

SHORTER NOTE

CHILD-REARING PRACTICES AMONG THE GARO OF ASSAM IN MATRILINEAL CONTEXT

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Cultures influence to a great extent the different ways in which parents rear children. The focal points are the patterns of family life, shared conceptions of the way to bring up children and oral traditions handed down over generations. The theory of personality formation in infancy is now widely accepted. Taking cue from this, this paper attempts to study some aspects of child-rearing among the Garos. The data have been incorporated from Garos of four neighbouring vilages - Bakrapur, Daglapra, Kasumari and Nishangram in the plains area of Goalpara district of Assam in the northeastern part of India.

In physical features, the Garo resemble the Mongoloids. Rich oral traditions abound with the tales of migration from Tibet to Garo Hills region of Meghalaya and its adjoining states (Assam, Tripura and Nagaland). Liguistically, they show affinity to Tibeto-Burman tongue. The main source of livelihood, among the Garo, is shifting cultivation, still practised in some pockets. In the plains area studied, wet paddy cultivation is practised; permanent agriculture has also been introduced in valleys of small rivers in Garo Hills. The Garo are traditionally animists with belief in a number of malevolent and benevolent spirits (*mite*). Christianity introduced among them in the early part of the twentieth century by European and American missionaries, has spread rapidly with only a few pockets in Garo Hills where animists (*songsarek*) are still to be seen. In the plains area, due to easy penetration, Christianity persists. These villages have been acculturated to some extent because of their contact with other tribal and non-tribal groups.

The whole gamut of Garo social life revolves around the female. The birth of a daughter is welcomed with great joy and merrymaking, since all hopes are pinned on her as the inheritress and successor. Descent among the Garo is in female line. At birth, a child, whether a

boy or girl, becomes a member of the mother's clan (*mahari*) and a cluster of clans (*machong*); and gets affiliated to one of the five conglomerations of *machong*, called *chatchi* (viz., Sangma, Marak, Momin, Areng and Shira. The daughter is of utmost necessity. In case, a couple fail to beget a daughter, adoption from one's *mahari* (or *machong*) takes place. If there are more than one daughter, the parents' favourite is selected as the inheritress, known as *nokna-dongipa mechik* (*nok* meaning house, *gipa* meaning owner). She inherits not only the movable and immovable property but also the responsibility towards elderly parents, younger siblings and other needy *mahari* members. The husband of the inheritress is called *nokrom* and he should preferably be the real nephew of the bride's father. For the daughters, matrilocal residence is the norm. It is only after a few years that the married daughters, other than the inheritress, move out and set up neolocal residence not far away from the mother's homestead. Succession to the chieftainship (*nokma*) is from males to males through females. In Garo Hills, the office of the *nokma* is seen while in the plains, the village headman (*gaon-burha*) is seen, whose office is elected.

The boy-child in Garo society, though not enjoying the same position as the girl is not ill-treated or neglected. Even though the Garo are matrilineal, it is on the shoulders of the males that the responsibility of running the family and society rests. In his family of procreation, a man is called *nokgipa*. Therefore, he plays an important role in the matters of family as the owner, but he has no say in the matters of his wife's *mahari*. However, in the matters of his mother's *mahari* he plays an all-important role. As the maternal uncle, he enjoys the most respectable position and has command over his sister's family. He mediates in the sister's household in difficulties and regulates the conduct of the children.

A Garo family ceases to function without one or both parents. In case of the former, it is the responsibility of the *mahari* members to make a family functional by providing a substitute in the place of the dead husband or wife who would look after the children and property. Death entails the responsibility of the kin of the deceased to give a 'replacement spouse' from the same *mahari* to the surviving partner (Majumdar 1980:25). If the surviving partner is senile or incapable of presiding as the head of the family, then the *nokram* takes over the reigns of the household. If both the parents are dead, it is the responsibility of the *mahari* members to provide a loving home to the children either in the dead mother's sister's house, or in the maternal uncle's house.

The scenario of child-rearing

There are no set norms about the number of children a Garo

woman should beget. She tries to bear as many children as possible as to be able to increase the *mahari* numerically. Conception and birth continue till she reaches menopause. It is therefore natural to find a number of children in a household and where the difference in age between the eldest and the youngest child is as much as twenty years or more.

When a woman comes to know of her pregnancy, she informs her husband first and then her mother. The people who rejoice the most at the news of her pregnancy are her consanguines. The first thing that comes into force after the confirmation of pregnancy, is diet control - food too rich in protein and carbohydrate is avoided for fear of the baby getting obese. Craving for unusual items like broken pieces of clay utensils, pieces of cowdung and mud plaster, etc., are fulfilled. A series of pre-natal taboos (explained by the mother, grandmother and other kin) are adhered to such as not to sit on a mortar, a pillow, in the doorway, etc. She is not allowed to burn firewood from the roots for fear of breech delivery. Eggs are avoided in diet. Hair from armpits are not shaved for the life of the first-born. During the confinement period, the father avoids hunting.

The child is born usually in the maternal grandmother's house unless the mother has moved out to set up a neolocal residence. The grandmother assists the midwife in labour. There is no restriction on the husband being present in the labour room. After delivery, the umbilical cord is cut off with a new blade about three inches from the navel and softly buried in the garden. Earlier, a split bamboo was used to cut the cord, and it was placed in a gourd and hung up on a tree (Playfair 1998:99). If thrown across a river, it is believed a woman will never conceive again, which is a shame for the *mahari*. The cord-stump (*gandil*), after it falls off, is washed, dried and preserved. When the infant suffers from stomach ache, the *gandil* is soaked in water and the solution given to the ailing infant. Breastfeeding takes place almost immediately and continues for around two and a half years or more, unless weaning is advanced due to another expected child. The period of breastfeeding among the Garo lies somewhat around the worldwide average (Ember and Ember 1995:395).

The grandmother or the midwife gives the baby its first wash. Only after two or three days is it given a proper bath in lukewarm water. Earlier head-hair of new born babies were shaved (Playfair 1998:99), however it is not done nowadays. After the bath, it is wrapped in soft, warm clothing and laid on the mother's bed. If the mother has not recovered sufficiently from child-birth, then the grandmother keeps vigil over the infant. After the cord-stump falls off, the infant is given daily

massage with warm mustard oil, bathed and warmly clothed. It is regularly taken out for fresh air. The mother also tries to engage in a little play, tickling the soles, stomach, etc., and making the infant smile. It is given the formal toilet training only when about eight to nine months old.

Eighty per cent of the waking hours of the Garo infant is spent in the arms of the mother. While going through chores (like cleaning the house, cooking meals and fetching water) mothers carry their infants on their back with a cloth tied over them. It is from the mother that infants first learn to associate events with words and speech. In his study Rohner (1997:97-105), found that children tend to be more hostile and aggressive when they are neglected and not treated affectionately by parents. In the Garo society, a girl is never neglected by her mother and kin members, so is the case with the boys. The *mahari* and *machong* are of great importance among them; the father whose son and daughter belong to another *machong* is at times cold towards them. He prefers his nephews to his son - the nephew 'belong to our own flesh but a son belong to another's flesh' (Majumdar 1980:128). Seeing the cool attitude of the father, the mother and her consanguines bestow love and attention on the boy-child. When mothers are too busy with household chores, the grandmother and the mother's sister help look after the child. Kissing and fondling of children are commonly witnessed.

Discipline for Garo children is equivalent to good behaviour, respect to elders and obedience. One of the most commonly used methods is praise. The mother and other onlookers praise the child when it learns to walk or does not wail on being tripped. She, at times, uses rewards to discipline the child, giving more sweets when it obeys and depriving one when it disobeys. Mild reproach and scolding takes place when a child fails to obey and show respect to elders, especially the mother's brother (*mama*). Bogeyman characters are also used to frighten stubborn children. Girls are rarely beaten, and when they are physically punished it is the mother who usually does so. On the other hand, naughty boys are threatened and beaten by the father. When children cannot be controlled by parents, they are sent to the maternal uncle's place. The children are usually in awe of the latter and remain well-behaved before him. Chagnon (1983:115) studying the Yanomamö found that boys were encouraged to be fierce and rarely punished for hitting parents. In Garo society, if such an incident occurs, the children are punished severely. When a grown-up boy hits his parents, it no longer remains a family matter, a *mahari* meeting is called and the boy punished severely. Dentan (1968:61) while studying the Semai found that they encouraged children to be non-violent. Such situations are not seen among the Garos for

parents and older siblings teach them to stand up for themselves if another child provokes a fight.

Another form of discipline is the process of task assignment. The study of six cultures (Whiting and Edwards 1988:265) showed that children who regularly babysit are more nurturant than other children even when they are not babysitting. Garo children as young as three to four years are at times asked to babysit younger siblings/cousins. Children of about eight to ten years are often seen playing with friends, carrying their young siblings on their back. By the age of ten to twelve, the boys are sent to agricultural fields to assist and the girls are taught to assist in cooking, in sweeping the courtyard, and in fetching water. At times, a child of either sex is sent to the maternal uncle's home to assist in household activities for a short period. School going children are also given multiple tasks like looking after pets, weeding the garden, babysitting siblings after school hours.

Summary and Conclusion

It can be assumed without much ado that the way children are reared will determine the type of personality they will have in adult life. Mead (1953:4) stressed the tremendous role played by the social environment in which each individual is born and reared. Neither race nor common humanity can be held responsible for many of the forms that such basic human emotions as love, fear and anger take under different social conditions. The insistence on modesty through verbal instruction or through story-telling is put in the mind of the Garo child, who learns that to be modest and shy is preferred to being rude and haughty; and that a modest and shy girl is of good moral character, while one being immodest has a bad moral character. The Garo child is not neglected; but the love and care lavished on the girl child, coupled with the father's preference for his nephew, at times make the boy child feel out of place.

The child rearing methods have undergone many changes in recent times. Due to economic pressure, many couples have moved out to urban areas and set up nuclear families, no longer living in the plots gifted by the wife's mother. Educated mothers are now opting for fewer children in order to do justice to various jobs held, and to provide their children a proper education and all the requirements which would otherwise be impossible. If there are two children, one or both of whom are girls, subsequent pregnancies are more and more being terminated. If the third or fourth issue turns out to be a boy again, adoption of a girl from one's *machong* is still the rule. Therefore, the position of the girl-child is unchanged. Since more and more families are becoming nuclear, traditional babysitters like grandmothers, aunts and older siblings are

rarely found. Instead parents are taking turns in babysitting while earlier, a father babysitting was unheard of. Paid babysitters are also being employed. Due to the influence of the church many ceremonies and customs are no longer followed. The ceremonies connected with birth described lucidly by Playfair (1998: 98-10) are no longer in vogue. However, in a few cases, newborn infants are still being christened after the name of a dead ancestor. Playfair (1998:100) had also stated that when a child was born, nobody from the village went near the fields for fear of the crops being blighted. Due to economic constraints, the Garo cannot afford to do so now. The dismantling of the bachelor's dormitory (*nokpante*) has resulted in the restriction of the base of socialization for boys. Instead, they are now imparted modern education in conventional institutions. Indeed modern education has led to the evaporation of many superstitious beliefs connected with child-birth. Modern medical facilities has led to a drop in mother-child mortality. Child immunization programmes under the aegis of the Integrated Child Development Scheme (ICDS) and the State government have spread to interior villages.

With such obvious changes, tribal isolation could not be maintained. Social intercourse began culminating in marriages with non-Garos. This has somewhat made the clan system porous. Earlier tribal endogamy was strictly followed, but now exceptions have begun to crop up. *Machong* exogamy is still maintained. Descent, inheritance and succession is still in the female line. Earlier the daughter showing the best qualities was selected as the inheritress. Now other conditions, like whether she would give up her job in urban areas and stay in the village and look after home and property, are also being considered. That the *nokrom* has to be the real nephew of the bride's father, is no longer insisted upon. An unwed mother betrayed by a man is not ridiculed, but still accepted within the folds of the *mahari*. The illegitimate child enjoys the same status as other children, and if the man who eventually marries its mother does not want to look after it, the *mahari* members take over its nurture and care.

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