Chisaks, Duals, Matchis, Matabengs, Kochus, Atiagas, Abengs, Chiboks, Rugas, Ganchings or Garas, and Atongs. The most significant differences, however, exists between groups who live closer to the plains, i.e., the Akawes, Chisaks and Kochus - and the hill dwellers, which constitutes the remaining groups.

The origin of the name “Garo” and their numerous legends of migration are much discussed by the author. He refers to earlier works, such as Col. Dalton’s (1973[1872]), tries to cross-check with historical evidences, nevertheless deciding to go ahead with his own findings despite little evidences to support his claims. One leg of the migration-journey is rather interesting since the places mentioned are present-day places that Garos either remember in their tales or reside nearby.

...the ancestors of the Garos inhabited a province of Thibet (sic) named Torua, whence, without any apparent reason they started on a voyage of discovery under the leadership of two chiefs, Jappa-Jalinpa and Sukpa-Bongipa. The first place in the plains of Bengal of which they make mention is “Rangamati near Rangpur”, possibly the place now known by that name in the Goalpara district, which once formed part of the Rangpur district. Thence, these people moved on to Dhubri, where reigned the king Dhobani. This king received them in a friendly manner, but being afraid of them, he would not allow them to settle there permanently, so they moved on up the right bank of the Brahmaputra until they reached its affluent (sic) the Manas river. Here the emigrants met with their first misfortunes. The chief of that part of the country was both powerful and cruel. He was attracted by the beauty of Juge-Silche, the daughter of one Kangre-Jingre, and endeavoured to carry her off by force. To defeat his ends her fellow-countrymen hid her in a cave at a place called Jugi Ghopa, and a battle ensued in which the progenitors of the Garo race were defeated. For a few years they seem to have been under subjugation... The Garos were eating their midday meal when their enemies came upon them, but though surprised, they fought with desperate courage, and with such success, that they were allowed to proceed on their journey without further molestation. A place called Garo-mari ... is said to be where they made their stand.

[1975(1909):8-9]

The story continues and ends by suggesting a hypothesis how Garos are now found spread in different parts of the region. Interestingly Rangamati, Dhubri, Jugi Ghopa (Jogigopa) and Garo-mari are existing and Garos still remember stories connected to these places. In his attempt to offer proofs of Tibet as the place of origin, he brings in linguistic evidences and the importance of the yak (and its tail) in Garo rituals.

One important aspect of life, viz., economic life, is dealt in different sections. In the section on domestic life, he mentions that Garos are essentially agriculturists, practicing shifting cultivation and cultivating the same plot for two years. In the

first year a variety of crops are grown. In the second year only rice is grown, after which the land is abandoned and allowed to lie fallow for at least seven years. Here, he mentions an interesting method of harvesting by the Garos, viz.

...in harvesting their rice crops the Garos have their own peculiar methods. They do not cut the rice as is done in the plains, but grasp the ears with their hands and drag off the grains. A harvester always carries two baskets, one on his or her back into which the rice is thrown, and a small basket called *kerang*, fastened to the waist in front, into which are placed specially fine grains to be kept for seed for the next season.

[1975(1909):34]

In another section, he mentions hunting and fishing methods. He points out that though their hills are full of game, Garos know very little about hunting and in tracking cannot be compared with many other hill tribes of Assam. The methods employed are traps of various kinds. Fishing, on the other hand, is very common and Garos are seen making use of a number of traps like *nagil*, *chekwe*, *asok* and *chekke*. They fish with the help of poison too. Some amount of ironwork, weaving and carpentry is done by Garos, and trade in the early 20th century was confined to barter alone.

On the subject of social life, Playfair (1975[1909]: 66-73) discusses, to some extent, marriage and inheritance. Marriage is strictly exogamous, the husband and wife must belong to different clans. Types of marriage include marriage by capture, marriage by trial (when the bride lives in the groom's house for sometime), *chadila* (in which a girl, about to make a proposal, cooks a dish of rice and sends it to the man of her choice in the dormitory through his sister or some other female relation) and others. Playfair reveals that among Abengs and Matabengs, it is the custom for a man to refuse at first to marry the girl, who has sought his hand, and to run away and hide himself (in a marriage by capture). A party of friends seek for, and bring him back by force – and apparently very unwillingly – to the village, whence he usually escapes. He is captured a second time, but should he run away a third time, it is taken for granted that he really does not wish to marry the girl, and he is allowed to go free. However, this custom was not free from claims and counter-claims, as he says:

I have known this custom to form the subject of judicial proceedings, for a man appeared in court one day, at Tura, and filed a petition in which he claimed compensation from the father of a girl for having failed to give him his daughter in marriage. The complainant explained that he had been chosen by the girl, but according to custom, he had refused to marry her and had run away. To his disgust, nobody came to seek for him, and the girl chose and married another man who was less strict in his ideas of Garo etiquette.

[1975(1909):67]

One fascinating feature of Garo marriage is the system of cross-cousin marriage, i.e., marrying one's father's sister's son. Such a marriage is sought for the inheritress whose husband would be the *nokrom*. At the death of his father-in-law (and maternal

uncle) the *nokrom* would marry the widow, thus assuming the position of husband to both mother and daughter. When there is no *nokrom* to marry, a widow is governed by the rules of *akim* (marriage alliance involving obligation of both kin groups), which states that a widow or widower cannot marry again without the permission of the family (and clan) of the deceased husband or wife, and then, only into their respective clans. This seems to have been legally repealed later as Playfair says:

In 1883 fifty women of the Someswari valley appeared in court at Tura and applied to be relieved from the operation of this law. Their prayer was acceded to, and *akim* is no longer officially recognized, though still generally obeyed by the people.

[1975(1909): 69]

Inheritance among Garos is in the female line i.e., from mother to daughter. However in the lifetime of a woman, her husband has full use of her property. He cannot will it away, but otherwise his authority with regard to it is unquestioned. Regarding land tenure, Playfair (1975[1909]:73) mentions that land belongs to the wife of the *nokma* (leader of the clan group or chieftain). He, however, is always thought of and spoken of as the proprietor. Land may be, and frequently is, sold by the *nokma*, but can only be disposed of with the permission of his wife and her clan members. All inhabitants of a village are entitled to cultivate whatever land they require, and may cultivate wherever they choose within the village boundary.

Like all animistic religions, Garos also believe in a variety of malevolent and benevolent spirits. Playfair (1975[1909]:80-89) gives a very compelling description of the creation of the world and constellation of stars. Tatara-Rabuga is the creator, at whose command two lesser spirits, Nostu-Nopantu and Machi created the earth. Chorabudu, also servant of Tatara-Rabuga, is the protector of crops. Saljong, represented by the sun, is the god of fertility. Goera is the god of strength and cause of thunder/lightning. Kalkame, brother of Goera, is responsible for lives of all humans. Susime, represented by the moon, is the goddess of riches. Nawang is an evil spirit that devours the souls. Garos also believe in the existence of a spirit in humans that on being released from its human state moves to Mangru-Mangram, the abode of spirits. They also believe in re-incarnation: the lowest form of re-incarnation being insects and plants, while the highest form is to be re-born into the same clan.

In political life Playfair (1975[1909]: 74-76) discusses briefly the traditional systems of governance. Since the annexation of Garo Hills by the British, *laskars* were appointed who dealt minor matters and disputes. This is done by meeting the villagers and inflicting fines or awarding compensations to injured parties. In earlier times, when evidence was not found trial by ordeal was of two kinds, the *sil soa*, ordeal of hot iron, and *chokela soa*, ordeal of boiling water. All such trials were preceded by an oath. The Garo oath is a long one, and consists first of a declaration of the truth of the coming statement, and then calling down upon the speaker all

the worst evils that can be imagined, should he speak falsely. Oaths were in the following manner:

An oath is taken on the biting of a tiger's tooth, which is a symbol for "if I have spoken falsely may my death be caused by such a tooth as this". Meteoric stones are likewise used, the oath sworn on them being "may Goera (the god of lightning) kill me with one of these if I have told a lie". Yet another form of taking an oath is to cut off the head of a fowl, and run a sharp slip of bamboo from one side of the head to the other through the eyes. The person taking the oath bites this head and calls down upon his own eyes a like destruction if his word is false. They will sometimes take earth in their mouths and swear by that also, that their statements are true.

[1975(1909): 75-76]

Persistent Appeal of The Monograph

A monumental work, such as this, which tried to encompass all sections of the Garos, is bound to either miss out small details or let minute inconsistencies crop in. Playfair in his research might have come across some features, which were unique only in a specific location or to a specific group of people/persons, which he wrongfully classified as universal among them. For instance, while talking about the Garo dress he mentions a particular dress worn by women called *marang-jasku*, during dancing and gala occasions, made of dyed Assamese silk (1975[1909]: 26). Such apparel is not seen widely among Garos and silk dresses are in reality only a new feature and affordable by the wealthy. Playfair (1975[1909]: 28) also mentions that tattooing was absent but practised occasionally by the Mymensingh Garos. This is again a falsity I came across during my work in Bangladesh¹. It could have been only a personalised body adornment rather than a generalized feature of the Garos. Again, while listing exogamous clans, he mentions a clan named "Ebang" (1975[1909]:64). I have never come across this clan in my studies among Garos, neither in person nor in narratives. I have thus come to the conclusion that this group is/was a sub-clan, rather than a clan.

One of the biggest inconsistencies in Playfair's work is on adoption. He states that with the exception of the adoption of a *nokrom* in the absence of a sister's (bride's father's sister) son, there is no adoption among Garos (1975[1909]:73). This is lacking on two counts. First, a *nokrom* is never adopted inspite of there being no son in the sister's family who could marry the maternal uncle's daughter. This is not a requirement because in the absence of a son in the sister's family (of the bride's father), there are other matrilineal kin members who are accepted as "allied through blood and lineage". Second, adoption is widely prevalent among Garos when there is no daughter in the family to inherit. This absence leads to adoption of a girl child from the mother's sister's daughters, or from among other matrilineal kins.

Despite these inconsistencies, Playfair's monograph still has universal appeal. As portrayed in the previous section, the reason why Playfair's work is still

considered a classic even today is because he gives beautiful descriptions of events and social systems. A second reason why his monograph is still referred and consulted by researchers all over the world is because he talks about aspects which are no longer seen among Garos and therefore it works as a “historical” text.

One traditional description given is that of the use of barks of trees as bedding and blankets. Such an article called *simpak* is manufactured thus,

A fairly young and straight branch is cut off – the trunk of the tree is too hard and cannot be used. The branch is first subjected to a thorough pounding with a smooth stick, so as to loosen its covering. A sharp, pointed bamboo is run along the whole length of the branch under the bark, which is split open and then peeled off. Only the inner pith is used, so that, before the *simpak* can be prepared, it is necessary to separate the outer layer from the inner. This is easily done and the rejected part is stripped off and thrown away. The piece of bark to be operated upon is then laid upon a smooth log and well pounded from one end to the other with a *panil* or serrated mallet. When this has been done, it is doubled over lengthwise and again beaten, and the process of folding and pounding is continued until the piece of bark has been reduced to a thick mass of fibre. When it has been sufficiently pounded, the layers of fibre are unfolded, the moisture is wrung out and nothing more remains to be done but to put it in the sun to dry. Lengths are sewn together until the requisite width is attained, and as many layers as are necessary can be fastened together in like manner.

[1975(1909):57]

Head hunting and evidences of it are no longer seen among Garos. However Garos were notorious as perpetrators of numerous raids into the plains at the foot of their hills in the districts of Goalpara and Mymensingh. The raids were not always entirely unprovoked, and mostly done to avenge wrongs and as an outcome of internal feuds (Playfair 1975[1909], Sangma 1981). The death of a *nokma* too called for sacrifice, and it was often necessary to procure a victim elsewhere. He gives a gruesome description of the practise thus:

After an attack on a village, if the distance was not too great, the victim was sometimes carried home to the raiders' village, otherwise, only the head was taken. In the former case it was customary to lay the body on a *ganchi* or funeral pyre, round which the people danced. The body was then decapitated, and the hands and feet were cut off. The latter were then taken to the outskirts of the village, and placed in holes in the ground in which *mandal* trees were afterwards planted. In some cases, instead of burying the hands, they were fastened to bamboos with the fingers outspread. These bamboos were then stuck into the ground by the side of the path leading to the next village, as if to warn strangers not to approach. The corpse after having been thus mutilated was burnt, and the skull was hung up in the latrine of the house of the taker of the trophy.

[1975(1909):78]

A third reason for the appeal of Playfair's work lies in those aspects of Garo life which have remained untouched. Agents of change such as globalization, industrialization and even the advent of Christianity have not been able to change it. Some such aspects include the rules of *akim* and spouse replacements which

still exist. Even in a Christian family many cases of spouse replacement are seen on account of death of a husband or wife in the family/clan. Even though polygyny has been replaced by monogamy as a result of Christianity in almost all sections of the Garos, rules of clan exogamy still persists at the level of the sub-clan or *mahari*. The unique system of teknonymy, where individuals are not called or addressed by name but in reference to someone else, such as A's father or B's mother, is very much present among Garos. They are still loath to address one another by name, especially those who are older by age and status.

Playfair in his monograph also discusses certain aspects which have been rarely examined by others. For instance, he mentions that besides the well-known sub-groups of the Garos there were other sections, such as the Hana Garos, Damelia, Baragharia (who are akin to Megams) in the plains. In Mymensingh, other groups such as Brak, Jariadong, Somon, Galne and Malong were present (Playfair 1975[1909]:63). Majumdar (1972:263-70) does not mention any groups by name, but mentions the presence of Hindu Garos in Garo Hills who claim to belong to Bengali Vaishnava sect. These people were served unconditionally by the Brahmin priests, and thus occupied in the caste hierarchy the top position among other groups in the areas such as the Rabha, Koch and Hajong. In my own research endeavours among Garos in Assam, I have come across sections such as Baroguriya Garos (Playfair's Baragharia), Horoniya Garos, Susilenga Garos, Synteng and Marwe Garos (the last two probably admixed and splintered groups from Garo, Jaintia and Khasi). The first three groups were Hinduized and wrote "Garo" as surnames.

Emergent Issues

While talking about a fragmented Garo society, Bal (2007: 92) who studied the Garos of Bangladesh says, "the first and most obvious division is the separation into Bangladeshi and Indian Garos, a distinction which largely corresponds with the division into hill people and lowlanders". Indeed, with Indian Independence from British rule in 1947, the Garos were divided into the Garos of India and Bangladesh. Later, the Garo Hills formed a separate district within the state of Assam, first under the British and later within independent India. The hill tribes within Assam felt a sense of ethnic separateness from the surrounding plains dwellers and were somewhat discontented. In response to this discontent, the Indian government created the new state of Meghalaya in 1971, consisting of districts including the Garo, Khasi, and Jaintia hills. This geographical and administrative divide is now felt even more than ever before within the Garos. Instead of a sense of "oneness", a sense of alienation is felt by those living in marginal areas such as Assam and Bangladesh vis-à-vis the Garos of Garo Hills.

In my fieldwork among Garos of Kamrup District (Assam), I was repeatedly informed that Garos from Garo hills in Meghalaya (especially "city" Garos) make

fun of their dialect and also that they feel slighted by them. I could sense a feeling of being looked down upon that Garos of Kamrup District felt. Interestingly, the same group of people also spoke of a resident, a Garo woman (originally from Bangladesh, now a resident of the village), as “shameless” and “just like a Bangladeshi”. This woman was called “shameless” because she had a shop in the village square wherein she sold vegetables². The term “Bangladeshi” was therefore used in a derogatory and belittling manner. This indicates that within and among Garos too, an unwritten but very vivid distinctions and differences exist. Playfair, a hundred years earlier, stated that there were differences in cultural patterns (between hill and plain Garos) which have now multiplied manifold. These differences are not only on cultural patterns alone but on emotional issues that segregate them. However, Garos are also known to be emotionally united when the need arises. On September 30th 2005, 11 people died and around 40 injured in two separate incidents of firing by the Central Reserve Police Force (CRPF) in Garo Hills. The seriously injured were rushed immediately to Guwahati for medical treatment and it was the Garos, living in and around the city, who, within a few hours, mobilized and financially helped the patients and their attendants when monetary constraints came up.

Garos are often mistakenly called matriarchal. While investigating the entire complex of problems grouped around the question of the matriarchal system in India, Ehrenfel, in his *Mother Right in India* (1941), locates the cultural matriarchal circle in the north-eastern group of the Khasi and Garo. Even Bamflyde Fuller in his introduction to the monograph introduces the Garos wrongly as people who are “matriarchate” (Playfair 1975[1909]: xxxi). However, Playfair(1975[1909]:72) in the late 19th century was able to correctly state that Garos actually do not have it, and that a woman is merely the vehicle by which property descends from one generation to another. When other aspects of Garo life are studied, it is very clearly seen that women do not wield power in the economic, social, political or religious life. Today, as in the past, economic and social decisions, political leadership and priesthood are all entrusted in men. Women are merely holders of the purse. One new feature that is seen to creep into Garo life is the replacement of matriliney to some extent, and in some areas, with patriliney. Instead of a *nokrom* or *chawari* (the son-in-law who marries a non-inheriting daughter), it is now a fashion to bring in a *bohari* (daughter-in-law, who moves into the groom’s house) whose children would take up the lineage of the father, and in effect would be patrilineal. Interestingly, the Garos of Garo Hills opine that Garos of Assam give their daughters as *bohari* which my field experience negates. I have come across many families in Assam who are reluctant to send their daughters as *bohari*. In four cases, there were a series of negotiations that took place between the two clans but which could not be conclusive. The girls’ family refused to send the daughter as *bohari* and marriage negotiations broke down. However in those cases where a *bohari*

had been brought in, in place of a *chawari* or *nokrom*, other problems crop in. One of which is the complexity and ambiguousness in the kinship relationships between prohibitive and preferential kins for children born out of such wedlock.

The rise of Christianity has brought in many changes in Garo life. At present almost all Garos are Christians, belonging to different denominations. This has further divided the Garos into Christians and Songsareks. Christian Garos tend to perceive a rather sharp divide between Christianity and Garo animism. In their opinion, conversion to Christianity brought about and in many ways radical changeover in beliefs and outlook. From this perspective, according to de Maaker (2009: 148):

the emergence of Garo Christianity epitomizes the ‘progress’ that has been made over the last hundred and fifty years, in which Garo Hills has ... changed from ‘a collection of feuding villages’, ‘misery and muddle’ into a self-conscious hill community that emphatically demands for its place within the state of Meghalaya, as well as within the Indian union at large. Garo animism is then something from the past, an anachronism, which has been overcome. It may continue to act as a historical reference point, but in the present day and age Garo Christians by and large consider animists as backward, ignorant and superstitious.

Indeed, many social systems have undergone change. Polygyny and *onchapa* marriages³ (when a daughter is offered along with widowed mother) are no longer seen. Erection of memorial stones for the dead, such as *kima*, is also dwindling in many places. Songs and dances have all been more or less eradicated. In many regions it is only stories of the past way of life which remain. However, a wave of “retribalization” is also seen among Christian Garos at present. *Wangala*, a ritual that is conducted for propitiation of the sun god, is now seen to be communally celebrated in different parts of Garo hills and in other marginal areas too. The reason behind the propitiation in earlier days was thanksgiving for a bounty harvest in the year gone by, and the ritual was infested with religious connotations. This is now celebrated as a secular ceremony but with many of its erstwhile regalia. In West Garo Hills District this is celebrated at a village called Asanangre, near Rongram and popularly referred to as the “hundred drums” festival. Interestingly, only a few of the participants are Songsareks, the majority being Christians. In Assam it is celebrated annually in different pre-destined locations in different geographical areas, while in Haluaghat Upazila in Bangladesh, it is celebrated in Askipara village. In such a “secular” communal harvest celebration, the various ritualistic stages as performed by Songsareks are conducted, including communal consumption of *chu*, rice beer, that Christianity had abolished, followed by dances and sports.

One of the major problems that have come in at present times both in Garo Hills and in the marginal areas is that of land alienation. To make the restriction on alienation of tribal land more effective, the Garo Hills District (Transfer of Land) Act 1955 sought to restrict transfer of land by a tribal to a non-tribal. However,

despite the laws being present to safeguard tribal lands, it is noticed that land transfers either through forceful occupation in the bordering areas or by unscrupulous means have come about. As a well-known social activist in Garo Hills once remarked, "Some *nokmas* give and sell land to a non-tribal even for a bottle of liquor". Playfair (1975 [1909]: 74) mentions, that *nokmas* can and have the right to give land to an "outsider" for which he has to pay rent. However, he too would not have foreseen the problems of land alienation that has come about. This has sprung due to poverty, marital relations with non-Garos and pressure politics of the dominant group. When a Garo is in need of money, he generally approaches the money lender (who is a non-Garo) who charges an exorbitant amount of tax. In Bangladesh, in a village of Askipara as per *mouza* records, the total land area under Garo occupation before 1947 was 532.11 acres and in 1971 it decreased to 252.16 acres and at present there are only 171.4 acres of which 29.8 acres are now under mortgage to Bengali moneylenders. Unfortunately, the unaccounted "missing" land from 532.11 acres to 171.4 acres is now being occupied by Bengali Muslims. It is therefore seen that the present day village is rather small compared to what it was previously, and the "indigenous" people have been pushed towards the northern border (nearer the hills, but constrained by the international border). It is noticed that when Garos feel persecuted by non-Garos they move towards the hills and jungles leaving their prime located ancestral lands. Again, in cases where an unscrupulous non-Garo marries into a Garo household, instances of misuse of property and usurpation of financial funds are seen. These might also occur when a Garo husband or son-in-law is corrupt, however while in the case of the latter, the clan of the culprit is present to check and admonish him (which he fears and therefore adheres to), it is absent in the former. Therefore, in the case of the former, many of his misdeeds go unpunished, rather leading to acute problems for the wife and her family. In Bangladesh, many Garo girls are seen marrying Bengali Muslim boys. In some cases, these men have been known to have married the Garo girls for their property and once the property is transferred in the husband's name, the wives are either asked to leave or forced to accept a co-wife.

Conclusion

The Garos was a very comprehensive and descriptive work on the life and culture of the Garos. With its compilation and publication, it can be assumed that the plan behind Playfair's work was achieved. For, if the purpose was to "tame" the "wild" people who were head hunters and who defied the British administrators, for better and smoother administration, it was achieved for the whole region was brought effectively under British administration. If education and conversion were the aims, then it was achieved beginning with the first school set up for Garo boys at Goalpara and with the first converts Omed and Ramke (who belonged to the first batch of students in the school) in 1863 at Sukreswar Ghat in Gauhati. At present, formal

education has spread throughout Garo Hills and Christianity has percolated in the majority of the people's lives.

What is lacking in Playfair's work is an indepth study on the people and their culture. No doubt he discusses many aspects of Garo life, paying attention predominantly to material culture and religious life, but he misses out some issues. Scholars such as Bose (1936: 44-46) stated that important aspects like the *nokrom* system is missing in this work. It is correct that it is in need of detailed works on the social life of the Garos especially on some unique features such as the cross-cousin marriage, *akim* system, *nokrom* v/s the *chawari*, the role of the maternal uncle, and the clan system which is the backbone of Garo life. This is where the contribution of later anthropologists comes in, who studied specific aspects, and therefore were more thorough and indepth in their endeavours. Mention may be made of Burling (1997[1963]), who studied kinship and social systems of the Garos of West Garo Hills (Meghalaya), Majumdar (1980) who studied the culture changes taking place among Garos of Garo Hills (Meghalaya) and Bal (2007) who studied ethnicity among Garos of Meghalaya, among others.

Even though many structures remain the same, changes have been seen in Garo society. Besides the earlier geographical disparities, socio-economic class differences have come in. With the coming in of many forces of change, processes of detribalization (as a result of conversion to Christianity, and concepts of nationhood) and retribalization can be seen. Land alienation is one of the most emergent issues that Garos in all areas are facing today.

Nevertheless, the appeal of the monograph lies in its beautiful, at times almost lyrical descriptions of cultural aspects – those which are no more and those which are abiding. Consequently in some cases, his monograph works as a "historical" text. In it, he has also touched on some so-far "untouched" issues too. This was the earliest systematic work on the Garos and therefore any research on the people will always have references to it.

Notes

1. For empirical data for my PhD work, I visited the Garos of Assam (Kamrup District) and Bangladesh (Mymensingh District). This data collection was completed over a period of three years in which I had the opportunity to meet and interview Garos of different villages in the two districts mentioned.
2. Garo women in Assam are generally reticent and shy to sell vegetables, livestock and grains in the market. Normally selling took place at home where neighbours and co-villagers (usually the women) drop in and buy food items either in cash or kind, or mostly on credit. In recent years however, a few women are now seen venturing to sell their products in the local markets.
3. This refers to a system of marriage where there is replacement of spouse on death. When the head of household (a man) dies, his nephew is made to marry the widow, and in his absence his near relations. This arrangement is called *onsonga* or providing a continuation.

If the widow is too old for the young man, he is given an offer of her daughter along with the mother in marriage. This is called *onchapa* or additional gift.

References

- Bal, E. (2007). *'They Ask if we Eat Frogs': Garo Ethnicity in Bangladesh*. Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies.
- Bose, J. K. (1936). The Nokrom System of the Garos of Assam. *Man*, 36: 44-46.
- Burling, R. 1997[1963]. *Rengsangri*. Tura: Tura Book Room.
- Dalton, E. T. 1973 [1872]. *Tribal History of Eastern India*. Reprint of *Descriptive Ethnology of Bengal*. Delhi: Cosmo.
- de Maaker, E. (2009). Narratives of Garo Witchcraft. In J. Jansen *et al.*(ed). *Traditions on the Move: Essays in Honor of Jarich Oosten*. Amsterdam: Rozenberg Publishers. Pg. 147-56.
- Ehrenfel, U. R. (1941). *Mother Right in India*. London: OUP.
- Eliot, J. 1979 [1794]. Observations on the Inhabitants of the Garrow Hills. Made during a Public Deputation in the Years 1788 and 1789. In *Asiatic Researches*, Vol.III. New Delhi: Cosmo Publications.
- Hodson, T. C. (1911). *The Naga Tribes of Manipur*. London: Macmillan and Co.
- Majumdar, D. N. (1972). A Study of Sanskritization among the Bodo-speaking Tribes of Garo Hills. In K. S. Singh (ed). *Tribal Situation in India*. Simla: Indian Institute of Advanced Study. Pg. 263-70.
- Majumdar, D. N. (1980). *A Study of Culture Change in Two Garo Villages of Meghalaya*. Guwahati: Gauhati University Press.
- Playfair, A. [1909] (1975). *The Garos*. Gauhati: United Publishers.
- Sangma, M. S. (1981). *History and Culture of the Garos*. New Delhi: Books Today.
- Vidyarthi, L. P. (1978). *Rise of Anthropology in India: A Social Science Orientation*. Delhi: Concept Publishing Co.