

Jagua Nakam: a Look into its Properties, and its Revelations on Garo Lifeways

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Abstract

A single item of food at times tells many things about a society. The present paper aims to look at the importance and properties of *jagua nakam*, an item that is hugely sought-after among Garos, a tribe from north-eastern India and northern Bangladesh. Its importance lies in its gastronomic appreciation and habitual consumption. Narratives point to a similar feature. Interestingly, this single item of food consumption tells us much more about the people and their society.

INTRODUCTION

Many anthropologists have studied single substances – food sources, plants, animals, and foods made from them – in their quest to unravel food and foodways. One of such early work was conducted on potatoes by Salaman in 1949 wherein he tried to discuss the origins, domestication and diffusion leading to impacts on European political life (Salaman 1949). Since then, many works have appeared which showed the diversity in food research. Mention may be made of Ohnuki-Tierney's work on rice (1993) and Sidney Mintz's work on sugar (1985), which were drawn from history but while the earlier told much about the Japanese psyche, the latter revealed political and power realignments. Besides, other studies have focused on meat (Fiddes 1991), milk and milk products (Murcott 1999) and vegetables (Simoons 1998), to name a few.

Over a three-year period of research on Garo food, I came across the importance of *nakam*, dry-fish, in the life of a Garo. This was an item that was coveted in meals, and also subsisted the group under study when no other flesh-food was available. Among different varieties of

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nakam available, it was the “vilest” and foul-smelling variety called *jagua nakam* that was most coveted. This made me look into the importance of this single food item in a Garo’s life.

The Garos are a tribe living in the north-eastern part of India and northern Bangladesh, more distinguished for their system of matriliney. In India, they are found predominantly in the state of Meghalaya in the districts of East, West and South Garo Hills; however, they are also found in small pockets in different states such as Assam, Tripura, Nagaland and West Bengal. In Bangladesh they are mostly found in the northern districts of Mymensing and Tangail. As in other systems of matriliney, lineage, succession, transmission of property and residence after marriage is through the female line, i.e., from mother to daughter. However, unlike some other systems, succession to leadership and transmission of property does not follow any rules of inheritance; instead it is laid in the hands of the favourite and most “capable” daughter.

Garos are shifting cultivators, cultivating a large amount of crops in their plots, starting with the staple, which is rice, and followed by other crops such as millet, tapioca, pumpkin, varieties of gourd and bean, sorrel leaves, chillies and others. This is such a case in some of the hilly pockets of Garo-dominated areas of Garo Hills in Meghalaya (India) even today. In marginal areas such as Assam and Bangladesh, where Garos are plains-dwellers and a minority, shifting cultivation is now being replaced by slash-and-burn cultivation and wet paddy. Besides, cultivated food, Garos forage in the wilds for food such as arum, ferns, bamboo shoot and mushrooms. Animals domesticated include pig, cow and chicken while in Bangladesh ducks, goats and pigeons are also reared. Livestock is reared invariably for food even though bulls are kept for agricultural work and cows for milk in some regions. Dogs and cats are also commonly reared, but these are only kept as pets and not meant for food. Besides the above, some amount of hunting for wild animal food and birds also take place. Fishing is very common, especially in the riverine villages, where communal fishing takes place after a spate of heavy rains.

The data incorporated herein is original, empirical data collected through a period of three years, from mid-2006 to year end-2009, in my pursuit of Garo foodways. Only a part of the field data generated has been used for the purpose of this paper. The focus of my study was geographically contained in a village called Gohalkona situated in the state of Assam in India. The methods being used herein include narratives and case studies in order to present the observations and conclusions of this paper.

WHAT IS *JAGUA NAKAM*

Even though meat is deemed prestigious¹ among Garos, they are very fond of fish and dry-fish. Since Garos mostly live near rivers and streams, fish is a daily constituent of their diet. On occasions when fresh fish are not available, they eat dry-fish, fish that has been dried in the sun and stored away to be consumed later. At present, instead of preparing dry-fish at home,

¹ In terms of prestige and value, meat occupies a high position. Meat occurs in narratives and daily discourses often, such that it gives an impression of being a daily constituent of Garo diet. In actual practice it is not so. Garos can very rarely afford to buy meat, with hunting of big game almost non-existent in Gohalkona due to less forest coverage, stringent forest laws of the Assam government and presence of camps of extremist groups in the forest. Therefore, they actually eat meat only occasionally. The amount and variety of meat consumed in communal gatherings assume prestigious connotations for the family, the clan and at times even the village. The number of cows and pigs slaughtered during the Christmas feasts in Gohalkona, and the resultant feeling of pride in daily discourses with visitors, is an illustration of this.

Garos prefer to buy dry-fish from the non-Garo merchants who sell it in the big markets of the towns nearby, or on weekly market days in the vicinity of the village. There are different varieties of dry-fish depending on the type and size of fish that is dried. One of the varieties that is very often consumed and relished is *jagua nakam*, a variety that emanates a strong and rank² smell. This type of dry-fish is made by drying small fish (caught from streams) which are cleaned and salted, and then dried under the sun. After a day or two, when it is semi-dry, it is put in the *wapong* (a bamboo container made out of the hollow stump of bamboo), and tightly capped with dried plantain leaves and stored away for a month or two.

During this storage, fermentation of the dry-fish takes place. Therefore when it is fully fermented, it starts emanating a very strong smell which is found to be “aromatic” and relished by Garos.

Garos mostly cook in a variety of manners – by roasting (*soa/brenga*), boiling (*rita*), steaming (*rita*), in alkali (*kalchi songa*) and in mustard oil (*to songa*). Cooking in alkali³ is said to be the most authentic manner of cooking since times immemorial. This is a food preparation that they prefer (over other methods of cooking) and cook daily. In such a preparation, indigenous vegetables⁴ and meat (or fish) is cooked in the pot with few drops of liquid alkali together with mashed ginger and chillies as condiments. In such a preparation of vegetables, a piece or two of *jagua nakam* is added as a condiment for its aromatic properties. At times, even in the cooking of meat, *jagua nakam* is added for the same purpose. On other occasions, *jagua nakam* instead of being an aromatic condiment is used alone as the main ingredient. This takes place especially in the form of chutney, where a few pieces of *jagua nakam* is slightly burned and mashed along with generous amount of chillies.

JAGUA NAKAM IN FOLK AND PERSONAL NARRATIVES

As anthropologists, during various stages of research, we predominantly focus on a people’s narratives. These are in varied forms including stories, songs, poems, jokes, case-stories etc. Garos, as a people, also have a very rich oral tradition in various forms. They have stories regarding all events and all aspects of life. Some such narratives regarding *jagua nakam* collected from Gohalkona is given below. These stories are wide-ranging, however leading to how important a role it plays in the society. The first two stories were collected from Informant A, a male aged 75 years.

² Even though I had been offered this item many times on my visits to homes of informants, I still could not get over the smell. Contrastingly, however, the inhabitants of the village relished it and found it aromatic.

³ Food preparations in liquid alkali are considered unique to Garos and much favoured over others. This refers to an indigenously prepared solution that is used in cooking. This solution is procured by distillation of ash from burnt plantain stems, bamboo stumps and jute stems.

⁴ In Garo cuisine, a distinction is made between indigenous food, called *achik samjak* (literally meaning “Garo vegetables”) and non-indigenous food, called *bangal samjak* (meaning “non-Garo vegetables”). *Achik samjak* refers to traditional vegetables which are either collected from jungles, forests and marshes or grown in shifting/slash-and-burn plots of land. These include varieties of plant food like tubers, roots, stems, leaves, and flowers, which are believed to have been consumed since the time of forefathers-foremothers. These are also at times grown within the margin of the dwelling places in the form of kitchen garden both tended and untended. Non-Garo vegetables on the other hand refer to vegetables which are bought from the market and are not local in nature.

The third story is collected from Informant B, a female aged 55 years. The fourth narrative is a case study collected from a 35 year old woman residing in the village.

Narrative 1

Once upon a time, there was a miser, who hoarded his money and never spent it on anything. One day, he went to the *anti* (weekly market) and bought a few pieces of *jagua nakam*, wrapped it in a plantain leaf and stored it inside a *basing* (clay pot). This pot, he hung from the ceiling in the centre of his room so that no one would be able to reach it. Not even a cat. Every day, when he ate his food (comprising of plain rice and salt), he would take a sniff of the *jagua nakam* and feel contented. After the meal was over, he would again store it away. This continued for many days. One day, when he was resting in the afternoon after a hard day's work in the fields, he fell asleep under a tree. While he was in that state, his *janggi* (soul) came out of his body and sat on a branch of the tree under which he was sleeping. The man wanted to wake up but he could not since his soul had left him. He asked his soul why it left him and the soul replied, "You have been tempting me with the *jagua nakam* but you never ate it, thereby leaving my hunger unquenched. You are a miserly man; I will not live within you!" The man pleaded his soul to come back again and again, but all in vain. The soul refused to return into its earlier self and the man was never able to wake up from his sleep.

Narrative 2

Once there were two friends who decided to go to the *anti*. The location of this market was far away from the village and they would have to cross forests and streams to reach the place. As they were going to the market, one told the other, knowing his nature of whiling away time, "Don't be late in coming back. Don't fool around in the market. Let's come back as soon as possible." The second one retorted, "Don't you worry. We'll be fine." When they reached the market, the first friend told the second, "Let's disperse and buy our essentials as soon as possible, then meet at the entrance of the market by mid-day." The second friend nodded but laughed at his friend's cautiousness. When it was mid-day, the cautious friend waited for the other but he did not turn up. He waited till the sun was no longer above his head and decided to leave for home. Only when dusk set in, the second friend realizing the lateness of the hour, decided to rush for home. As he was crossing the forests, he felt as if he was being followed. He looked behind but did not see anyone. He started getting scared since he thought it must be *memang* (ghost, also malevolent spirit). He started running, and as he was approaching the stream, a strange *memang* appeared by his side and said, "I can smell *jagua*. Do you have it? Give it to me!" The man was indeed carrying *jagua* for his wife at home. He was scared but refused to hand it over, and started running faster. The *memang* kept pace with him and told him, "Hand it over, if you want to pass!" The man, still refusing, ran trying to outrun the *memang*. The *memang* finally pushed him into the waters, thus drowning the man, and snatched the packet of *jagua* from him.

Narrative 3

The *menggo* (house cat) is the *mama* (maternal uncle) of the tiger. The uncle-nephew duo lived happily in the jungle, hunting together and sharing food. One day, the uncle (cat) on his search for a prey neared a house where *mande* (humans) lived. As he approached the house he saw humans through the window moving about in the house, and he told himself he would never go hungry for many days. For once he would be able to feed his nephew, the tiger, who had all along been hunting and sharing his hunts. He happily reached the house and as he looked in through the window, he smelt something very wonderful. It was the smell of *jagua nakam* which the woman of the house took out from a basket to cook. The uncle (cat) found the smell

so aromatic, he could not kill the woman neither could he leave the house. On seeing the cat, the woman threw a piece of the *nakam* for him and the cat immediately swallowed it up. From that day onwards, the uncle (cat) forgot his nephew (the tiger), with whom he had lived together for many years, and started living with humans.

Narrative 4

Case 1: Samanda (name changed) is a 35 year old resident of Singpara locality in the village. She is married and has four unmarried children. Two of her children, a boy and a girl, suffer from malaria⁵ regularly. In the summer of 2007, her daughter had shivering fevers, believed to be symptoms of malaria, at night. On earlier occasions, her malarial fevers would disappear in a couple of days. Therefore, Samanda did not much bother about it thinking it would go off in the next few days. In two days, her daughter's fever did not subside, and her body temperature rose higher. On the third night, when her daughter started crying that she could not bear the headache and told her mother to do something about it, Samanda realized the seriousness of the matter. She realized that she should not have taken her daughter's illness lightly and immediately sent her husband (in the rain) to the *oja* (traditional healer) to either fetch him or to get some medicines. The *oja*, who had earlier gone to the neighbouring village, had not yet reached home - the wife (of the *oja*) conjectured he must have been stranded due to the heavy rains. As soon as Samanda's husband reached home, he shouted at her, "You, senseless woman! With your last-minute work! Couldn't you have thought about it? What kind of a mother are you?" Samanda felt shame at her husband's words. Remembering her mother cooking *jagua nakam* curry for her now deceased brother (who suffered from malaria) and saying that it helps in cases of malaria, she immediately cooked up some with generous amounts of chillies. She forced her daughter to eat the hot curry with rice. Due to its hotness, the daughter sweated a lot, and later fell asleep. When she woke up in some time, the fever had subsided. Samanda thankfully says, "The sweating due to the hot *jagua nakam* curry helped rid the fever". She also adds, "Now whenever my children are having fever, I don't take a chance. I make the curry and give it to them."

DISCUSSION

While personal narratives are individualistic in nature, folk narratives reveal a glimpse of a society. Folk narratives at times acquire inconsistencies in the narration – many times beyond explanation. These also undergo changes as the tellers or narrators change. However, both these two types of narratives go a long way, in some instances, to reveal the underlying ethos of a people.

The Garo narratives in this paper, consisting of three folk stories and a case study, reveals some underlying characteristic features of the people. The narratives focussing on one item of food, i.e., *jagua nakam*, reveal certain properties as well. These are qualitative in nature and include the following:

- It is tasty. Garos prefer it over other food due to its tastefulness. Among different varieties of dry-fish, *jagua nakam* scores more due to this property. In terms of food choice, Garos prefer ceremonial food, such as food cooked during festivals and weddings, over everyday

⁵ The village is located in a malaria prone-zone. It is believed that once a person is infected with malaria, it cannot be totally eliminated from his/her body, it can only be contained to some degree with the help of medication.

food which are either boiled or cooked in alkali. However, *jagua nakam* is one food item that does not lose its tastefulness and become dull and mundane even though it is an everyday food and consumed regularly.

- It is aromatic. Smell is one of the sensory characteristic that Garos use in food selection. Due to its aromatic properties, Garos prefer to use *jagua nakam* as a condiment in their everyday food preparations. These include food preparations where both vegetables and flesh-food are used, together or singly. As one informant in the course of my fieldwork revealed, her sons did not like to eat vegetables but if *jagua nakam* is used as a condiment, they would eat it up happily.
- It gives pleasure to the soul. This is a food item that makes a man or woman feel full and happy after a meal. This happiness and satiety finds expression in smiles and discourses after meals. In the very telling narrative (narrative 1) about the soul which refused to return to its former shell, it revealed how soul-stirring this food item is for the Garos.
- It has healing properties. Food items normally acquire many properties. Some food are perceived to be good for the body, while others are supposedly bad. As revealed in the above narrative (narrative 4), *jagua nakam* also acquires one such property. It is believed to have medicinal properties and used by many during certain crises periods.

The narratives also reveal many characteristics about Garos and their lifeways. These include what they generally like about themselves or what they dislike. Even though many such characteristics can be analysed, only a few glaring features are mentioned below.

- Garos are very fond of *jagua nakam*. This is a food item sought after and relished by them when they are living as well as when they are dead or living as a spirit. Even form-less spirits, such as a soul and a malevolent ghost, seem to be fond of it. A cat is also seen giving up his original instincts of hunting big prey and start living with humans only for a taste of this item. Even though the authenticity of the stories cannot be verified, it does prove beyond doubt that for Garos, this food item is a very important part of their lifeways.
- In the above narratives, a soul and a malevolent spirit in the shape of a ghost is seen to be vengeful, so much so that the former refuses to re-enter the body of a man (thus killing him), while the latter intentionally kills a man only for a packet of *jagua nakam*. Even though the vengeance is seen to be carried out by spirits, it does reveal that Garos could go to any extra lengths (in terms of cost mechanics) to procure this item. A moot case in point would be that despite the high monetary costs, Garos still buy it ⁶.
- Miserliness is a characteristic that Garos do not favor. They are mostly seen living hand-to-mouth existences; even then they are seen to share their food with relatives and neighbours. Whenever a woman collects vegetables from the wilds she always distributes it to her kin members. This food-distribution is reciprocated either in kind or service later. Sharing of food is seen even for house pets. In fact, it is seen that many families put in an extra handful of rice while cooking meals for the house-pets, such as dogs and cats.

⁶The cost of *jagua nakam* in the winter of 2007 was Rs.200 per kilogram. This was rather steep considering that it was a constituent of their daily diet. At present the price of this item per kilogram is reported to have doubled.

CONCLUSION

In the works by anthropologists on single food substances, many aspects of the food item under consideration were revealed. For instance, Ohnuki-Tierney in *Rice as Self: Japanese Identities Through Time* (1949) takes rice as a metaphor for Japanese collective identity and discusses its changing face through time. Similar work on the Garos would require much more analysis and much more varied methodology. In the present paper, only some aspects of the studied people are discussed through one food item, and with the help of narratives alone.

That *jagua nakam* plays a very important role in Garo foodways is undeniable. It is that part of their food system that is most coveted, full of taste and aromatic properties, and consumed daily. It, therefore, forms a part of their common day existence and not an extra-ordinary food that is reserved only for special and ceremonial occasions.

This single ingredient also plays a very important role in Garo lifeways. It is that food for which extra efforts are taken to procure it – either by preparing it rigorously over time, or by shelling out extra cash-money. The narratives also to some extent reveal some of the endearing and non-so endearing characteristics that Garos prefer in themselves.

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