

CREATION IN THE PRIMAL RELIGION OF THE GAROS :  
RECOVERING A TRIBAL ECO-CONSCIOUSNESS

SHALLINDRO R. MARAK

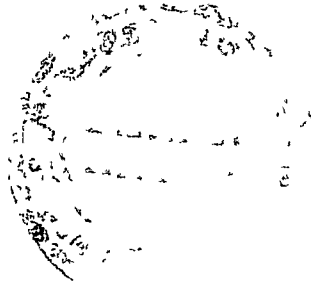
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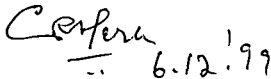
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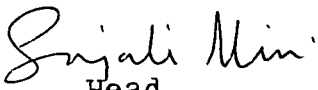
DECLARATION

I, ~~Shri~~ Shallindro R. Marak, hereby declare that the subject matter of the dissertation is the record of work done by me, that the contents of this dissertation did not form the basis of the award of any previous degree to me or to the best of my knowledge to anybody else, and that the dissertation has not been submitted by me for any research degree in any other University/Institute.

This is being submitted to the North-Eastern Hill University for the degree of Master of Philosophy in Philosophy.

  
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Finally, I acknowledge my indebtedness to my wife and children for their patience and empathetic support for me throughout this research.


  
(Shallindro R. Marak ).

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CHAPTER-I  
INTRODUCTION

The present work, as the title suggests, has two components. In the first place, it is a study of the concept of creation in the "primal" religion of the Garos. The concept of creation is a fundamental concept within the philosophical branches of Metaphysics and Philosophy of Religion. Moreover, in recent times, in as much as creation is viewed as a model, or paradigm, for intellectual pursuits, it has been receiving a lot of attention within Philosophy of Science as well. My perspective, here, however is that of Philosophy of Religion, despite the fact that it occasionally dips its brush into metaphysics. Secondly, it is an applied study, in as much as the study of the concept of creation, far from remaining purely theoretical, is carried forward to rediscover an eco-consciousness among the Garos as a tribal community. It is precisely here that the applied aspect of my study may be viewed as falling within the purview of an Eco-Philosophy. A Philosophy of Ecology, we all know, has become the need of the hour. If the primal religion of the Garos is chosen, here, it is a personal predilection of mine inspired by a desire to investigate the availability of the philosophical resources, if any, in the tradition of my own people as contributing its mite to the revival of an eco-consciousness in the life of the tribe.

The Garos live in the three districts of the East, West and South Garo Hills of Meghalaya State. But many of them live also in the Khasi Hills and in the plains of Assam and

Bangladesh. Many monographic studies have been carried out by the social anthropologists and historians about the Garos. Most of the earlier scholars are either 'outsiders' or foreigners. In recent years, however, a few of such studies are being conducted by the natives themselves. Some among these writers have devoted their particular attention to the religious aspects of the Garos. But all of those efforts are mostly of descriptive type. Till today, in my considered opinion, any commendable work is yet to be carried out purely from a philosophical perspective; particularly in the area of ecology, ~~/x~~ I am afraid, there may not be any writing of significance. My work therefore is a modest attempt on the subject.

At present, the Christian population is the single largest of all religious groups among the Garos. Yet, a large number of the Garos still belong to their primal religion. According to the 1991 General Census, they stand next to the Christian population in the three districts of Garo Hills. G. Costa says, "Religion is so completely interwoven into every phase of the Garo's life that his every act might be termed as religious act".<sup>1</sup> In fact, as in the case of many other tribal communities, religion is the Garos' way of life. Yet, it would seem to me that if we look only at the cultic faith and practices of the tribesmen, we are likely to miss the total significance of the primal religion of the Garos. There is much that is of significance in their traditional life, their social institutions, seasonal festivals, and art and culture. There is a sense in reducing all of them to the wider concept of religion. It is

1. P.C. Kar(ed.), G. Costa's The Garo Code of Law (Tura: Catholic Church, 1975), p. 8.

only in this sense that it may be said that one cannot fully analyse any part of Garos' traditional life without a proper understanding of their conception of their primal religious universe. Even the Christian worldview is a superstructure on the original religious worldview.

Some scholars tend to describe the tribal religions, such as the traditional religion of the Garos, as "animism", and sometimes as "primitive religion". Major A. Playfair<sup>2</sup> and K.I. Aier,<sup>3</sup> who describe the Garos' traditional religion as animism, readily come to our mind. However, many of the tribal leaders themselves are not willing to accept these terms, while describing the nature of the tribal religions. This is partly because such terms as "animism" and "primitive" imply derogatory nuances. Such value judgements are often 'Eurocentric'. In Tribal Awakening, we find a statement made by a group of tribal scholars themselves in this regard, as if to counter the approach hitherto in vogue:

✂ These concepts (animism, animatism or spiritism) may be helpful for a non-tribal to understand and describe tribal religion. But they finally fail as a theoretical framework to describe a tribal phenomenon.<sup>4</sup>

Sylvanus Lyngdow, a well-known Khasi writer, expresses the same, when he says, "... if we take it (animism) in its accepted meaning, then we cannot believe that this form of

2. Major A. Playfair, The Garos (Guwahati: United Publishers, 1975), p. 80.
3. K.I. Aier, The Growth of Baptist Churches in Meghalaya (Guwahati:C.L.C., 1978), p. 11.
4. M.M. Thomas & Richard W. Taylor(eds.), Tribal Awakening (Bangalore: C.I.S.R.S., 1965), pp. 122 f.

religion is particularly characteristic of the tribals".<sup>5</sup> Renty Keitzer, a popular Ao Naga writer, also shares the same feeling, when he writes : "Most of them (earlier Western writings on tribal religions) described the tribal religions as primitive animism, the worship of spirits and deities or demons. However, this is not a good description about tribal religions of north-eastern India. There may be elements of primal religious ideas present in this religions but they are not animistic"<sup>6</sup>. B.N. Choudhury, seeing that the term "animism" is inappropriate to the Garos' traditional religion, writes :

Really the Garos are neither heathen nor totally animistic; they have their own spiritual beliefs as well as others of the world. They believe that there is an Almighty God above us all who has created the universe and all the creatures of this world of ours.<sup>7</sup>

To a student of philosophy, the problem is that we do not have the precise meaning of this strange term "animism". Henry H. Presler maintains, "Animism, from the Latin anima meaning soul, is the doctrine that objects and living things are endowed with indwelling souls, independent of men"<sup>8</sup>. E.B. Tylor was responsible to have popularized the term "animism"

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5. Sylvanus Lyngdoh, "Christian Approach to Tribals and their Culture", in Service and Salvation, edited by Joseph Pathrapankal (Bangalore: T.P.I., 1973), p. 535.
  6. Renty Keitzer, "Tribal Perspective in Hermeneutics Today", Indian Journal of Theology, Vol.31, No.3&4 (July-December, 1982) : 307.
  7. B.N. Choudhury, Some Cultural and Linguistic Aspects of the Garos (Guwahati: Lawyer's Book Stall, 1969), p. 6.
  8. Henry H. Presler, Primitive Religions in India (Madras:C.L.S., 1971), p. 51.

as "the doctrine of souls and other spiritual beings in general". It also includes the belief that the bodies are inhabited by souls, which may also exist in a separate disembodied state.<sup>9</sup> And according to the general understanding of the term, it is the religion which believes that every object or living being - stone, stream, tree, animal and so on - has a spirit within itself and, therefore, a multitude of spirits are worshipped out of fear for the benevolent or malevolent powers that they wield. Some people even like to describe the tribal religions as "animism" with explicit description of it as a religion which worships evil spirits and demons.<sup>10</sup> This is wholly unwarranted for the tribal mind. Now, it is true that Garos' traditional religion has the elements such as totemism, fetishism, magic and so on. But, it is also significantly true that the same religion has a strong belief in the existence of the Supreme Being, the creator and sustainer of this universe. Looking at these prevailing elements in this religion, one finds it difficult to accept the one-sided definition or description of such terms as "animism". It ignores the realities of the religion at crucial junctures.

Likewise the term "primitive" has also been rejected by many tribal scholars. Nirmal Minz writes, "This concept

9. E.B. Tylor, Religion in Primitive Culture, Vol.1 (New York: Harpers & Row Publishers, 1959), pp. 417-502.
10. Eugene A. Nida and William A. Smalley, Introducing Animism (New York: Friendship Press, 1959), pp. 3-10.

(primitive) conveys an idea of archaic and even 'pre-civilized' nature of the religion of a pre-historic group of people. This does not give the proper picture of the people and their religion in modern India. Therefore this concept is now replaced by 'Primal Religion'.<sup>11</sup> He continues, "The concept 'primal' conveys the idea that human communities in the world hold on to the primal vision of the world, God and man. There is fundamental vision of reality by human beings, which is retained in the tribal communities of India and the world. The difference between 'primitive' and 'primal' is that the former means something outdated and the latter indicates something at the bedrock of human existence, and relevant even today".<sup>12</sup> Jonathan H. Thumra also expresses that he prefers the term "primal" over against the "primitive", since, for him, the term "primitive" implies 'the mistaken notion of mental processes which are pre-logical and qualitatively inferior to that of the so called civilized people'.<sup>13</sup> He continues, "When we study the religion and practices of the tribal people we will find that many of the basic features of these people are basic or primary in the religions of the world".<sup>14</sup> I take a cue from scholars of this line of thinking.

11. Nirmal Minz, "The Study of Tribal Religion in India", in Re-Visioning India's Religious Traditions, edited by David C. Scott and Israel Salvanayagam (New Delhi: ISPCK, 1996), p.120.

12. Ibid.

13. Jonathan H. Thumra, "The Primal Religious Traditions", in Religious Traditions of India, edited by P.S. Daniel, David C. Scott and G.R. Singh (Serampore: Indian Theological Library, 1988), pp. 45-46.

14. Ibid.

Subscribing to the opinion that the terms like "animism" and "primitive" are both culturally derogatory and philosophically inadequate, and that the term "primal" is, here, on the other hand, more meaningful and appropriate to describe the tribal religions, I have ventured to make use of the same in this work. The tribal culture and religion are not static; they have their own growth. Far from being the fossilized phenomena, they are continually in the process of change. Yet, there exists something permanent at its core; that there survives the primal vision of man, nature and God; of their intricate relations. The conception of creation and man's own place in the universe are at its core, in spite of many cross currents from the so called "great traditions" and the powerful impact of the forces of modernization. Like any tribal religion of the world, the primal religion of the Garos too has its primordial or primeval vision of man, nature and God.

Its intentionality to these realities is characterized by a rare spontaneity that is often lacking in the conceptual superstructures and intellectual mazes of the "great traditions". The "little traditions" of the tribal religion have by and large succeeded in guarding their heritage, primarily due to the spontaneity witnessed in their myths, rituals, ceremonial dance and festivals. Garo religion is no exception here. It may not have nameable founders; it has no sacred "scriptures" of its own, in the strict sense of the term. It largely depends on the oral tradition from generation to generation. People in their practice of religion are intimately related to one another and to the natural world by a perceived spiritual

kinship. It has a distinctive attitude towards the land :  
land is not static and inert, but dynamic and organic. Land  
is life-sustaining. In the final analysis, land and all forms  
of life sustained by it, man included, forms an organic  
whole, in being identical as nature.

#### Statement of Problem

As we are just about to begin the 21st. Century, we  
are being challenged, as never before, by a host of threatening  
signs of what we call ecological crisis. We are being challenged  
by the fast depletion of non-renewable natural resources, the  
increasing deforestation, massive pollution of air, water and  
land, vagaries of rainfall, temperature and wind that have  
catastrophic effect on the sustenance of life on our planet.  
Scientific and technological man in recent times has entertained  
a species-determined concept of right. Such a conception of  
right is invariably severed from the duty and responsibility  
to all other species, indeed, to whole cosmos. He tends to  
be ecologically "unconscious" or "insensitive", because  
contrariwise he practices an "egology" as a human species.  
We are all witness to what our greed-driven economic enterprise,  
buttressed by an ever increasing creation and satisfaction  
of our wants, has done with earth and its elements. Creation  
seems to be groaning under the tyranny of man.

While all are affected by the ecological crisis, the  
poor and underdeveloped tribals are in a special way impove-  
rished by it, as their life is inextricably linked with the  
preservation of nature. There was a time when people thought

that the ecological crisis was not a serious problem to the poor tribals, who are said to live in the jungles, and therefore on the fringes of technological and urban civilizations. Their problem, it was assumed, was confined to illiteracy and disease, and the environment issues were summarily rejected as "luxury" of the industrialized countries and societies. But today, we realize how urgent is the arrest of an ecological degradation for the rich and the poor alike, for the effect of the ecological crisis has no racial and geographical boundaries. The tribals, such as the Garos, who are known to be in a close symbiotic relation with nature, are being increasingly forced out of their natural habitat and thereby become "refugees" in their own land. The survival and identity crisis of the tribals is an integral part of the crisis in Creation itself. It is engendered often by the (mis)perception of, and action towards, the land. Present crisis should also be seen as a moral, or spiritual, crisis of the people, in relation to nature, supernature and other fellow beings. Therefore, a new look at the religious and cultural heritages of the concerned people, from the ecological perspective, has become a necessity. It is my fond hope that this work will be a small step towards it.

#### Purpose of Research

It is a general observation that no philosophical concept in primal religions exists in a vacuum. Their basic concepts have been formed out of their experience of "realities" - the realities of natural environment, cultural heritage, socio-economic situations, morality and spirituality. They

exist as an integral part of people's day-to-day life. Therefore, it may be assumed that the concept of creation among the Garos is not an end in itself. It is interwoven with their living. Hence my attempt to put it to the service of recovering an eco-consciousness in the life of the concerned tribe may not be without its significance. In other words, the purpose of this work is to revive a self-consciousness, which is also intrinsically a cosmic-consciousness. Since the notion of the self to the Garo is not that of a presiding "deity" over nature but an integral part of the nature in symbiotic relation, his self-consciousness at once becomes an eco-consciousness. Such a self-consciousness may contribute towards his cultural, ethical and spiritual regeneration by way of recovering his pristine relation with the cosmic realities of man, nature and God. This is not an appeal to revert to the lost innocence of a "primal" perception of life, or to some pre-scientific consciousness. Rather, we do desperately need to search for a more integral vision of life which perceives human life as dynamically nurtured by, and organically participative of, the earth's life. As many disciplines of knowledge are converging on this new search, it would be preposterous of me to say that philosophy alone gives a solution to the ecological crisis. Vast number of empirical studies lay bare one or the other aspects of it. Philosophy, I believe, has the great task of integrating the piecemeal approaches to a problem. Though, this too is a micro-level study, in as much as it refers to the religious worldview of the Garos in the North-East India, hopefully, it will not be devoid of the wholistic perspective of philosophy.

### Resources and Methodology

The concept of Creation, in the Garo primal religion, may not be available to us in all its philosophical sophistication, for the simple reason that the conceptual schema for a scientific and systematic study has yet to evolve among the Garos. This is partly due to the lack of a systematic philosophical literature in the culture concerned. The traditional Garos may not still have developed any philosophical repertoire, in the strict sense, to express their experience of the perceived "realities". Moreover, the religion concerned does not have any written law or sacred scripture, unlike the religions of great traditions. It does not have any clearly defined doctrines, or theology. Theirs has been a culture characterized from generation to generation by the oral traditions. But all this may not be construed to suggest that the concerned tradition totally lacks in the experience of realities that makes human life and its activities significant. If so, the Garos, too, have a philosophy, waiting to be articulated at the hands of sympathetic scholars. Their experiences of realities are replete in their religious beliefs and practices, myths, music, dance and rituals. Therefore, one has got to cull out its conception of creation from not only from the prayed, sung and spoken word, but also from the "word" that is "danced about", "acted on" and "ritually celebrated". In the tribal context, the "text" is a much enlarged concept, going far beyond what is strictly "scripted". There is then a deeper sense in which it could be said that the "Word" gets "incarnated", or materialized in the entire life of the people. Human life

itself tends to be the primordial incarnation. As it has been mentioned earlier, a significant mass of materials is collated and often codified by the social-anthropologists, historians and, in recent times, the natives themselves. I have ventured to draw materials from the many available sources. Apart from the written materials, I also have had recourse to personal interviews, observations and other necessary field surveys among the people, particularly those belonging to this primal religion.

I have to spell out three of my basic principles, forming the core of the study undertaken here : (1) There is a close link between the ecological imbalance and the present trend of ill-conceived modernization among the Garos in the region. (2) In spite of the alien influences from the many quarters on their thought and life patterns, the primal worldview, in which nature, supernature and man exist interdependently, still holds good in their culture. (3) It is therefore possible to draw insights fruitfully from the core of the primal religious heritage to recover the symbiotic relationship with nature, and thus arrest the sway of destructive types of modernization.

This dissertation is divided into five chapters. After a brief discussion on my preference of the use of the term "primal" over against the "primitive" for the traditional religion of the Garos, I have stated the problem, purpose, resources and methodology of my work, in this introductory chapter. In the second chapter, I have analysed the philosophical concept of creation itself. However, to make my

work on the concept of creation in Garo primal religion stand out, I have restricted my scope to the views of Aristotle and St. Thomas Aquinas only, as these two thinkers place creation in the perspective of divine causation.

In the third chapter, I study specifically, against the backdrop of a philosophy of creation already discussed, the concept of creation in the Garo primal religion. In the first part of the chapter, a popular creation myth, which is a central "text" in the concerned religious tradition of the Garos, has been analysed. It is my perception that the creation myth functions as a mirror to reflect the people's primordial vision of an inter-related and integrated life for the orders of nature, man and God. In the second part of the chapter, some of the select religio-cultural practices have been examined to corroborate my conclusion. It is found that such religio-cultural practices, it is argued, spring from the self-consciousness, which is also cosmic-consciousness for the Garos.

In the fourth chapter, I have addressed myself to the impact of modernization on the worldview and life of the Garos. Modernization often is mistaken for a technological civilization. A technological civilization that cuts at the humane roots of the Garo culture has been destructive to Garo way of life. There is nothing wrong with a technology with a human face. But, modernization has not always been sensitive to their primal vision of life. It has been often hostile to their worldview and quality of life. The process

of ill-conceived modernization and its hostile impact on the life and worldview of the Garos have been traced to certain inherent defects in the new political administration, coming of Christianity and the emergence of a consumeristic culture.

In the concluding chapter, besides summing up the results of the study, I have explored how far the Garo concept of creation might be pressed into the service of contributing to the recovery of an eco-consciousness for the Garos as a tribe. Primarily, the Garo primal religion perceives the cosmic "realities", the origin and survival of the whole creation, as the "household affairs" of the Creator God. It is also closely associated with their matrilineal culture. The Creator God, who is believed to be the creator, or source, of every being in this universe, is perceived as characterized in its motherhood : God is an all-caring Mother, or Grandmother. Hence, the whole creation, with the Creator God at the centre of the universe, is understood as actively moving within, or fulfilling its own assigned functions in the great "universal household". Although the place of humanity is very high in the cosmic order, its nature is to be understood in terms of its function, creativity and responsibility. Humanity is asked not to forget its existence as dependant on the elements like land and water, and also the fellow creatures like man and innumerable forms of life. Thus the sustenance of an environment that can support life itself, man included, is the task assigned to man as a serious responsibility. The

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imperative must be heeded to, as there is no other alternative to a humanity, faced as it is with the threat of its extinction on the earth as one more species to leave its final signatures in the geological records.



## CHAPTER-II

### CONCEPT OF CREATION

Creation, implying a sense of "production", is an important philosophical concept in the area of metaphysics and philosophy of religion. Metaphysics studies it for explicating, generally, the origination of things in the world (along with its co-relate destruction as well). Therefore, the concept is inextricably associated with the process of change that makes possible the origination of the multiplicity of objects. Hence metaphysicians discuss it under the principles of act and potency or, at times, in the context of a theory of causes - material, formal, efficient, instrumental and final. Such a metaphysical study may also be in respect of the creation of the world as such. Philosophy of religion, however, among other things, studies the divine nature as the Pure Act, or divine causation in respect of production of the world to come up with theories of either emanation or creation out of nothing or of a pre-existent matter. It is therefore, in a special way, concerned with God's efficient causality and also the material cause, if any, of which created world is a product.

In this chapter, an attempt has been made to analyse philosophically the concept of Creation itself. This, for the simple reason that the concept of creation in the Garo primal religion, though it may lack a philosophical framework, is not devoid of significance. The significance however is couched in a myth which, at a prelogical level, may admit several layers of interpretation. The myth invariably has the

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concept of an efficient and material cause, howsoever obscured by the poetic and mythological fancy. Yet, I shall analyse the concept of creation not quite generally but with special reference to the views of Aristotle and Thomas Aquinas. My choice of these two philosophers has a certain justification : Aristotle is the first Greek philosopher who, while giving a realistic explanation of the world, provided us with a systematic theory of causation. And, Aquinas, making use of Aristotle's philosophical categories, gives us a natural theology that provides for the divine creative act within the latter's conceptual schema. Now, the Garo myth of creation may have within itself some of these concepts.

Aristotle (384-322 B.C.), a pupil of Plato, developed a realistic philosophy without rejecting the spiritual world of ideas and the divine. His cosmology, in particular, in substantial disagreement with his philosophical mentor, is a philosophical system which focuses on the realm of nature and the method for studying nature. But, it is deeply rooted in his metaphysics in as much as it is oriented to the discovery of ultimate principles of reality. How shall we explain the world ? What is its essence ? Is it self-existent or caused ? If caused, what is its source ? What are the principles involved in the origination ? Aristotle's positive solution to the problems is allied both to the naturalistic, or materialistic, theory of atomists, on the one hand, and to the ideal theory of Plato, on the other. It is precisely the latter that makes for a theodicy, or natural theology. Democritus had explained the world in terms of the moving material atoms. Plato, on the

other hand, explained it in terms of the Ideas which somehow influence the formless matter. Aristotle, in a way, rejects both and seeks to mediate between them. The Idea, or form, cannot be a self-existent "essence", apart from matter. This is a major departure from Plato. There can be no form without matter. Nor can the changing reality perceived by us be explained merely by the purposeless atoms, or matter, in motion. This again is a major departure from Democritus. There can be no matter without a directing purpose, or form (entelechy). Plato regarded the objects of concrete experience as mere incomplete copies of the universal Idea, as accidents, whereas the form alone is the substance in a true sense; objects are mere "shadows". Aristotle, on the other hand, regards the particular objects, or individual beings, as real substances. But the essence, or true nature, of the particular concrete being is constituted by its form, by the essential qualities of the class to which it belongs. Yet, the substance in its individual existence is a complex of form and matter. This is his hylemorphism at the root of his naturalistic and realistic cosmology.<sup>1</sup>

There is, according to Aristotle, a plurality of individual substances; his metaphysical position is one of pluralism rather than monism. Moreover, the substances arrange themselves

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1. Frank Thilly, A History of Philosophy (Allahabad: Central Publishing House, 1994), pp. 104-105; Richard Mckeon (ed.), Introduction to Aristotle (New York: Modern Library, 1947), pp. 20 ff.

in an ascending scale, the limits of which are indeterminate matter, at the bottom and, God, or "pure form", at the top. The whole array of substances - individual physical objects, plants, animals, and men - lies in between these two extremes. Every individual substance is an admixture of matter and form. By form, Aristotle understands the "universal aspect" of a thing, the essential unity shared by all things of the same type, or class. Matter, on the other hand, is that which confers particularity and uniqueness. Matter and form are inseparable principles of the individual thing. On this point, as it is seen, Aristotle differs radically from Plato; Plato had asserted the separation of form from the thing. But Aristotle strongly insists that the universal and the particular are fused into the complete unity of the individual. The individual object changes and grows; all that is perceived is changeable. It assumes now these qualities, now those; it is now seed, now sapling, now tree, now fruit.

How shall we explain this process of becoming? There must be something that underlies all change, something that persists all through in the change, something into which the different qualities inhere. This particularizing and individuating principle is matter. As conceived by Aristotle, it is not the self-sufficient substance of the early materialistic philosophers. Rather it is matter which is inseparable from its form, co-existent with it. Thus, when we say that an object changes its form, we do not mean that the form itself changes, or becomes different: no form, as such can change into another form. Rather it is the case that matter assumes different forms,

indeed a series of forms, one form following another. The form it first had does not change into another form, but a new form fashions the matter. The different forms have always existed, they do not suddenly come into being. Neither matter nor forms arise or disappear; they are the eternal principles of things. In order to explain change or growth, we must assume a substratum (matter) that persists and changes, and "qualities", or "essences" (forms), which are responsible for the rich and growing world around us.<sup>2</sup>

Closely connected to the distinction between form and matter is the antithesis between potentiality and actuality. Whereas form and matter are inseparable, yet, distinguishable, aspects of a single substance, potentiality and actuality are the stages in the development of a substance - the potential being an earlier, and the actual a later, stage. The example given by Aristotle is revealing: As the acorn is to the oak, the materials of the building to the completed structure, sleeping to the waking, the eye shut to the eye seeing, so is potentiality to actuality. The distinction is clearly relative, the same thing may in relation to one thing be actual, and in relation to something else merely potential. The oak is the actuality of the acorn, but the potentiality of an oak table. In an ascending series from potentiality to actuality, there is a progressive realization of a greater preponderance of form over matter. Thus the two distinctions between form

2. Ram Nath Sarma, History of Western Philosophy (Delhi: Kedar Nath Ram Nath, 1994), pp. 129 ff.; Frank Thilly, A History of Philosophy, pp. 105 ff.

and matter, and between <sup>n</sup>pot~~en~~tiality and actuality, though not identical, are closely parallel. Hence Aristotle calls matter the principle of potentiality, and form the principle of reality, or actuality.<sup>3</sup> Every form may be, like the Platonic idea, eternal, but, instead of being outside of matter, it is in matter : form and matter have always co-exist<sup>s</sup>ed; they are co-eternal principles of things. Form realizes itself in the thing; it causes the thing to move and to realize an end, or purpose.

The cooperation of form and matter, which is discernible in the processes of nature, is even more clearly illustrated in the creative activity of man. An artist in producing a work of art has an idea, or plan, in his mind. He acts on matter through the motion of his hands, being governed in his action by his plan, and so realizes a purpose. The developmental process described in terms of the antithesis of the potential and the actual, of form and matter, is governed by causes.<sup>4</sup>

Aristotle recognizes four principles operative in any process, which he identifies as the four kinds of causes<sup>5</sup>:

(1) The material cause, by which he understands the crude and relatively undifferentiated stuff, that from which the thing in question is made. Aristotle illustrates the material cause

3. Frank Thilly, A History of Philosophy, p. 106.

4. Ibid, pp. 106-107.

5. Ibid.

by the formless bronze from which a sculptor plans to fashion his statue. (2) The formal cause is the pattern, or structure, which is to become "embodied" in the thing when it is fully realized. It is that which the thing essentially is. The formal cause of a statue is the general plan, or idea, of the statue as conceived by the sculptor, and now "injected" into the relatively undifferentiated matter "to in-form" into a statue. (3) The efficient, or moving cause, is the active agent which produces the thing as its effect, it is that through which the thing is produced. The efficient cause of the statue includes not only the agent but also all the instruments used in his work. (4) The final cause is the end, or purpose, toward which the process is directed. It is that for the sake of which a thing is made. The material and formal causes are obviously intrinsic to the individual substance. The efficient cause, however, is extrinsic to it. The final cause, in as much as it is also a form, may be either intrinsic or extrinsic, as the the goal to be worked out may be within or without the individual thing.

The four causes, which are readily distinguishable in the creative activities of man, are at work in nature as well. Aristotle maintains their operation, particularly, in the organic world. The only difference is that, in nature, the "artist" and the product are not separate, but one. The discovery of one type of cause in no way precludes the discovery of one of the other types. The four causes can be much more readily discriminated in a fabricated article, or an artistic production. But Aristotle insists that they can

also be distinguished in natural process and in the growth of living organisms.<sup>6</sup>

Aristotle observes that forms are purposive forces which realize themselves in the world of matter. Every organism becomes what it is through the action of an idea, or purpose. There is a directing principle at work in the seed that makes it impossible for the seed to become anything but a plant; or animal of the same species, as that from which it came. Since forms in themselves are unchangeable, species are immutable, though individuals arise and pass away. Motion, or change, is explained as the process for union of form and matter. The idea, or form, is what causes motion in matter : the idea is the mover, matter the thing moved. Motion is the realization of the potentialities of a thing. How is this brought about by the mere presence of the idea ? Aristotle maintains that the matter is in potency to realize the form, it is aroused to action by the presence of the form, it has a "desire" for the form and, since form and matter are eternal, motion, too, may be said to be eternal.<sup>7</sup>

It is significant that we take note of the fact that Aristotle's metaphysics naturally culminates in a "theology"<sup>8</sup>. The eternal motion on the part of matter presupposes, according to Aristotle, an eternal unmoved mover, something that causes motion, without itself being moved. A given motion in the

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6. Ibid.

7. Ibid., p. 108.

8. Ibid.

universe is produced by some other motion, this motion by a third motion and so on, and, since an infinite regress is impossible, it is necessary that there should be, as the first cause of the series of motions, an unmoved mover, or God. If the first cause of motion were itself in motion, it would have to be moved by something else that moves, and this would leave motion unexplained. Somewhere, motion must begin, being caused by something that itself does not move. Hence, there must be an "eternal unmoved first mover", who is the final ground of all vital forces in nature.<sup>9</sup> It is said that Aristotle's argument from motion to the unmoved cause of motion is the first complete formulation of what has come to be known as the cosmological argument for God's existence,<sup>10</sup> whatever shortcomings are discovered in the argument in the long history of philosophy. The argument has never lost its fascination to the philosophers. God acts on the world, not literally moving it, but as a magnet which draws the iron fillings towards itself, or as a beautiful picture, or an ideal, acts on the soul. Aristotle was led to think that God is the final cause of all that occurs; he is the highest purpose, or the highest good, of the world. All beings in the world, plants, animals, men, desire the realization of their essence because of this highest

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9. Ibid.; Aristotle, Metaphysics, Book A, cited by Edwin A. Burtt, Types of Religious Philosophy (New York: Harper & Brothers Publishers, 1939), pp. 55-56.

10. Frank Thilly, A History of Philosophy, pp. 108-109.

good, or God. His existence is the cause of their desire. Hence, God is the unifying and directing principle of the world, the goal towards which all things strive, the principle which accounts for all order, beauty and life in the universe.<sup>11</sup>

I am inclined to believe that Aristotle's physics may have been defective, but the principle governing his metaphysics may be philosophically sound. For he thinks that the earth was at the centre of the physical universe. It is surrounded by a number of revolving spheres, which explain the movement of planets. The outermost sphere has the stars and is moved by an aspiration of the unmoved cause, or God. For him, nature, in itself, is divided into kinds. These natural kinds, in turn, form natural groups, or "kingdom of kinds". Horses are of a kind in the animal kingdom, even so, humans are of a kind in the rational kingdom, and so on. Further, these kinds and kingdoms are interrelated; they form a continuous hierarchy. For example, a horse has the characteristics of the mineral kingdom and vegetable kingdom, but also has other parts of its own kind which makes it belonging to the animal kingdom. In the same way, humans share a form with the animal, mineral and vegetable kingdoms, but have more characteristics, or form, such as rationality, spirituality, morality, etc.<sup>12</sup>

The supreme end, or purpose, of human presence in this universe

11. Ibid.; Simon Blackburn, Dictionary of Philosophy (New York : Oxford University Press, 1996), p. 252.
12. Richard Mckeod (ed.), Introduction to Aristotle, pp. 8 ff.; W.T. Jones, A History of Western Philosophy (New York : Harcourt Brace Jovanovick, 1970), pp. 217-218.

is the ultimate principle, or "the good", for the sake of which every other good is to be sought. What is this highest good? The goodness of a thing consists in the realization of its specific nature. Hence, the highest good for man is the complete and habitual exercise of the functions which make him a human being, a life of reason.<sup>13</sup>

The apex of the Aristotelian cosmology was the discovery of the concept of the unmoved mover and of "the good". These come handy to Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274), acknowledgedly the greatest of the thirteenth century scholastic philosopher-theologians. He is well-known not merely for his theological works but for his ability to utilize Aristotelianism as an instrument of the theological and philosophical analysis and synthesis.<sup>14</sup> The Christian philosopher that he was, his fundamental aim was to demonstrate the rationality of the universe as a revelation of God.<sup>15</sup> Although Albert the Great, his teacher, had gone some way in the utilization of the Aristotelian philosophy, it was left to Aquinas to attempt the full reconciliation of the Aristotelian system with Christian theology. However, it will be absurd to suggest that the Thomistic philosophy is simply a restated Aristotelianism, for he equally makes use of other writers, Christian and non-Christian alike. The thoughts of Augustin, Pseudo-Dionysius,

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13. Frank Thilly, A History of Philosophy, pp. 113 f.

14. Sinclair B. Ferguson and David F. Wright (eds.), The New Dictionary of Theology (Leicester : Inter-Versity Press, 1988), p. 682 f.

15. Frank Thilly, A History of Philosophy, p. 227.

as also of his mediaeval predecessors and of Jewish and Arabian philosophers, are replete in his philosophical works. We could say that the Thomistic synthesis, however, is largely unified by the application of the fundamental Aristotelian principles. A great deal of Aquinas' philosophy is indeed the doctrine of Aristotle, but it is the doctrine of Aristotle re-thought by a powerful creative philosophical mind, and not slavishly adopted<sup>16</sup>.

While Aquinas owes much to his predecessors on the problem of the creation of the world, he differs from them in many ways. In a sense, the Thomistic position lies mid-way between that of the Arabian-Islamic Averroists and that of the Christian Augustinians. Averroists maintained the eternal existence of the world as a matter of rational demonstration. Augustine, however, held that the beginning of the world was not only a matter of revelation but of rational demonstration as well. Aquinas, however, maintains the possibility of a beginning of the world in time, along with an equal possibility of its eternity. But he denies that either possibility can be shown by reason to be the fact.<sup>17</sup> In developing his solution to the problem of creation, Aquinas owes much to his mediaeval fore-runners : Albert the Great and Maimonides. Nevertheless, his teaching departs from theirs significantly. Thus, Maimonides would admit creation as a matter of revelation only, whereas

16. Frederick Copleston, A History of Philosophy, Vol. II (London : Search Press, 1950), p. 423.

17. Saint Thomas Aquinas, Summa Contra Gentiles, Book Two : Creation, translated, with an introduction, by James F. Anderson (London : University of Notre Dame Press, 1956), p. 11.

Aquinas holds that it can be demonstrated rationally; and, yet, both agree that it is impossible to demonstrate the beginning of the world in time, and that it is always possible to deny the eternal existence of the world. Again, Albert admits, with Maimonides, that the creation of the world ex nihilo cannot be known except by faith, while Aquinas considers this demonstration possible.<sup>18</sup> Now, let me enter at some length into Aquinas' philosophy of Creation.

1. Creation out of Nothing : As a theologian-philosopher, Aquinas has a strong conviction that God is the First Cause of this universe and everything therein.<sup>19</sup> Creation from nothing simply means that the universe owes its existence to God, that God is its necessary cause. For him, God created the cosmos, including matter, out of nothing. For, if God is the first cause of all things, he must be the cause of both form and matter in the Aristotelian schema. If creatures were created out of a pre-existent matter, that material would be either God himself or something other than God. But God cannot be the material of creation, since he is a simple substance, spiritual in nature, therefore, unchangeable. Nor can there be anything independent of the First Cause to serve as the material to be worked upon. For there can be but one necessary Being. God, therefore, is absolutely prior and eternal, cannot

18. Saint Thomas Aquinas, Summa Contra Gentiles, Book Two : Creation, translated, with an introduction, by James F. Anderson, p. 11.

19. Ibid., pp. 36-38.

"exteriorise" himself in creation. Since a matter independent of God would be relativizing the absolute God, it must be presumed that God brings out his creation out of nothing, ex nihilo. However, the phrase must not be misunderstood that there is something which is called 'nothing', nihil, the material out of which God created the universe. It must simply mean that first there was nothing and God created something.<sup>20</sup> Creation then is the divine summoning of something into the act of existence out of nothingness.

The power of creation is a prerogative of God alone, and it cannot be communicated to any creature, according to Aquinas.<sup>21</sup> He argues that the reason, why some philosophers, like Avicenna (Ibn-Sina), introduced intermediary beings, was their belief that God creates by a necessity of nature. Such a necessity, they thought, provides for intermediary stages between the absolute simplicity of the supreme Godhead and the multiplicity of the creatures. Aquinas asserts forcefully that God does not create by necessity of nature; and, indeed, there is no reason why he should not create spontaneously and directly a multiplicity of creatures.<sup>22</sup> While Peter Lombard argues that the power of creation is communicable by God to creature in such a way that the latter could act as an instrument, not by its own power, this position is not acceptable to Aquinas, since, if the creature were to contribute

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20. Frederick Copleston, A History of Philosophy, Vol. II, p. 233; Summa Contra Gentiles, Book Two, Chapters 15-16.

21. De Potentia, 3, 4, cited by Frederick Copleston, A History of Philosophy, Book Two, p. 364.

22. Ibid.

in any way to creation, its own power and activity will be involved. But such a finite power of the creature cannot accomplish an act of creation which demands infinite power, namely the act of bridging the infinite gulf between not-being and being.<sup>23</sup> This at once suggests the technical sense attached to the concept of creation out of nothing. Aquinas, however, observes God's act, or operation, of creation in two ways : active creation and passive creation. Active creation refers to the creative act of God, wherein creation is defined as the product of something from its own nothingness. This is to preclude the possibility of interpreting creation as any form of emanation out of divine substance. For emanation, too, reminds us of the priority of God : from God, who is the 'universal cause', every thing, or being, comes into existence. But the universal causality of God cannot be equated with the material cause of creation. By definition, God is spirit, and not matter. On the other hand, the passive creation focuses on the effect, in the creature. Here the operation of creation is somehow outside of the Creator, but it is still from him : all created beings, or things, are being "influenced" or "transformed" by God, in the sense that their nature is called forth into the act of existence. God's causality is observed, in this sense, as transcendent causality. Therefore, for Aquinas, the creative power belongs to God alone, in the proper sense, since creation of its very nature and its

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23. Ibid., pp. 364-365.

actualization in existence require an infinite and omnipotent power.<sup>24</sup> We must recognize here the advancement of the Aristotelian doctrine of potency and act, matter and form. While Aristotle spoke of the actualization of finite matter by way of "forms" to constitute a finite nature, Aquinas speaks of the finite nature itself being actualized by "existence" as the additional form directly imparted through the efficient causality of God by his creative act.

Another question closely associated with creation is whether the world was created in time or from eternity. Aquinas maintains that, although it can be philosophically demonstrated that the world was created by God out of nothing, we cannot satisfactorily draw the conclusion, or provide an indisputable proof, that the creation took place in time. This is against the views of Albert. On the other hand, Aquinas equally disagrees with the views of Averroists to maintain that it cannot be philosophically demonstrated that the world was created from all eternity either; that creation in time is an impossibility, too, cannot be demonstrated. In other words, that the world was actually created in time, and not from eternity, to Aquinas, is known only through revelation. Hence, Aquinas argues that the philosophers cannot settle the question whether the world was created in time or eternity. He also maintains that, although God might

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24. Summa Theologica, Ia, q45, art.3(c), cited in The New Dictionary of Theology, edited by Joseph A. Komorchak, Mary Collins and Dermot A. Lane (Bangalore : PTI, 1996), p. 251.

have willed freely from eternity to create the world, the world cannot be demonstrated to have come into existence from eternity. In other words, God's creative act may be thought of as certainly eternal, the external effect of that act will follow the way willed by God.<sup>25</sup>

2. Relationship Between Creator and Creation : According to Aquinas, every creature, by the very fact that it is created, has a "real" relation to God as Creator. But the relation concerned is one-sided. For it cannot be argued that God, too, has a real relation to the creature. For a real relation in God would either be identical with the divine substance or "accidental" (in the sense of being an accident as distinct from substance) in God. But the divine substance cannot be made the material cause of his creatures. In the event of God's substance serving as the material cause, there would be the necessary relation of God with the creatures, and thereby God would be in some way dependent on his creatures. This would philosophically militate against the absolute transcendence of God. On the other hand, God, as absolutely simple, cannot receive or possess accidents. Further, there are other implications too : If God is really related to creatures, it would mean that creation is necessarily eternal, and thereby God cannot exist apart from creatures. Now, God and his creation would form a "Totality". This position would lead to pantheism, incompatible with the Christian concept of

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25. Summa Contra Gentiles, Book Two, Chapters 31-34; Frederick Copleston, A History of Philosophy, Vol. II, pp. 366-367.

monotheism. Moreover, it would be impossible to explain the generation and perishing of individual creatures. Hence, for Aquinas, the perception that God is related to creatures is only an "ideal" relation (relatio rationis), attributed to God by human intellect. However, he maintains that the attribution is legitimate, since God is Creator and we cannot express this fact in human language without speaking as though God were related to creatures. The point he is stressing here is that, when we speak of creatures as related to God and of God as related to creatures, we should remember that it is creature which depends on God and not God on creatures.<sup>26</sup> In the Thomistic perception, creation is a unilateral relation of dependence : the creature depends for its being and continuance upon the Creator, but not the Creator upon the creation. The position is consistent with the concept of a creation out of nothing in Christian philosophy.

3. Purpose of Creation : If God does not create by a necessity of nature, the question why he creates at all, becomes philosophically relevant. Aquinas maintains that God's creative causality is free, and hence intellectual and voluntary in character. With his infinite knowledge and wisdom, God must act freely for a purpose. As self-sufficient and infinite perfection, God may not be said to create for the sake of acquiring anything for himself. The Biblical affirmation here has been that God created the world "for his own glory".

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26. Summa Contra Gentiles, Book Two, Chapters 11-13; Frederick Copleston, A History of Philosophy, Vol. II, pp. 353-364.

But it may be philosophically interpreted to mean that even in creation God did not have any potency that seeks to be self-actualized. He does not need anything which he does not already possess. Much less does it mean that he stands in need of a chorus of admirers. The philosophical significance of these negatives only suggests that God's will cannot depend on anything apart from God, that he himself, as the infinite good, must be the end of his infinite act of will : In the case of the act of creation, then, the end is his own goodness as communicable to beings outside himself.<sup>27</sup>

Aquinas is quite creative in the synthesis that he effects between Aristotelianism and the Christian theology to give us a Christian philosophy. He maintains that God creates a thing for the purpose of revealing his goodness in creation. Hence, the nature of everything is such that it points in the direction of divine goodness, in its own way. Every creature is to realize the divine idea and reveal the goodness of God by realizing its true being. Objectively considered, the highest good, as viewed by Aristotle, is identified by Aquinas with God. Likewise, subjectively considered, the good for the creatures is their greatest possible perfection, or likeness to God. When Aquinas considers that the supreme good for man is the eternal blessedness, or beatitude, that consists in the realization of his true self, he has effected a creative synthesis with the Aristotelian metaphysics. While the non-rational beings are

27. Summa Theologica, Ia, 44, 4, cited by Copleston, A History of Philosophy, Vol. II, pp. 366-367; Frank Thilly, A History of Philosophy, p. 233.

determined by natural, or sensuous, impulses, implanted by God, to realize their goal, the rational beings are to seek their realization consciously and voluntarily.

Closely connected with the question of purpose of creation is the question of the diversification in the order of creation. Aquinas does not agree with the views of the ancient Greek cosmologists on the issue. According to them, the multiplicity of things in the created universe is the result of chance movements and convergences of material principles, irrespective of their being conceived as elements or atoms. Aquinas is a creationist in the strict sense of the term. He believes that the things were created diverse and mutually distinct, in order that they might be suitable recipients for various forms. This once again suggests how creatively Aquinas makes use of hylemorphism of Aristotle. Diversity of things cannot be traced back to any pair of contrary agents, or active principles, the one good, the other evil by nature, as some of the ancient philosophers and even some Christian thinkers had taught. Aquinas is careful to assert that the primary cause of distinction of things cannot be found at all in the order of secondary agents, as taught by Avicenna. He rejects the views of Christian thinkers, like Origen, that the diversity is to be attributed to a diversity of merits on the part of rational creatures. Multiplicity, on the contrary, among created things, exists primarily for the reason that they in multiple ways represent the perfection of God.<sup>28</sup> Aquinas maintains that it is

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28. Summa Contra Gentiles, Book Two, Chapters 41-44.

'the intention of God Himself' to create not only multiplicity of individuals in one species, but also multiplicity of species. In all their gradation of the perfection of the universe, they represent God's own goodness and perfection in innumerable ways. The grades among the species are said to be divinely ordered within a hierarchical structure from higher to lower, according to the manner of their being.

In conclusion, it is important for us to recognize, in the context of philosophical analysis of creation, a few fundamental concepts of causation, the first cause that sets in motion everything without itself being moved, the finality of a created order, etc. For these concepts are met with both at the prelogical level, in myths and religious rituals, and at the logical level in a conceptual schema, like those reflected in the philosophies of Aristotle and Aquinas. Thus, what may be unmoved mover at the latter may present itself as the "source", or "origin", of everything else at the former level. The close association of certain causes as principles may also pave the way for the concept of the entire created order itself as a living organism, in which everything is mutually dependent on one another. Thus, there is a sense in which it may be said that a philosophy grows out of a mythological worldview, even as philosophy itself is a mature reflection on the deeply felt truths of the mythological insights.

## CHAPTER-III

### CREATION IN THE GARO PRIMAL RELIGION

The concept of Creation in the Garo Primal Religion, admittedly, is not available to us in a philosophical schema. This is understandable in as much as a written literature is a precondition for the emergence of a philosophical vocabulary. The Garo primal religion does not have any systematic doctrine, or ideology. Much less a scripture, in its strict sense of a written record credited with "revelation". Yet, this is not because the concerned people lack in the experience, or the perception, of cosmic "realities" that make the existence of human life and its activities significant. On the contrary, they have an abundance of that experience. It only operates on a very different plane. This is clear to us, when we listen to their myth and music, when we observe the celebration of their rituals and festivals, when we reflect on their symbolism, morality and spirituality in practice. Hence, we may have to reconstruct their conception of creation, not from the written records but from their concrete life as it is lived. Therefore, in what follows, I shall focus my attention on their myth of creation and some of their religio-cultural practices. To be sure, there are other aspects of the tradition which may be said to be a ready material for a philosophical enterprise. However a judicious delimiting of the scope of one's study becomes an academic necessity.

First, a methodological issue. How are we to reconstruct meaning out of the myths and the religio-cultural practices,

granting these may be treated as "the texts" in the primal traditions ? For any creative hermeneutics, we may have to take the "texts" along with their "contexts". Now the context of the tribal texts is the whole of lived life. Hence, the meaning, before it is conceptually formulated, is to be "felt", often by a sympathetic participation. Once the sympathetic participation is guaranteed, we may seek from the hermeneuticians a reasonably workable scientific methodology.

A naturalistic method, advocated by thinkers like Max Muller, a prominent comparative mythologist in the nineteenth century, may be employed by us. A great deal of tribal myths and socio-religious texts are the expressions of their attitude to nature and the many nature powers. They often depict people's close association with, indeed, their self-perception as an integral part of, nature as a living organism. They may depict a structured cosmos in which man, gods, spirits, the dead ancestors are all stratified. Again, a philological method, advocated by thinkers like Thieme, too, may be of immense help, in as much as the language is a mirror of reality, as our contemporary philosophers of language have admirably argued out. Likewise, an ethnological method, too, advocated by the British anthropologists, may reveal the social structures of the tribal society.

I tend to believe that it is advisable that we do not practise here exclusive methods, for, for the tribal worldviews, it is never a case of "either-or", but of "both-and". Every exclusive method may have its own serious limitations. A judicious combination of the several methods may yield

better results in the attempt at our understanding of the tribal myths and practices. I shall therefore remain close to a "syncretic" hermeneutics, although a certain preference may be exhibited by me to naturalism, consistent with the concern for the revival of an eco-consciousness through the Garo conception of creation in their primal religion.

#### 1. Garo Myth of Creation

The traditional Garos have a number of creation myths. At times a single creation myth admits several versions. This is partly due to the differences in dialects and modifications in the process of oral transmission. Moreover, besides the creation stories of the universe as a whole, there are also some isolated stories of "origin" of specific things or tribal institutions, for example, the creation of human beings, rice, fire, marriage, a dance and so on. At times there are mythical explanations for their land, hills, rivers, groves, etc. For the modern mind, they may seem to be logically inconsistent and unsystematic. But, their outright rejection may be a mistake, since we are then liable to miss the significance of vital categories that rule the lives of these people. Indeed, they may not be devoid of significance even to the modern mind, if only it cares to separate the grain from the chaff. Simple as they are, and "irrational" as they seem to be, the creation stories may have been framed out of the lived experiences of the people. Hence, they are the products of their response to their own life-situations : hunting, foraging, agriculture,

birth, death and life-after; nature, God and man; society, religion and culture. They become "myth" (mythos), precisely because they become "sacred stories" that sustain their way of life. Hence, they admit deeper meanings beyond the surface, for the people. It is not a question of scientific knowledge, but of wisdom required for living a meaningful life.

"Myth" is taken here not in the sense of what is opposed to reality. In the words of Mircea Eliade, the myth is "a 'true story' and, beyond that, a story that is a most precious possession because it is sacred, exemplary, significant".<sup>1</sup> C.R. Agera maintains that myths 'refer to the truth of our being, however camouflaged'. He suggests that one should not ask what a myth is, rather what it does in the consciousness of the people.<sup>2</sup> Approving the views of Joseph Campbell, a contemporary mythologist, he writes, "As a people we all stand in need of myths, we 'live by' myths".<sup>3</sup> He finds the necessity of "deconstructing" the meaning of the myth, as it admits transcendental elements beneath the mundane ones. He writes :

Both symbols and myths emerge from the depth of our ontic being. A myth may die out on its own, or a myth may be replaced by another, but myths continue to live

1. Mircea Eliade, Myth and Reality (London : George Allen & Urwin Ltd., 1963), p. 1.
2. C.R. Agera, "Human Creativity, A Value ? An Essay on Ecological Philosophy", Religion and Society, Vol.42, No.3 (September, 1995) : 43.
3. Ibid., Joseph Campbell, Myth to Live By (New York : Bantam Books, 2978).

for ever. Hence, the recognition of a myth as a myth suggests that we clearly demarcate the distinction between the myth and what is mythologized. A myth understood as a myth, but not abolished, may be called 'a broken myth'. It is important for religion to have myths, but they should not be unbroken myths. Myths .. are to be understood only in their mythological form, as pointing to the beyond... Every myth is to be 'broken', or 'deconstructed', or 'decoded' so that it serves as a sign of what is mythologized, namely the ultimate.<sup>4</sup>

The Garo traditional myths are no exception. They reflect both their day-to-day concerns and aspirations, moral and spiritual visions, and religio-metaphysical perceptions. They regulate their belief-systems, ceremonies and festivals, steady their ethical behaviour, and stabilize their socio-cultural and political institutions. The Creation myth, in particular, is a mirror, to their cosmology. It functions as a mirror that reflects the people's primordial vision of an interrelated life for nature, man and God. It might have been formed in the "unconscious" of the people since time immemorial. Since it captures the symbiotic relationship of man with nature and "supernature" alike, it has a perennial significance to his life, past, present and future. Hence the only way of remembering it is by way of periodic celebration.

For a long time, these myths were a part of an oral tradition. However, today, some of the creation stories

4. C.R. Agera, "Religious Language : A Study in Tillich", The Journal of Religious Studies, Vol.XXVIII, No.1 (Spring, 1997) : 36.

are being collected and published in the local magazines and booklets. Some of them have been compiled, and put among the other traditional songs and stories in the book form. One of the most popular versions of the Creation myth is selected for our reflections, here<sup>5</sup>:

In the beginning, there was no land and darkness was everywhere over the vast watery plain. Having a plan to give birth to the Earth, Tatara-Rabuga, Dakgipa-Rugipa, Stura-Pantura, Bisikkrom-Bidatara, Dingipa-Ba·bra, Pattigipa-Ra·rongipa<sup>6</sup>, commissioned a lesser female spirit called Nostu-Nopantu to carry out this plan. As there was no place even to set her foot on, Nostu-Nopantu rested herself upon a spider's web which was stretched over the water. To start with, Tatara-Rabuga, Dakgipa-Rugipa, gave her a handful of sand to Nostu-Nopantu, but when she began to do her assignment it was found that the sand-particles would not stick together. Therefore, she sent Ang·kerong (a big type of crab) underneath the water to fetch some amount of clay so as to fasten the sand-particles together into a shape. However, disappointingly, Ang·kerong returned because the water was too deep for him. Then

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5. This Creation story has been translated and, to some extent, reconstructed, by the present writer, from its Garo versions found in Doronsing K. Sangma (comp.), A·chik Golporang (Garo Folklore), Part-III (Tura : Tura Book Room, 1984), pp. 27-29; D.S. Rongmuthu (comp.), Apasong Agana (Thus Said Our Forefathers), (Baghmara : M.A. Sangma, 1970), pp. 1-9; K.M. Momin (comp.), A·chikni Chanchibewale Seanirang (Thoughtful Writings of the Garos), (Tura : G.K. Marak, 1972), pp. 54-58.
6. These are the names, suggesting a variety of attributes or functions, given to the Supreme Being. Usually those names are uttered in rhymes, and to maintain the rhythm they are pronounced in pairs, sometimes, more than one pair.

Nostu-Nopantu sent Chipong-Nokma Balpong-Gitel (a small type of crab), but he was also frightened by the depth of the water and had to return without fulfilling his work. Finally, Chiching-Balching (a beetle) was sent, who could, with great effort, return with a lump of clay; and with the aid of which Nostu-Nopantu fashioned the Earth.

When Mane-Pilte (Mother Earth) was just been born, it was still wet and soft. So Nostu-Nopantu prayed to Tatara-Rabuga to help her in making the Earth firm and concrete. Tatara-Rabuga, then, set the sun, the moon and the wind in their respective functioning places, and as a result the surface of the Earth was dried up and hardened.

However, Nostu-Nopantu found the Earth still naked and ugly. So, she said to Dakgipa-Rugipa, Dingipa-Ba·bra, "It is not nice to keep Mane-Pilte's breast uncovered, it is not right way to keep human habitat so bare". Therefore, Dakgipa-Rugipa grew hair on her head in the form of banyan tree, sal tree, sago palm, and different kinds of cane. A turban in the form of clouds was given too. For her Re·king (traditional Garo petticoat), different kinds of thatching grass and grasses were caused to grow.

Of all the animals of the land created by Dakgipa-Rugipa, hulock-ape and jungle-foul were created first, and their mission on Earth was to utter loud cries and prevent Mother Earth from falling asleep and neglecting her function of productivity. In the water, the first aquatic animal created was a frog, whose special function was to proclaim the advent of rain to all other living creatures by his loud croak.

Though there was water underneath the Earth, its surface was dry. So, Dakgipa-Rugipa commissioned a lesser female spirit called Norechire-Kimrebokre to make the springs break forth, the water flowing in the forms of streams

and rivers, and to water the surface of the Earth with rain, announcing its possibility by a thundering voice. Dakgipa-Rugipa, then, felt the necessity of putting human beings on this Earth. So, she called around her all other lesser spirits and declared her intention to create the human beings and placing them on the Earth. Dakgipa-Rugipa, then created man and woman in her dwelling place, which was seven layers underneath the Earth after giving them Chichri-Chijanggi (water of life). Even today, Dakgipa-Rugipa is giving the Chichri-Chijanggi freely to each man and woman before they are sent to the surface of the Earth. The length of one's life-span depends on how much one had taken that Chichri-Chijanggi before he/she is born.

The story is simple, almost innocent. Nevertheless, it provides us with some inestimable clues to reconstruct the concept of creation in the Garo primal religion. The significance of the myth can be gauged only by what it does to the consciousness of a people. Hence, it has to be linked to the religio-cultural context of the concerned people, the concrete context of the people's experience of "realities" in the nature-man-god complex. It is significant that the myth should begin with the phrase "In the beginning". The phrase all of a sudden transports us to the "mythical time", as opposed to the chronological time. Mythical time is the stage when the latter was yet to begin. It prepares us to accept that whatever is to be now narrated is not a matter of temporal, but of an a-temporal sequence. Naturally, it takes us to a pre-reflective stage. If it is to transform itself into a "logical" order later, it goes to the credit of the availability of philosophical categories in that culture. Philosophy grows out of a mythological consciousness.

In the first place, the cosmic "realities", the origin and the survival of the whole creation, are viewed as the "household affairs" of the Supreme Being (Dal·batgipa Mite)<sup>7</sup>. Creation is <sup>an</sup> on account of the Supreme Being, who is believed to be the creator and sustainer of this universe and everything therein. The Supreme Being is the "source", "origin", the "first cause" of the creation. It is perceived in the character of motherhood : It is the Grandmother or the Mother.<sup>8</sup> The concept, in as much as it serves as the source of the created order, philosophically may be understood as the ground, or the cause of the latter. But the Garo myth of creation, if interpreted ethnologically, may reveal the perception that the gender determination of the Supreme Being may be closely associated with the matrilineal culture of the people themselves. In fact one cannot think of any religio-cultural aspect of the traditional Garos without the matrix of matriliney. It is not for nothing that the Garos are a matrilineal society.

Secondly, the Supreme Being of the Garos is not a god of the deists, rather he is perceived to be actively present in the world-events just as the grandmother or

7. The traditional Garos call Mite all the spirits, including the Supreme Being, in common. Dal·batgipa means the 'Greatest' or 'Supreme'.

8. Certainly there are clear indications that the Garo primal religion also understands the Supreme Being, sometimes, in male form or in the character of fatherhood; and every name in neuter gender given to this Being indicates such characterization. But, in their everyday language the female character of the Supreme Being is more in vogue.

Nokdang<sup>4</sup>

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mother is in the traditional Garo family. She is directly or indirectly involved in every details of her great universal household (Nokdang). She is directly involved, because she not only "gives birth" to, or causes the origination of, all things and beings, but also nurtures them. All that is created by her are the members of her family. Again, she is indirectly involved because it is she who commissions and directs the lesser spirits to carry out specific tasks; it is she who sustains and directs the cosmic order, which functions according to her plans, dictates and purposes.

A philologically oriented hermeneutician would be quick to read significant meanings in the names attributed to the Supreme Being of this creation myth. Dingipa-Ba·bra and Bisikkrom-Bidatare convey the idea of the "Creator" and the "Designer" God respectively. While the name Dingipa-Ba·bra (Dingipa = Provider; Ba·bra = One who gives birth and brings up) is self-explanatory. So, too, Bisikkrom-Bidatare (Bisikkrom = Source; Bidatare = Fountainhead) is not less significant. Bisikkrom-Bidatare, literally, means "a source or place from which a stream springs forth and flows out". When it is used as a name for the Supreme Being, it has the connotation of Mother from whom a kinship lineage originates; also a mother who, having given birth to a child, nurtures it with living sustenance. Thus the name suggests a kinship relation on the part of God with all her creation. Thus every conceivable thing or being, or person, is understood to have been inextricably tied to the Supreme Being, by the umbilical cord, as it were, and to one another by the close kinship bonds,

in this perceived universal household (Nokdang). The inter-relatedness of the things in the created order is traced to the Grandmother, the Supreme Being; again, to Mother, the Supreme Being, on the part of the Earth. All that the Earth bears on her are the children of God, brothers and sisters to one another, on the part of the individual things or persons, in this great universal household. The hierarchy does not appear to be one from top to bottom, but rather a "concentric" or involutional one, wherein the Supreme Being is at the centre, and all other lesser spirits, beings and things move around - all playing out their own roles in the great household.)

< If, however, it is to be conclusively established that Bisikkrom-Bidatara is a name rooted in the Sanskrit language and culture to be equivalent to the Vedic Viśvakarma Vidhāta, God-Mother is the great architect and designer, who fashions the entire universe. The two meanings of "source" and "architect" are not entirely exclusive to each other, however. The divine originator is also the divine "creatrix" who, with her primordial skill (arché, techné), fashions everything in her womb. The influence of the Sanskrit culture is then quite creatively assimilated by the Garos.

Thirdly, this myth conveys a religious message that the Supreme Being (Tatara-Rabuga, Dakgipa-Rugipa) was not {content with the primeval chaos: "the darkness was everywhere over the vast watery plain". The Supreme Being is not a God of chaos, but of cosmos. The Creator does not like to see Mother Earth naked and bare; though there could be obstacles, the Creator wants to clothe her with green >

<vegetation. The creation of trees, shrubs, creepers, climbers, bamboos, canes has a purpose. They clothe the Mother-Earth. It is perfectly a naturalistic explanation by a people, so close to nature, if they come up with such an explanation for the existence of vegetation on the Earth.>

Apparently, the Garro myth of Creation has insights that bear upon the material cause of creation, too, however couched they be in a poetic language. The myth seems to reject the Semitic notion of creation out of nothing. The universe is not created out of nothing (creatio ex nihilo), or out of any glorious splendour light, rejecting thereby an emanation from the divine substance. Rather it is said to have been created of a chaos, out of a "formless darkness". The myth refers to the stage prior to creation only negatively : 'darkness was everywhere', 'the vast watery plain', 'sand-particles would not stick together', 'water was too deep', 'frightened by the depth of the water', and 'had to return without fulfilling his work'. The primeval chaos may refer to a matter devoid of all forms. The state preceding creation then was not nothing, but "no-thing". There were forces of evil, failures and disappointments which were to be overcome in fashioning the chaotic matter into a "formed" universe.

It has been already stated that the Garro myth of creation is not a chronological account. It is not a historical account, especially if one were to understand history in its modern sense. Nonetheless, it is an exemplar history, in the sense that the creation at the beginning

of time is an "example", a "paradigm", for the imitation of gods in man's rituals . As a narrative, however, it tells us how the mythologist views the cosmic "realities". He fears, if the chaos were to gain upper hand, cosmos would be under a perpetual threat. Man has got to guard the cosmic order.

Moreover, the story does not depict the process of creation as static, or as completed once and for all. Creation is an on-going, dynamic process, possibly leaving enough room for entertaining the idea of evolution within the schema of creation. However incoherent, the order of creation in this myth shows the on-going struggles, disappointments, failures, successes, improvements and changes. The picture of struggles, disappointments and achievements in this myth suggests the continuity and the process of perfecting in the order of creation. One of the names of the Supreme Being is Dakgipa-Rugipa. Dakgipa, literally means Creator, while Rugipa means Moulder, or even Destroyer. This particular name of the Supreme Being suggests the dynamism inherent in the act of creation. The Creator, who is, as an architect, constantly at work, not only creates but also destroys to mould and remould the things. Should anything go wrong in the created order, in the eco-system, the Creator would have to remould and recreate the order for the sake of establishing a new order.

Fourthly, in this myth, the focus seems to be apparently on every creature as having its own role in creation. Every creature has its own function to contribute as a "co-creator" in the act of creation. The cosmic order is for the benefit

of every creature. The Creator God is not pictured here as doing everything all by himself by his fiat, but rather as directing and supervising the works of the creatures, the "co-creators". The Creator makes use of the help rendered by the lesser spirits; by the living creatures like crab, beetle, hullock-ape, jungle-foul and frog. Everyone in the order of creation has a role to play, especially in its sustenance. This would be equally applicable to items of the plant and mineral kingdom as well. Sand, spider's web, clay, sun, moon, wind, water and the varieties of plant and grass have their role to play. This speaks for the myth-maker's rare insight that the created-order is one of interdependence. Everything originates, grows and matures in a symbiotic relation with every other thing.

Finally, the myth of creation also speaks of the place of human beings in the creation. It speaks very highly of the status of human beings in the cosmic order. When it is said that the creator desired to create human beings to be placed in the midst of other creatures on the Earth, she declares her intention before all the lesser spirits, as though a consultation was required on the creation of man. The message is very clear : The presence of human beings is distinctively significant in creation. But, when the myth assigns human beings a high place in creation, it does not indicate any position of superiority or dominance, on the part of humanity, above other creatures. Rather it only indicates that the status, function and the exercise of his creativity are at once responsibilities towards the entire created

order. This is because of his being gifted with the "water of life" (Chichri-Chijanggi), which may be interpreted as a degree of "spirituality", possessed by man, as no other being of the created order is said to be endowed by it. This apparently forms the natural endowment of human beings, as distinct from other forms of life.

Moreover, far from any sense of dominance, man is treated as a part of the created order. Land and water, in particular, go to constitute a part of his nature. Whatever specific endowment he may have, he is an integral part of creation. The mythical language speaks of the creation of man underneath the Earth, in the Creator's dwelling place itself. His nature is earthy, hence his life is inalienably earthly. He is human precisely because he is made of the "humus" that sustains all forms of life. It is also said that the longevity of his life on Earth is said to depend on the amount of "water of life" he might have received freely from the earth beneath, the dwelling place of the Creator. At this level, "water of life" may quite literally mean the purity of the elements like earth, water, air, etc., on which the life-span of human being depends. It is significant to note that human life is impossible except in close association with other creatures, human or otherwise, to say nothing of plants and such elements as land, water and air.

## 2. Religio-Cultural Practices

It has been already stated that in a primal religion, like that of the Garos, myth, symbols, rituals, dances, etc.,

are all "texts", waiting to be "deconstructed" for the hermeneutical meanings. The deconstruction of a single myth, say of creation, does not exhaust the riches of the concept chosen for study, here. The Garo concept of creation, more importantly, the Garo attitude to creation, is also depicted in their religio-cultural practices. In this second part of the chapter, I make a modest attempt to explicate the concept further from their religio-cultural practices.

The Garos, in their day-to-day life, live close to nature - land, water, hills, valley, forest, animals and so on. Ecologically, they are almost entirely dependent on agriculture. Therefore, most of their religio-cultural practices, including rituals, are closely connected with agricultural activities. Needless to say, agriculture associated with all the changing seasons itself is reflection of creation, as it expends man's creative energy in more ways than one. Even the intimate personal activities associated with sexuality, birth, name-giving, initiation, marriage, funeral and the like are all much related with his concern with nature. Hence, an examination into the select religio-cultural practices may provide us with some valuable insights into Garos' understanding of, and attitude to, creation.

(a) O·pata Amua : The cycle of the annual ceremonies and festivals connected with their agricultural activities is set in motion with the O·pata Amua. This particular religious practice falls usually in the month of January. This is performed by the individual household at its convenience,

depending on when it is to begin its agricultural work. All the households in the community may, however, decide to observe it on the same day. This ritual is performed to "obtain" the consent of the guardian spirit, Abetpa-Ranggapa, for beginning the agricultural activities in a plot of land. It is believed that the Supreme Being, Tatara-Rabuga, had assigned this guardian spirit with the task of looking after and preserving the jungles and hills at the time of creation.

Before the actual clearance of the jungle is carried out by the farmer for the "jhum" cultivation, symbolically a small portion of the jungle is cleared in one corner of the selected plot of land. A lump of grass is kept on a bamboo stick, which is known as Samsepa, on that very spot. A chicken is sacrificed there with a prayer to Abetpa-Ranggapa. Then the household waits for a good omen through the dreams. The farmer may thus wait for a couple of nights for this omen. That plot of land selected for the jhum cultivation must be free from ill-will of the spirits of the land, springs, plants and all the living creatures therein, as his agriculture is likely to disturb the peace of their habitat. An elderly person from the household can perform this ritual. While the actual sacrifice is being done, usually the following words of prayer are uttered, suggesting at once the deep sensitivity that the Garo has towards the harmony that he has to guard in nature.

Abetpa-Ranggapa,  
One who is residing in, preserving this land,  
We are going to clear a little;

Please shift your residence  
Across this field, other side of the stream,  
Carrying the lame in the bamboo basket,  
Leading the blind with your hand.  
Entering into the earth, diving into the water,  
Please show your will to us,  
Preserver, Guardian.  
If you wish answer our prayer,  
Guardian of this land.  
When the time would come around,  
Cultivation cycle would be completed,  
We would certainly return this field with thanks  
To you, Abetpa-Ranggapa;  
Then you may stay here again.<sup>9</sup>

The prayer could not be more explicit of the attitude of the Garos to creation, in which every element and creature has a rightful place. Man has no right to disturb the natural order. The traditional Garos believe that Bisikkrom-Bidatare, the creator and sustainer of this universe, is the ultimate owner of the land; it is the home of the Creator. Man is only God's trustee as far as the ownership of land is concerned. The official and social demarcations of the A<sup>o</sup>king land (area belonging to a particular clan) are all temporal possession to human need and sustenance. The prayer and ritual in O<sup>o</sup>pata Amua is basically nothing but the acknowledgement, in a deep spirit of humility, of the ultimate ownership of God on that plot of land, which is now chosen by the farmer for the jhum cultivation. The farmer

9. Aldrich Ch. Momin, A<sup>o</sup>chikni Ku<sup>o</sup>andik (Garo Tradition), (Tura : A.Ch. Momin, 1985), pp. 12-14; Mihir N. Sangma, Maniani Bidik (Core of Worship), (Tura : Garo Hills Book Emporium, 1989), pp. 1-4.

never goes against the will of the guardian spirit, Abetpa-Ranggapa, which might be expressed through the dreams. If the omens are unfavourable, the farmer dares not proceed to clear that plot. He would rather choose another plot, and once again consult the spirit of that land. It is the firm belief of the Garos that, if one were to forcibly clear the jungle and cultivate the forbidden land, he would be cursed by the guardian spirit. That the judgement and punishment for such recalcitrant action would befall not only upon the individual but also on his family and, sometimes, even upon the whole community. Thus, the effective enforcement of the prescription and proscription is guaranteed at the individual, familial and the social level.

The prayer is significant in that the permission to cultivate the land is sought from the guardian spirit of the land. It also implies a promise to return the land with gratefulness, along with a share of the produce, to God, after it has been cultivated enough, usually for two years. Traditionally, every plot, once allotted, is used successively for two years, and then left fallow. The deep sensitivity of the Garos not to rob the soil of all its nutrients is the guiding force of the act of leaving the land fallow after two years of cultivation. The section of the area that has been fallow for the longest period is, again, apportioned into the household plots. A household thus generally returns to the same plot which it had jhumed earlier. This jhum cycle ranges from 12 to 7 years, depending on its availability in the A'king and demands of the increasing households brought about by the population growth.

There are also other similar practices that the religious community practices. They all specifically acknowledge the ultimate ownership of the Creator God on the land. Thus, before cutting and levelling a site for the building of a house, before cutting the earth for the village roads, before organizing a community fishing from a lake or a portion of river, before going out for community hunting, and before shifting a village to a new area, such similar prayers and sacrifices are invariably offered.

It is important that we today duly take note of the significance of the above sacrifices of the Garos, because we need to develop a human culture which integrates itself in Earth's totality of life. This is a kind of spirituality, "eco-spirituality", or a "geo-spirituality", which considers reverence for nature, more particularly the land, as redeeming to humanity. It considers the undue interference with Earth's life as evil and dangerous. More importantly, it participates in Earth's life by recycling and regenerating such of its gifts as humus, water, every form of vegetation and every species of the animal kingdom. In all our economic activities such as industry, mining, permanent wet-cultivation, horticulture, animal husbandry, trade and commerce, etc., we cannot afford to be insensitive to the needs of ecological preservation of nature, therefore, to the rights of every form of life in nature.

(b) Den·bilsia Amua : The Den·bilsia Amua is observed after the completion of the clearing of the jungle for the new jhum field, and it usually falls sometimes in the month

of February. In some areas it is also known as Gansroka, which means, literally, "rearranging the dress", or "renewing the garment". Again, in some areas, it is also called Gitchipong Roka, meaning, "cleansing the hoe's handle". This is a purificatory ceremony for the sake of "washing" the whole community of all defilements, impurities and "sins", which are called Marang. It also includes a ceremony for rededication to the work for welcoming the visit and favour of the Supreme Being (Pattigipa-Ra·rongipa), and for receiving the blessings from the Mother of Crops (Rokkime), who is the spirit assigned to look after the wealth of the people. A few details of the ceremony may help us to appreciate the Garo concerns to respect God's creation.

In the morning, all the tools used for cultivation, such as axes, daos, hoes, etc. are washed with rice-beer. It may be noted here that, as among the many tribes of the North-East, the rice-beer, brewed out of the staple food of the people, plays an important role in the Garo rituals, hence, its purificatory symbolism. The idea governing this ritual washing is ecologically significant, as it exhibits the Garo sensitivity to creation. During the time of jungle clearing for the preparation of the new jhum field, the farmer was obliged to remove the stones, cut the trees, bamboos, canes, creeping plants and medicinal herbs. Unwittingly he may have hurt or even killed the animals and insects, whose habitat the selected jungle was.<sup>10</sup> That he has disturbed the

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10. Aldrich, A·chikni Ku·andik (Garo Tradition), p. 17.

ecology of the place is uppermost in his mind. His agricultural implements have been directly responsible for the disturbance caused to the animate and inanimate world. This calls for a purification for himself and his implements.

During the day, the surroundings of the village dwellings and the footpaths leading to them, to the fields and also the market places, are all cleared. Then, all the men of the village gather to build an altar at an open space in front of the Headman's house (Nokmani A·tila). Around midday, the Headman (Nokma), representing the whole community, sacrifices a goat at the altar, invoking the names of Pattigipa-Ra·rongipa and Rokkime. Representing the people, he offers a special prayer for the sanctification of the whole community and all their possessions, especially their agricultural tools. This is followed by a community feast and dancing.

Needless to say, Den·bilsia Amua celebration is significant in the context of the life and spirituality of the Garos. It beautifully depicts their attitude to nature. It is the genuine belief of the people that a disturbance caused to the peaceful "life" of the environment, both animate and inanimate, by people is likely to invite the wrath and the curse upon themselves. That this curse may have the impact on the yield of grain and fruits intended to be cultivated, thus jeopardizing their livelihood itself. They feel remorse at having disturbed the rhythm of nature. The so called Marang is the accumulated "guilts", projected by their ecologically sensitive conscience. Only after the purification ceremony is completed, through the ritual washing

and prayer for the sanctification of the community, their troubled conscience may be said to rest. The sacramental community feast and dancing may be then viewed as the symbols of reconciliation between the people and God's Creation, with the Creator God as witness.

(c) Salpang Sim·a : This is an occasional religious ceremony, performed on account of a continuous drought in the region. It is the belief among the traditional Garos that the continuous drought is the punishment by God because of people's disobedience to God's law. Disobedience itself is interpreted in terms of people's pride and wrongful action. The concrete expression of the latter, in particular, is the defilement that is said to befall the community for such action as the felling of trees in the sacred grove of the A·king. To be sure, there are other forbidden actions, but the violation of the sanctity of the sacred grove is one such action. If the culprit is identified and caught, he is compelled to pay a heavy fine; besides, he has to bear all the expenses for the Salpang Sim·a ceremony.<sup>11</sup>

Every A·king<sup>12</sup> has a place set-aside for the purpose of the sacred grove. This place is known as Salpang Sim·ram or Salak So·ram. The two names of the place are derived from the two religious ceremonies, Salpang Sim·a and Salak So·a, conducted, here, by the people of the A·king. The specially set-aside patch of jungle, in virtue of its

11. Jangsan Sangma, Principles of Garo Law (Tura : Jangsan Sangma, 1973), p. 29.

12. In one A·king, there may be more than one village.

sacrality, is also a taboo. People do not cut the trees, bamboos and canes from it. Nor do they remove stones from it. Nor do they kill animals or birds from it. Rather the trees like banyan, Euphosbia catus and mandal (a kind of thorny tree), along with the natural vegetation of the jungle, are grown in it. In most cases, this grove is also a source of water, in that it contains some springs which flow out as the streams, the life-breath of the villages. Since the grove has many tall trees and abundant jungle vegetation, undisturbed environment and, above all, enough water sources, it naturally becomes an excellent habitat for animals and birds.

A speciality of the Salpang Sim·ram grove, distinct from all other groves in the A·king, is that a particular stream therefrom is regarded as specially sacred by the people. There may be also other streams flowing out from the same grove, or there may be many more streams flowing out from other sources in the same A·king, but the one that is specially marked out from the Salpang Sim·ram is specially sacred. Only from this stream is the water for the ritual purpose of the Salpang Sim·a ceremony used. Even from the neighbouring A·kings, people would come to fetch water from this sacred stream for their own Salpang Sim·a ceremonies, if they do not have such a marked out sacred stream in their own Salpang Sim·ram grove.

Now, we may dwell on a few details of the ceremony. The ceremony begins in the morning on the appointed day. People of the A·king gather at the Salpang Sim·ram; everybody

brings water in a container from the sacred stream. All work in the fields, except those associated with the ceremony, is taboo to the people of the A·king on that day. The priest recites a prayer for the forgiveness of the community, for the cleansing of the defilements from the community. He prays and requests Misi Saljong, the spirit who is believed to have been assigned the task of looking after the sunshine and the rain by Bisikkrom-Bidatara, the Supreme Being, to send plentiful rain to their land. A goat is sacrificed thereafter in the name of Misi Saljong, and its blood is smeared on the sacrificial stone. Then all the people present pour water from their containers over the sacrificial stone as well as on the priest. When that place becomes a virtual bog, people begin to play and dance in it, rubbing the mud on one another to the rhythm of the sound of drums.<sup>13</sup>

The Salak So·a ceremony, on the contrary, is performed when the region is threatened by the excessive rainfall, bringing an inundation in its wake. Before the sacrifice is offered, a fire is lighted by the priest around the sacrificial stone. In this ceremony, too, the priest offers to God a prayer for forgiveness. On behalf of the whole community, he prays to God to control the excess rainfall. With the soil and stones taken from the sacred stream the people dance and play. With the completion of the ceremony, they

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13. Julius L.R. Marak, Garó Customary Laws and Practices (Shillong : Vendrame Missiological Institute, 1985), pp. 57 f.; Aldrich Ch. Momin, A·chikni Ku·andik (Garó Tradition), pp. 44-48.

carry with them the soil and stones to place them over the fire place in their respective homes. <sup>14</sup>

Both Salpang Sim·a and Salak So·a ceremonies reflect the belief of the traditional Garos about the imbalance in the created order. In some way or other, in their consciousness, it is caused by man, by his wrongful action, and therefore it calls for the original restoration of the created order. In their wisdom and spirituality, people understand that there is a link between the imbalance brought about in creation and human action occasioned by man's greed and instinct for excessive possession. However, theirs is not a religion without hope. The original order can be restored, if only people repent and have recourse to remedial measures in time. Whenever an imbalance in their environment occurs, man is called upon to suspect and search, if there is not anything wrong on the part of human creativity in relation to nature. The power of human creativity, he is aware, can easily be misused for destroying the interrelatedness of all living forms, man included. Man is directly responsible to maintain the interrelatedness in nature. When people discover their mistakes and change their wrongful attitude and action against nature, normalcy can be restored. The playing and dancing with the soil, indeed, is the symbol of a reconciliation and living harmony with nature. Salpang Sim·a and Salak So·a are ceremonies that remind man that both drought and inundation, in other words, serious

14. Ibid.

imbalance in nature, are somehow linked with the heedless destruction of nature by man. Each imbalance is a threat for the survival of human species and the whole environment. In the context of our ecological crisis, we cannot but relate the concern of the Garo primal religion to preserve the sacred groves like Salpang Sim'ram and, along with them, the water sources, the flora and fauna in it. The religio-cultural traditions attached to the sacred groves are significant for the life of the Garos, indeed, for the whole eco-system. Moreover, the moral and spiritual transformation, which the people experience in their religious ceremony, should inspire all of us to create an eco-conscious human culture, in which responsibility to our environment is seen as a moral responsibility.

(d) A'song Tata or Kosi Dem'a : This religious ceremony is observed by the whole community of the A'king once a year, usually towards the end of the year, in honour of Kalkame-Kalgra, the guardian spirit of human beings. This is connected with the age-old practice of head-hunting also. Traditionally, in every A'king, there is a particular grove called A'song-Kosi, usually at the entrance to the village, where the Headman (Nokma) of the A'king resides. In this grove, besides the tall trees of natural vegetation of the jungle, fruit-bearing trees such as mango, jackfruit and tamarind trees are grown. It is a taboo to cut any trees from the grove. The sacred grove is visible and easily identifiable even from distance, on account of its tall trees at the entrance of the village. In this

sacred grove, two types of memorial stones are raised. The first type, called A·song, is raised in memory of the persons of the A·king, who had been killed by the enemies; they represent the members of the A·king. The second type, called Kosi, are raised in memory of the persons from the other A·kings, killed by the people of one's own A·king; they represent the members of the other A·kings. Both groups of the members killed are believed to strengthen the vitality of the A·king. In a sense, they all have sacrificed their lives for the A·king's sake. They are respected as sacred. The stones raised in their memory, too, therefore are sacred, as they are said guarantee the vitality of the soil of the A·king.

A few details of the ceremony, first. On the appointed day of the ceremony, the A·song and Kosi stones are cleaned and decorated by the people to show their respect to those who had to sacrifice their lives for the sake of the A·king. The surrounding of the stones is also cleared. The priest, first, sacrifices a goat in the name of Kalkame-Kalgra, and its blood is smeared on the sacrificial stone. A prayer of thanksgiving for God's faithfulness for the whole year is offered. The prayer also includes an entreaty for the protection of the people from all dangers and diseases throughout the coming year. The priest, then, leads the young men, holding the sword and the shield in their hand, round the willage. This is symbolic of the chasing out the marang, concretized in diseases and evil spirits, from the A·king. At the end of this procession, a bull, which is

tied in front of the bachelors' dormitory (Nokpante), is killed with a loud shout, symbolizing the victory over the threats against the well-being of the community. The celebration is concluded by a community feast at an open space in front of the headman's house.

The celebration is generally spread over three to seven days. During these days, the people of the A·king subject themselves to a number of taboos : For example, they are not allowed to go out of the A·king. They are not allowed to work in the fields. They cannot go hunting or fishing. In some A·kings even sex may be taboo. All the roads and foot-paths leading to, and from, the A·king are closed by barricades. Outsiders are prohibited entry to the A·king. If any stranger, or outsider, perchance, unknowingly were to violate these rules of entry and come to the A·king, the ceremony must begin afresh. The violator may have to pay a fine of Rs. 50 /-; moreover, he is detained in the A·king till the ceremony is over.<sup>15</sup> It is believed that, if somebody breaks the taboo, some calamity would befall that person as well as the larger community itself and their habitat. This calamity is known as A·si-Malja by the Garos.

Apart from being an occasion of thanksgiving and prayer for the protection of the people, the A·song Tata ceremony is significant for a specific belief among the Garos. It asserts the belief that the land is the identity of the

15. Aldrich Ch. Momin, A·chikni Ku·andik(Garo Tradition), pp. 60-66.

people. The A·king land and its people are one, suggesting thereby that people are rooted deeply in the soil, in their A·king. The A·king land is their "Mother". Hence, they are willing to sacrifice everything, even their lives, to guard the integrity of their habitat. In most cases, it is believed, the land-dispute was the root-cause of head-hunting and human sacrifice among the tribes in olden days. Among the Garos, their identity crisis is closely linked with the land-disputes and unsettled claims on the landed property, as they are a people rooted deeply in the soil. A·song Tata ceremony has risen from the consciousness of their identity with their A·king territory. It is an occasion for the rededication to their motherland. The rededication is not only of the living but also of the dead, the spirits of those who had to sacrifice their lives for their motherland, both from the community within and without. Significantly, the English word 'country', signifying "land", is translated as 'a·song' in Garo language. The idea of 'my motherland' is merely an extended idea of 'my Mother's A·king', or 'my Mother's A·song-Kosi', for the Garo.

The taboos attached to the A·song-Kosi ceremony is such that all agricultural and procreative activities are sought to be temporarily suspended. The ceremony is a reminder to humans that occasionally they should cease from their normal activities, not merely to regain their own lost energy of their own nature, but also allow the Mother nature to recuperate from her ceaseless productivity for the sake of her children. A time must be given to the

Mother Earth to heal her injuries so that she can sustain and nurture her children with renewed vigour. Because in most cases, the destructions, and even the so called natural calamities, on the Earth are caused directly or indirectly by the human activities, motivated by greed, pride and excesses. The A-song Tata seemingly reminds us of the need to restrain our creativity by a host of taboos, all related to our mundane activities. They are given a ritual sanction so that a culture for integrating people harmoniously with the rhythm of nature is created. C.R. Agera, while explicating the significance of the institution of the Sabbath in the Judeo-Christian tradition, writes in a similar vein :

Sabbath is the 'day of rest'...in the sense of 'abstention from work'. Nature, that is the raw material for human creativity, becomes taboo on the day of Sabbath. Man's greed and lust for power are to be ritually and institutionally suspended. Sabbath is an occasion for man to remember his dual nature of being primarily a creature and secondarily a creator; it is an occasion to remember his ambivalent nature of being a 'moulder' of the raw material at his disposal, and also of being a 'shaper' of that raw material within himself. While it is true that to become truly human means becoming creative of culture 'out-there', this creativity will have to be suspended every now and then for the sake of 'self-culture', turning inward, to discern his nature as creaturely.<sup>16</sup>

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16. C.R. Agera, "Human Creativity, A Value ? An Essay on Ecological Philosophy", Religion and Society, Vol.42, No.3 (September, 1995): 45.

(e) Mode of Worship : There are no temples or shrines as such built by human hands in the Garó primal religion. The outside manifestation of their worship can be seen only in their offerings, sacrifices, symbols and seasonal festivals. People worship in the jungles, on the trodden foot-paths, beside the streams, under the trees, in the field, and inside and in front of their dwelling places. There are a few sacred places and groves like Salpang Sim·ram and A·song-Kosi, but these too are no man-made and permanent buildings. There however may be some symbols like memorial and sacrificial stones erected. There is no official priesthood among them. Any person who practices medicine, or claims to know religious rites and to recite incantations according to the nature and purpose of worship, becomes the officiating functionary. The qualified person could usually be an elderly person, who is often also the Nokma himself.

The same flexibility is witnessed even in regard to the time of worship. The traditional religion does not have any religious almanac to determine the dates and days for conducting the ceremonies and festivals. The seasons of nature constitute its calendar. The celebrations are entirely seasonal. The actual dates for their performances may be decided by the community as a whole, taking into consideration the conditions of sunshine, moonlight, rain and wind. With their age-old experience of natural events, movement of animals, call of the birds, changes in the life of vegetation, the coming of ants and insects, the traditional Garos read the signs of nature, and fairly accurately predict the events of rainfall,

possibility of good crops and so on.<sup>17</sup> Besides these, they also consult the concerned spirits through divinations, through diviners, who are often expert observers and interpreters of the signs of nature. The divinations are in general called Sima Nia. The divination is common in the context of prayer and sacrifice meant for healing the sick. The traditional Garos use indigenous herbal drugs and medicines. Most of the local physicians (ojas) do not take up the task of healing without diagnosing first the nature and cause of the disease. Divination is often used for determining the cause and nature of the disease. For divination, they usually use such objects as rice, egg, hen, cock, grass, stone, water, etc. It is as though whatever has happened to the nature at large outside has an inextricable link with whatever has happened to the sick man. The holistic approach of the Garo medicine-man may not be without some significance to human health.

It is also significant to note here that the traditional Garos never address to the spirits, their deities, even to the Supreme Being, as 'King' or 'Lord'. Rather people regard them as 'kinsfolk' or 'enemy', as 'friend' or 'foe'. They address these powers accordingly. Moreover, their gesture in worship may not comprise bowing down or kneeling down. Such formal practices seem to them unnecessary and artificial. Everything comes to them spontaneously and naturally in their

17. L.R. Marak, Bebera·ani Bimik (The Seed of Beliefs), (Tura : L.R. Marak, 1987), pp. 12-13.

worship. In other words, every part of their life becomes  
a part of worship. Every creature is to be loved and res-  
pected because it is a part of the body of the Mother Earth,  
it has a role in nature; it is sacred and divine, because  
it is "born" of, or created by, the Creator God. In fact  
it is difficult to imagine the possibility of worship in  
the Garo primal religion without its natural surroundings  
like hills, dales, forests, groves, birds, insects, animals  
and the like. It is as though nature itself has become the {  
sacramental link between the divine and human. Nature is  
the sacred clock and calendar; nature is the sacred scripture;  
and nature is the "open hospital" for the healing. The whole  
life-cycle of the people - their religio-cultural activities  
- is synchronized with the one vibrant rhythm of nature,  
the cosmic order.

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## CHAPTER-IV

### IMPACT OF MODERNIZATION

In what follows the impact of modernization on the life and worldview of the traditional Garos is examined and evaluated. The process of modernization is a global phenomenon that affects every society. The society of the Garos is no exception. First, a caveat. My analysis and evaluation are skewed towards neither the denigration of modernization nor the glorification of the traditional worldview of the Garos. Rather it takes into account whatever is good and humane in both. Moreover, in the context of our contemporary ecological crisis, it enquires, if we can recover a much needed solution to the ecological problems that we have created for ourselves due to our fragmented vision of life.

M.M. Thomas, a contemporary social critic and the former governor of Nagaland, observes three ways in which the traditional and modern worldview may be said to differ.<sup>1</sup> (1) The traditional ethos is largely a vision of a continuum of the cosmos. But the modern ethos is a movement, often, of breaking up this undifferentiated total unity of being. The fragmentation is primarily for enabling development. (ii) In virtue of the unity of being, the traditional ethos is perceived to be 'sacred'. But modernization involves a movement from the sacral to

1. S.K. Chatterji (ed.), The Asian Meaning of Modernization (Delhi : EACC/ISPCK/CISRS, 1972), pp. 24-31.

a secular vision of life and the world. In a sense, the desacralization of nature and society is brought about by science and technology which does not acknowledge any mysteries but only problems. (iii) For the traditional vision, 'world' we live in is primarily nature that nurtures man. But for modernization, the world we live in is primarily history. While nature is what is gratui- tously given, history is what we make by our continuous efforts. The above conceptual schema is of much significance to my present concerns.

The process of modernization among the Garos began with the advent of the British colonialism to the Garo Hills. The British political climate introduced a new administrative system, urbanization and many other deve- lopmental programmes. In quick succession followed Western Christianity. The Western missionaries introduced a new faith, a new education, a new skill, indeed, a new way of life. The process of modernization thus initiated was further intensified through the attainment of India's Independence. The direct impact of an independent India was the creation of the Garo Hills Autonomous District Council and the formation of the Meghalaya State, in which the Garo Hills became a unit. As in the case of many other tribal societies of North-East India, majority of the Garos, particularly, the educated and elite groups, were immedi- ately attracted to westernization. Unfortunately, a simple equation of modernization with westernization was made by the tribal mind. This brought about a displacement of the

traditional life style by an individualistic and consume-  
ristic Western culture. No doubt, there are positive  
aspects to modernization, but the positive aspects were  
submerged under the destructive forces, to which the  
unsuspecting tribal fell a victim. The forces were to  
affect, in course of time, their self-consciousness, intrin-  
sically related to eco-consciousness, the greatest native endow-  
ment of the Garo culture. The process of modernization and  
its impact on the life and worldview of the Garos accor-  
dingly can be traced along its three main components :

- (1) The introduction of a new political administration
- (2) The coming of Christianity (3) The emergence of consume-  
ristic culture.

#### 1. Introduction of a New Political Administration

By the year 1873, the whole Garo inhabited land was  
subjugated by the British military operations, and Garos  
were put completely under the dominion of the British  
administration.<sup>2</sup> The British authorities described the Garos  
as "savages" and "blood-thirsty barbarians" because they  
fought bravely to defend the independence of their home-  
land.<sup>3</sup> The British initially disdained to learn anything  
about the Garos' cultural values and belief-systems. In  
this they were not different from any conqueror who tends

2. Milton S. Sangma (ed.), Essays on North-East India (New  
Delhi: Indus Publishing Company, 1994), p. 222.

3. Major A. Playfair, The Garos (Calcutta : United Publishers,  
1975), p. 76.

to look down upon the conquered as being inferior in every respect. It was also the imperialist policy of the British to strengthen their power and reign over the conquered people by demoralizing the latter. It is often the case that the vanquished lose faith in their own culture, religion and philosophy, in short in themselves. Thus the introduction of the new political administration by the British heralded the on-set of modernization and detribalization of the Garos.<sup>4</sup>

It may be true that, even before the British rule, the whole Garo habitat had been under the Moghul rulers. But the Moghuls had not interfered with the traditional cultural values and the ownership of the land by the individual A°king.<sup>5</sup> During pre-British period, there was no visible structure of any organisation, political or otherwise, covering the whole Garo tribe, which would include all the individual or isolated A°kings. Each A°king had its own traditional local-self government, which was democratic in spirit and in content. Although there were some variations from A°king to A°king in the functioning of their customary laws and practices, the underlying ideological principle was the same in all the A°kings' polity. Every A°king belonged to a particular clan,

4. O.L. Snaitang, "Christianity and Tribal Solidarity in Meghalaya", Indian Church History Review (June, 1994):26.

5. Milton S. Sangma, History and Culture of the Garos, pp. 6 f.

and every member, or household, had equal rights within the framework of their customary laws and practices, which the people held in common. Everyone was responsible for the well-being of the people and their habitat.

The headman (Nokma) was merely the custodian and the symbol of integrity of the clan within the A·king, having no special authority, or power, to rule over his people. No portion of the A·king land, or property therein, could be sold or mortgaged by the Nokma.<sup>6</sup> For all official and emergency purposes, the Nokma would convene a meeting of the elders of the A·king, and everything was discussed, debated and decided by the community as a whole. An important economic principle of the Garos was that no individual person, or family, should be landless in their own homeland. Even an "outsider", with the legitimate consent of the people, could cultivate a portion of the cultivable land apportioned to him against the payment of a nominal annual rent of Re.1/- to the Nokma, which was called A·wil.<sup>7</sup> As it is rightly observed by P.C. Kar, during the pre-British period, the Garos would not even conceive of selling their plot of land,<sup>8</sup> because the land was not only their source of livelihood but their very identity. The land is that in which they were rooted. They could not imagine their life without the land.

6. Ibid., p. 6.

7. Ibid., p. 66.

8. P.C. Kar, The Garos in Transition (New Delhi : Cosmos Publications, 1982), p. 248; Robbins Burling, Rengsanggri, Second Edition (Tura : Tura Book Room, 1997), p. 238.

Land had been their ancestral heritage and pride; in it their ancestors had been buried, and they themselves had been continuously nurtured.

When the British got complete control over the whole Garoland, they prohibited, in the first place, the Garos' age-old tradition of head-hunting. To be sure, such a law against head-hunting is a humane and civilized aspect of the process of modernization. None should grudge against it. Such practices as head-hunting and widow-burning have no place in a civilized society. But the way it was stopped by the British authorities, without properly educating the people, left a scar on the psyche of the Garos. As it has been already indicated in the previous chapter, the tradition of head-hunting was closely associated with the land, with the Garos' love for their motherland. When the British all of a sudden forced the Garos to ban it, and that, too, by the brute display of their power of gun and the imprisonment, it proved to be traumatic to the life of the Garos. In the last stage of their military operations, the British authorities forced each one of the Garo warriors and patriots, who had earlier practiced head-hunting, to pay a heavy fine of Rs. 200/-. All their "treasures" of human-skulls were collected from the villages and consigned publicly to flames, amidst much derision against the Garo culture, at the Rong-rengre village, now in the East Garo Hills district.<sup>9</sup> The painful experience of the insult to their traditional culture

9. Milton (ed.), Essays on North-East India, pp. 222 f.

could not be incinerated along with the burning of the human-skulls, but buried alive in the land and psyche of the Garos. The Garo head-hunting culture was sought to be suppressed by the power of the gun-culture of the West. Such imposition of the gun-culture was alien to the Garos. When the head-hunting was finally stopped, the persuasion by the missionaries may have had a greater part in it than is usually admitted. This description of the state of affairs is neither to glorify nor to justify the practice of head-hunting among the Garos. It is rather to show that the gun-culture traumatically intruded the Garo psyche that had a symbiotic relationship with the land.

Secondly, what directly damaged the Garos' symbiotic relation with the land was the British system of land revenue and the establishment of an administrative net-work for its collection. The British administration, for an effective control over all the Garo inhabited areas and the facilitating of the regular collection of revenues, introduced the office of the Lasker, invested with the limited police, civil and judiciary powers. Over a circle of twelve or more A·kings a Lasker was appointed, and all the Laskers were directly accountable to the Deputy Commissioner at the district level. Although the A·kings were allowed to retain their nokmaship and local councils, by providing the rights of appeal to the court of Lasker against the decision of the local council, the authority of the Nokmas and the local councils was greatly undermined. For the first time, the Garos were brought under the authority of an alien political power completely. This weakened the traditional A·king polity.

Moreover, the creation of the so called Garo Hills District within the greater Garoland, and the centralization of its actual powers in the hands of the foreigners, deeply disintegrated the people's attachment to the traditional polity, which had hitherto acknowledged and respected their identity with the land. Their land was fragmented without any concern to their belief-systems: A greater part of it has been under the present Bangladesh, now. Another part of it is under the state of Assam. A part of it is in the Khasi-Janintia Hills in Meghalaya. With the fragmentation of their land, the Garo community is badly divided. They are treated differently in different places, occasioning a crisis in their identity. The Garos living in Assam are not given the same status as the Garos in Meghalaya. According to the Sixth Schedule of the Constitution of India, they should be classified in the list of the Scheduled Tribes, but in Assam, they are not. Their condition in Bangladesh is even worse. They are a "declassified" people in their own homeland.

Thirdly, as the main objective of the British occupation of the Garoland was to earn the maximum profit, the economic exploitation, with scant respect for the preservation of their natural habitat, began. Under the patronage of the British, many hunters armed with guns hunted elephants, tigers, birds and other rare species of fauna natural to these jungles. Lumberjacks denuded the forests of the varieties of trees, bamboos and canes. Collectors of ivory, wax and rubber caused a havoc to the habitat of the people. Traders in arms and ammunitions began to operate freely in the hills and jungles

of the Garoland, undermining the ownership rights of the indigenous people. When the people began to object to the "predatory" activities of these economic agents of the British, serious quarrels and troubles ensued throughout the land. In order to prevent the recurrence of these conflicts, which hampered their trading activities, the British authority made a regulation known as "Garo Hills Regulation, 1876". The Regulation prohibited any person, who was not a native of the Garo Hills district, to extract any jungle product, without a licence from the British authority.<sup>10</sup> But the Regulation was a mere bluff, because all those operating in the jungles of Garoland were directly or indirectly the agents of the British trading authority, now armed with a British licence. The so called licence gave the operators power and freedom to extract the natural resources without any let or hindrance. When they produced the licence papers, issued by the British authority, to the Nokmas, the local people could not have a say against them. It was not only a matter of depriving the people of the produce of their jungles but, often, of denying the age-old rights of the indigenous people. More importantly, it institutionalized the destruction of the natural resources and environment by the British for their vested interests at the cost of marginalizing the tribals who were totally dependent on them.

10. Milton, History and Culture of the Garos, p. 39.

Fourthly, to consolidate their centralization of power and the capture of the traditional ownership of the land, the British administration made a full survey of the land within the boundaries of all the A.kings, and prepared their records with sketch maps. In the process, they excluded about 360 square kilometres in 18 patches out of the different A.kings for creating the state forest reserves, between the years 1883 and 1888, and thereafter declared the other forest areas as unclassed state forests.<sup>11</sup> The British authorities also had carried out certain measures that made them the ultimate owners of the A.king lands as well. On some pretexts or other, some A.king lands had been converted into Khas lands (area without owner, subject to government disposal). Some areas were forcibly divided and distributed among the people of their own choice. In some cases, portions of the A.king lands were forcibly allowed to be sold and purchased.<sup>12</sup> It was not merely a taking away of the right of ownership of the indigenous people, but also a systematic exploitation of the land and natural resources, that caused an irreparable damage to their traditional culture. All these contributed to the weakening of the traditional solidarity of the people. The systematic exploitation of land, the manipulation of the land tenure by the British, directly contributed to the confusion within the land-locked self-consciousness of the Garos. The British thus drove a wedge in their unified consciousness,

11. P.C. Kar, The Garos in Transition, pp. 237-238.

12. Ibid., pp. 238-240.

occasioning a differentiation between human and the non-human elements in nature. At the root of this self-division and nature's differentiation from their own self is the dangerous idea that land could be sold as a commodity to fulfil the human needs. This at once proved to be disastrous to their vision of a world as a cosmos, sacred and a unified nature.

Fifthly, in the name of development, the British, using their science and technology, constructed new roads and bridges linking all the strategic points. As a matter of fact, this was to facilitate their revenue administration and collection and, more specifically, the exploitations of the natural resources, especially the transportation of choice timber from the area. Many government administrative buildings and residential quarters were built in all the central places. Hospitals, post offices, police stations and inspection bungalows were set up in strategic places. Markets were opened everywhere for trade and commerce. Water supply and electrifications were provided in urban areas. Urbanization began to change the face of hitherto rural life. All these contributed much to speed up the process of modernization, which brought about many changes in the life and environment of the Garos. Life was made easier and comfortable, at least to a section of the people. But all this resulted into the total dependence of the people on the government machinery and, along with it, too much of dependence on a materialistic culture. They got alienated from their earth-centred life and culture. For instance, since water had come through conduits right into their houses, they would not anymore care for

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the many old water streams flowing out from the springs  
in the village grove. Further, at the spiritual level, too, they  
did not feel it necessary any longer to give thanks to God  
for the gift of water, as it was in the past. The inter-  
relatedness and the interdependence of their life with  
natural surroundings were steadily lost, and their life  
itself grew desacralized.

Sixthly, to encourage the permanent wet-cultivation,  
the irrigation dams and channels were constructed in the  
plains. Specific types of farming and gardening were  
demonstrated by the British government. The introduction  
of permanent wet-cultivation, farming and gardening, it  
may be admitted, is the beneficent aspect of modernization  
in agriculture. The more so, because the traditional type  
of jhum cultivation may have many ill-effects on the conserva-  
tion of soil and its nutrients, as we know it today for  
certain. But, the modernization in agriculture came so  
fast in the life of the Garos that they were ill-equipped  
to cope with it psychologically. An economic benefit need  
not necessarily compatible with the psychological well-being.  
In the traditional system of jhum cultivation, the land  
was owned by the whole community; the allotment of the plot of  
land to each person, or family, is made every year by the  
community itself in equal share, or according to their need,  
or even the capacity to cultivate. In the traditional system  
of jhum cultivation, the farmer returns the land to the  
community, after cultivating it for two years. But, when  
a plot of land is prepared for the permanent wet-cultivation,

farming or gardening, its ownership is no more of the community. It was automatically settled as the private property of the one who prepared and cultivated it. The land now turns from the community into the private ownership.

Moreover, in the system of permanent wet-cultivation, farming and gardening, the maintenance of the principle of social justice and equity was no longer possible in the community, because only a few, economically strong and skilled in scientific techniques, could carry out modern types of cultivation. Only the wealthy could engage more labour to get the maximum yield. The more skilled and knowledgeable farmer selected the best land to garner the maximum productivity.<sup>13</sup> The poor became poorer and the few rich richer in the community, at once destroying the relative egalitarianism of the tribal societies. Finally, since the religion and culture of the traditional Garos have been inseparably associated with their jhum cultivation for generations, a radical change in their pattern of agriculture has brought about a near disintegration of their traditional spiritual and cultural life.

Lastly, even after India's Independence, the new political administration, which was the continuation of the momentum set by the British rule, unleashed the forces of modernization that has been not necessarily sympathetic to the traditional Garo ethos. Both legislative and executive

13. Robbins Burling, Rengsanggri, pp. 302-304.

administrations, connected with the system of land tenure, land revenue, succession of nokmaship, the customary laws and practices, among others, were vested with the Garo Hills Autonomous District Council. The Council has also been entrusted with the management of unclassified state forests, covering about 4844 square kilometres spread over all the A.kings of the district. It validates all transfer of land, and acts in respect of A.king land tenure as a liaison authority between the state government and other organised bodies, on the one hand, and the Nokma and the A.king's clan, on the other. The District Council, today, exploits the forest resources on the basis of royalty payment, while it allows, however, the A.king members a free access to forest products only for domestic consumption, and not for any profit. It can then clearly be seen that the Council has retained the basic features of the forest administration as they were under the British rule.<sup>14</sup> Although the external colonialism of the British was overthrown with India's independence, it would appear that an "internal colonialism" continues to play havoc with the life and land of the Garos. Echoing this sentiment, Robbins Burling writes :

Today the loskors (Laskers) and their courts, and the administration above them are so much a part of the Garo social organisation that it is quite inaccurate to describe the Garos as forming anything but a dependent non-sovereign unit in a much larger society. Significant power over the Garos was for

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14. P.C. Kar, The Garos in Transition, p. 239.

eighty years concentrated in London; with Indian independence, this power has been inherited by New Delhi.<sup>15</sup>

Even with regard to the use of A·king land for shifting, or jhum, cultivation, the District Council has imposed certain restrictions. By the Jhum Regulations of 1954, certain measures have been adopted for the selection and allotment of jhum fields, restriction of jhum in watershed areas, fixation of jhum cycle, and a host of other restrictions.<sup>16</sup> Although these restrictions could not be rigorously followed in the absence of other dependable alternatives for livelihood till recently, the legislative import of these restrictions has adversely affected the social rights and the cultural environment of the people of the soil. It is important for any authority to take note of the fact that jhum cultivation is a mode of livelihood for the poor people. If they are not given an alternative mode of livelihood, they are likely to starve. In 1963, the Land Reforms Branch of the District Council began to rationalize the lineage ownership of the A·king lands. These lands are surveyed blockwise, and documents of the title deed (patta) issued to the heads of the households, possessing the lands brought under survey.<sup>17</sup> This system clearly leads to a structural change in the traditional land tenure, namely the land is transferred from the community ownership into the private ownership. This has disastrous effect on the Garo psyche. The rising sense of family

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15. Robbins Burling, Rangsangri, p. 301.

16. P.C. Kar, The Garos in Transition, p. 240.

17. Ibid.

ownership of land has invariably led to the rise of a new residence pattern, because most of the households have now established their respective residential houses within their own plot of land. This has created not only the gaps in inter-family relationships and depreciations of cultural values of community life, but also brought about unprecedented changes in the environment, due to the unmitigated expansion of villages and even encroachment into the village groves.

In addition to the District Council, after the creation of Meghalaya state, the state government too has contributed its share to the fissioning of the traditional community land on a large scale. This it has done even through well-meaning schemes like the expansion of state forest reserves and the soil conservation programmes. But the establishment of administrative headquarters, a host of office complexes and other development works have put a pressure on the community land. Every time when land is needed, it is acquired either through compensation or gift or other considerations. This has resulted in either a modification of community rights over land or alienation of ownership from the A·king's clan. While all these are going on, many different communities, with their diverse cultures and religious traditions have come to live in the midst of the indigenous people, affecting radically the environment and the traditional worldview of the Garos.

## 2. Coming of Christianity

Let us now examine how the coming of Christianity, too, has contributed immensely to the process of modernization among the Garos. Undoubtedly, Christianity is one single agency that has served as a catalyst of change to affect the traditional life and worldview of the Garo culture significantly. Christianity may be said to have made its entry into the Garo Hills to stay, when Omed W. Momin and Ramke W. Momin, uncle and nephew respectively, were baptized by an American Baptist missionary in 1863, as the first two converts. Christianity spread rapidly to bring about many changes into the Garo society. The Christian missionaries, with their dedicated service, wonderful spirit of humanity, kindness and devoutness, won over the hearts of the Garos. Christian faith and life- style took root among the Garos through their network of educational, literacy and medical mission.

Under the government patronage schools were established in the Garo villages by the first missionaries. In fact, in most villages, a school was established even before a church was founded. During the British period, the responsibility for education was entrusted to the Missions for many years. This however changed after Independence, for most of the village mission schools were taken over by the government. However, the mission schools had already become the nurseries for modernization, because in them was imparted to the students not only the Christian faith and values but also the first lessons in reading,

writing, arithmetic, geography and history. Through literacy and the secular disciplines, the knowledge of the Garos about the other peoples and other parts of the world grew and their outlook on life itself changed.

In many ways, Christianity and its educational services became a symbol of participation for the Garos in a larger world than the one of A°kings, hitherto known to them.<sup>18</sup> The world of the A°kings was one of relatively isolated villages, though largely self-sufficient. Christians began to visit other parts of the hills, and occasionally went beyond these villages to attend the religious meetings and festivities. From an intra-tribal relationships they began to associate in inter-tribal relationships. The Christian community, cutting across the boundaries of the A°kings, as one people began to emerge among them. Barely within a span of 136 years Christianity became the major religion among the Garos. Some scholars have opined that the conversion to Christianity was also facilitated by the fact that the Garos are by nature open and friendly, and their traditional religion is one of tolerance.<sup>19</sup> To be sure, some Christian Garos have held on to their traditional values, but many of them may have drifted into Christianity with little reflection of either their own or the Christian value system. Today, almost all the literate Garos claim

18. Robbins Burling, Rengsanggri, p. 136.

19. B.N. Choudhury, Some Cultural and Linguistic Aspects of the Garos (Guwahati: Lawyer's Book Stall, 1963), p.6; K.I. Aier, The Growth of Baptist Churches in Meghalaya (Guwahati: C.L.C., 1978), p. 11.

to be Christian, because Christianity has become a symbol of dignity and integrity for them.

However, Christianity, which has brought the message of love, unity and dignity to the Garos, has not been beyond reproach. It may also have created increasingly a mistrust and divisions among them, primarily due to its inherited and fragmented denominationalism. This fragmentation is what the missionaries from the West themselves had brought with them. This has surely created among many Garo Christian societies disunity and confusion. Their integrity as a closely knit group is under threat on account of the ideological and doctrinal differences among the denominations to which they belong. Villages, at times, even families, are divided along the denominational lines. It is not uncommon that family members are divided into two or three denominations. Anybody can imagine the chaotic state of the spiritual environment of the Christian Garos. This surely has its impact on their contemporary religio-cultural and socio-political life of the larger tribal community.

In missionary writings, one finds repeated emphasis upon the development of what is referred to as "Christian character". By the expression, "Christian character", is often meant an adaptation to a different life-style. F.S. Downs writes that the "fundamental to the nineteenth century understanding of Christianity in North-East India was the idea that becoming a Christian meant adopting a

new mode of life.<sup>20</sup> There was then a conscious effort  
that any aspect of traditional culture, that was consi-  
dered to be somehow connected with their primal religion  
was sought to be rejected by the early missionaries. As  
it becomes extremely difficult to distinguish between what  
is strictly religious and what is generally social in  
tribal communities, the development of the Christian  
character often affected both the religious and social  
practices and institutions. Thus this rejection included  
bachelors' dormitory, wood-carving, music, musical instru-  
ments, dancing, ornaments, drinking rice-beer, practice  
of herbal medicine, preserving the village grove, apart  
from the strictly religious rituals. Further, on account of the  
facile equation between "Christianization" and westernization,  
adopting a "new mode of life" or "Christian character", in  
the early stage of Christianity among the Garos, virtually  
turned out to be, without a critical evaluation, a mere  
adoption of the white man's Western life-style; correspond-  
ingly, it also lacked an empathetic understanding and a  
conscious interpretation of their own traditional cultural  
values. Nor was there any conscious evaluation of the  
Christian spirituality in relation to cultural values.  
Some concrete instances will drive home the truth of my  
statements.

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20. Milton S. Sangma and David R. Syimlieh (eds.), Essays on Christianity in North-East India (New Delhi : Indus Publishing Company, 1994), p. 147.

In the first place, in the cause of maintaining certain standards of conduct, the Christian Garo were dissuaded from participating in their traditional religio-cultural ceremonies and festivals by the missionaries. These festivals were replaced by the observance of the Sabbath on Sunday and other such Christian celebrations as Christmas, Good Friday, Easter Sunday, etc.<sup>21</sup> However, as stated earlier, most of the Garo religio-cultural ceremonies and festivals are related to their agricultural cycle, thus intrinsically earth-centred. Their replacement by the Christian celebrations, such as these, resulted in not only the social alienation of the Christian Garos, but, more importantly, in the alienation from the traditional geo-centric consciousness of the Garos. The major Christian celebrations such as Christmas, Good Friday and Easter Sunday had not been interpreted, or reinterpreted, by the early missionaries in the context of the ecological consciousness of the Garos. As a result, for the Christian Garos, in general, even today, these Christian celebrations have nothing to do with earth and its creation. They are merely seen as mysteries of personal salvation, or the redemption of the soul. A reinterpretation of Christian mysteries would have gone a long way to integrate the Garo vision of creation with Christian belief-system. Indeed, it would have been even closer to the original inspiration of the Biblical teaching.

Christianity, according to the Biblical testimony, may have a deeper message within its core for a holistic

21. Robbins Burling, Rengsanggri, pp. 312-314.

or cosmic concern for God's creation. But that opportunity was not explored by the missionaries. On the contrary, the Western missionaries were busy transposing the Western theologies of salvation, which was in every sense "other-worldly" in flavour to an earth-bound agricultural people. The salvation of souls and the attainment of a far-away blissful place called "heaven" made little sense to the Garos. The primal religion of the Garos may have a belief in a life after death. But this belief does not bear either on the salvation of the soul or the attainment of heaven. Rather it bears on his being born again into the same clan, the same family lineage, and, above all, in the same village. So strong is their belief in the indissoluble union with the soil of his land. The primal religion of the Garos is inseparable from the soil and the kinship relations in the order of creation.

Secondly, the Christian Garos, particularly, the boys in the mission schools, were not allowed to sleep in the traditional bachelors' dormitory (Nokpante); much less, to participate in the socio-religious activities of the Nokpante.<sup>22</sup> The Nokpante plays a very important role in the traditional Garo societies, in particular, in the manner of boys' education. Each traditional Garo village has a Nokpante, usually located near the headman's house. It serves as a cultural centre, an institute for training of of unmarried men. The unmarried women are closely attached

22. Ibid. >

with their parents and the family. Boys, however, sleep and rest in the Nokpante from the time they are about twelve or thirteen until they are married. It is here that the young men learn from one another, especially from the older boys, many of their traditional art and culture : techniques of war, wrestling, music, dance, rhetoric, games and sports, handicrafts, customary laws and practices. In short, it was a training-centre for the Garo boys to grow into mature adults, and effectively play the role of a man in the Garo society.

The structure of Nokpante building itself breathes deeply into the traditional art and culture, in close symbiotic relation with nature. The wooden pillars, bamboo posts and walls are decorated with carving of images of animals, birds, reptiles and trees. Musical instruments like different types of drums, bamboo flutes, horns and jaw's harps are kept there. The significance of all these to the cultural life of the Garos is taught here. In the bygone days, when people had to live in tension due to the inter-tribal rivalries and fear of the rampage by the wild animals, the Nokpante stood in the Garo village as a symbol of people's defence and security, because it was the centre of young and strong men of the village. But, with the coming of Christianity and the establishment of the mission schools in the villages, the institution of Nokpante itself fell into disuse. The missionaries and their educational institutions, to say nothing of the similar machineries of the government thereafter, substituted the institute of Nokpante by modern hostels

and residential institutions. But these modern institutions could be established only in the central and urbanized places; and they could never be an adequate replacement to the traditional Nokpante, which was a powerful and effective instrument of the transmission of a nature-friendly Garo culture.

Thirdly, by rejecting the Garo traditional and indige-  
nous musical instruments, possibly due to their association  
with religious rituals, the missionaries may be said to have  
contributed to their desacralization. The traditional musical  
instruments were rejected as something "unholy", or "profane",  
simply because they had been used by the people belonging  
to the primal religion for their religio-cultural purposes.<sup>23</sup>  
For instance, in their traditional culture, the Garos used  
to beat the drum, made of hollow wood and animal skin, or  
blow the animal horn, while calling out the people for  
assembly or invoking the spirits at their religious gatherings.  
But, after these musical instruments had been rejected by the  
missionaries, the Christian Garos began to use the imported  
church-bells for their religious gatherings. However, the  
church-bell ringing from the tower of the church-building,  
though seemingly nearer to heaven, seems to be further away  
from the earth as well as from the people in comparison with  
their traditional musical instruments, say, the beating of  
a drum or blowing of a horn. The ringing of the church-bell  
from the church-tower has meant, for many contemporary

23. Ibid.

Christian Garos, a mere announcement of the time for the church services. The indigenous musical instruments such as drums, horns and flutes, on the contrary, were an integral part of their socio-religious life. They were rooted in the soil and culture of the people; naturally, they touch their heart and soul to inspire them to live in tune with the rhythm of nature. Early missionaries failed to incorporate them, meaningfully, with Christian worship and the day-to-day life of their converts.

Finally, yet another desacralization of the traditional culture took place in respect of rice-beer and the village groves. The attitude of the missionaries towards the rice-beer was totally negative, however socially well-meaning it was. Christian Garos were strictly prohibited by the missionaries from consuming the rice-beer, possibly as a deterrent to drunkenness. Instead, they were encouraged to patronize the serving of tea as a hospitality symbol.<sup>24</sup> In the traditional life style of the Garos, rice-beer is not only a social symbol but also a spiritual one, and therefore it is sacred for them. This, not without reason. Rice is the staple food of the Garos, and the rice-beer is produced by a simple indigenous process of brewing rice. Since rice is the very symbol of life, the Garos believe that the rice has a divine origin. Therefore, rice has become to them, in many ways, a sacramental link in the

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24. Ibid.

covenantal relationship between the human and the divine.<sup>25</sup>

It symbolizes a covenant, as it were, between man and God.

This explains why rice-beer is unfailingly used in their traditional religion-cultural ceremonies and festivals. It is used

as an object of sacrifice, as a symbol of purification and sanctification, as a form of medicine, and also as a symbol of

hospitality in the traditional Garo society. There is no

doubt that the missionaries had prohibited its consumption,

considering its evil effects of intoxication and drunkenness

that may have reduced many a family to penury. But no man

takes to drinking out of perversity. Excess in any habit

is condemnable. Even the wine produced out of the grape-

juice, which is used by the Christians in their sacramental

celebration, namely the "Lord's Supper", is no exception.

Its symbolic use makes it a sacrament, but its excessive

use can be turned into drunkenness. During the time of

Jesus' earthly life, the wine produced out of the grape-

juice was used, in the Biblical world, on all religious

and social occasions. Wine had become a sacred symbol, as

only a significant item of daily use can become a sacred

symbol to people, even for Jesus Christ and his disciples

(Matthew 26:20-29). Therefore, by prohibiting and replacing

rice-beer by tea as a mere symbol of hospitality, it became

desacralized, and all the cultural aspects related to it

got alienated from the people, despite the good intention

25. Even the Wangala Festival, which is considered as the greatest festival among the traditional Garos, is connected with the divine origin of rice.

of the missionaries. Moreover, there may also have been the British mercantile considerations at play in patronizing of tea, to which missionaries themselves unwittingly may have succumbed to.

The village groves too came under severe attack by the missionaries, primarily due to their connection with the primal religion. The ecological usefulness of keeping the groves around the human habitat is wellknown to all the ecologically conscious people today. It has been already indicated how and why the village groves are preserved by the traditional Garos. The purpose of referring to it, again, is to draw one's attention to their destruction and desacralization by the process of modernization. The traditional belief-systems of the Garos, connected with their village groves, had been explained away by the missionaries as mere superstitions of the natives. The Christian converts were "de-educated" by the missionaries not to be afraid of the wrath and punishment of the guardian spirit(s), dwelling in the groves, as was superstitiously believed by the natives.

In addition to this, under the advancement of science and technology, a lot of encroachment on the land of the sacred groves has been taking place. Their wanton destruction, in the name of developments, is indulged in, with the traditional reverence to them fast waning. Let alone their sanctity, the general attitude of the common people towards them is one of mere material resources to be exploited for ever increasing human needs. In the process of developing.

a scientific temper in the people, Christianity thus contributed to the desacralization of the sacred groves. It could have theologized the tradition of the sacred groves of the Garos to recover a Biblical reverence to creation. Contextualization of Christian theology was however not easily forthcoming to a band of Eurocentric, nay more, imperialistic, missionaries. They could not be open to the suggestion of the Garo primal religion that God the creator and sustainer of the universe, who is omnipresent, could also lovingly reside among his people in the village groves. They shut themselves to the truth of the Garo spiritual consciousness that the trees, streams, medicinal plants, animals and birds in the sacred groves are a blessing of God to the people and their environment. More importantly, to the ecological truth that this same God can bring judgement and punishment upon man, if he indulges in the wanton destruction of God's creation, specially preserved in the sacred groves.

The contribution of Christianity to the process of modernization through its educational programmes was intensified by their drive for the literacy mission. Apart from propagating its gospel message, Christianity spread the modern worldview, unknown to the Garos hitherto, through the spread of literacy among people. The missionaries first introduced the Bengali script for the Garo language and, soon after, the Roman script, which proved to be of far reaching significance for the Garos in chalking out a distinctive identity for themselves and the Garo literature. The medium of instruction crystallized in the A\*we dialect,

one of the major dialects of the Garo language, serving as a common denominator among the many Garo dialects. Receiving the modern education through their own language, the Garos began to be introduced to literature, history, geography, science and technology. Their knowledge of other cultures and civilizations grew. Their own self-consciousness expanded, giving rise to a Garo literature. Through the publication of news papers, magazines and books, they could learn about the modern life-style, socio-political systems, and the economic conditions of the people in the towns and cities all around, and beyond them. Thus the literacy mission initiated by the missionaries, played a significant role in bringing about a great many changes in the worldview of the Garos.

The flowering of the Garo language and literature in one major dialect created a new sense of identity among the many Garo groups, that had been "dialectically" isolated and divided earlier. This is one of the inestimable benefits of the impact of modernization, achieved through the missionary presence and activities, on the life of the Garos. But, while a new sense of a common identity was emerging among the Garos as one people with one language and one culture, their traditional sense of identity rooted in the land greatly eroded. Their symbiotic bond with nature began to be loosened under the influence of the individualistic and materialistic life-style engendered by the new modern worldview. Caroline R. Marak, though in the context of a comparison between the modern Garo poetry with the traditional

songs, or "poetries", nostalgically makes the following comment :

\* It is obvious that nature is loved by the new authors, who are sensitive to its beauty; but they seem to be more conscious of what it does for man and the benefit that man derives from it, while the traditional singers love nature for what it is. Further, the traditional poets are not aware of man and nature as having separate entities, but for the new poets man is no longer a part of nature. In their attitude towards nature it seems that the new poets have been influenced by English poetry, which with other factors like their urban background may have caused the differences between their attitude and that of the traditional singers.<sup>26</sup>

Yet another contribution of Christianity to the process of modernization, which too had a great impact on the traditional worldview of the Garos, was its medical mission. With Christian love and concern towards the suffering humanity and inspired by the healing ministry of Jesus, the missionaries also took to the medical service among the people. They established the mission hospitals and health centres in select central places. Sometimes, small medical teams would go around the villages, preaching the gospel and at the same time offering medial services to those who were in need. The modern scientific medicines and medical services, administered with Christian love and concern by the missionaries, needless to say, attracted the traditional Garos. The missionaries endeared themselves among the people through their medical mission.

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26. Caroline R. Marak, Influence of English on Garo Poetry (Delhi : Scholars Publishing House, 1985), p. 188.

In their traditional way of treatment of the diseases, the Garos generally depend on the herbal medicines, prepared out of the jungle leaves and roots. Sometimes they are also prepared out of the flesh and bones of animals and reptiles, fishes and crabs, particular types of soil and stone, insects and so on. The traditional Garos regard the medicinal animals and herbal plants, on account of their healing property, as sacred. It is believed that some medicines and medical practices are taught to the practitioners in dreams and inspirations. The local medicine man (Oja) used to diagnose the nature and cause of the disease, before actually treating the disease with medicines, by way of divination. The traditional way of treatment against the diseases seems to be comparatively more lengthy and, at times, even more costly. Therefore, a direct visit to hospitals and medical centres, where modern medical drugs are easily available, seemed to the common man easier and cheaper. Needless to say, the modern medicine was also quick in its effects.



This has had a negative impact on the development of the traditional method of healing, which was often quite effective, apart from being wholistic to human nature, in the treatment of certain diseases. More importantly, the preservation of the medicinal plants and animals has come under threat. Since their healing power and value fell into disuse, the sacrality attached to them ceased to exercise its impact on the contemporary life and thinking of the Garos in general. In their traditional conception

of healing, there was a close bond between man, nature and God. It is vividly perceptible in the case of healing that involves the whole community. Such healing usually has a prayer for the divine intervention, besides the practice of drawing medicines from their natural surroundings. Therefore, such indigenous community healing becomes the occasion for renewal of communion, strengthening the symbiotic relationship with nature, man and God. It is the loss of a value system, associated with the indigenous medicine, which is regretted here rather than the introduction of allopathy in the villages. Side by side with allopathy, the traditional medicine would serve as an alternate medical system with its eco-friendly and community oriented values.

### 3. Emergence of Consumeristic Culture

It is a general feeling among the Garos that, with the coming to an end of British Raj and dawn of the Indian independence as a sovereign nation, the external political colonization came to an end, but that a subtle internal "colonization" began. The latter is legitimised in the name of development, growth and progress. A perceptive thinker observes that a western paradigm of development, through the western industrial growth model, is almost universally accepted.<sup>27</sup> This is the process of development, wherein the industrialists invest enormous capital, feed the giant machineries with natural resources, and produce goods for mass consumptions - all for the maximum profit for themselves

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27. K.C. Abraham, Eco-Justice (Bombay : BUILD, no year), pp. 4 f.

in the shortest time. Ruthless exploitation of nature and its natural resources, to say nothing of the labour and skill of fellow human beings, is the inevitable consequence of this pattern of development. The kind of technology they use is monstrous, in as much as it seeks to dispense with man and his labour increasingly. All decisions in this mode of production are determined by the principles of consumeristic economy, where the controlling logic is the greed and not the need.<sup>28</sup> Every society is affected by this consumeristic culture. Garo society is no exception, here. A new elite has emerged among the Garos, their elitism being measured by their consumption index. The group includes dominant public leaders, politicians, educationists, professionals and, above all, the capitalists. These people, after the model of some westernized societies, seem to be working with the development ideology of "catch up" at the cost of cultural and moral values. A. Wati Langchar writes :

In the dominant "catch up" development model, the criterion of judging human society is economic. It undermines the cultural and moral aspects of human society and projects the image of western society as the goal of civilization. When this "catch up" theory is applied to human society, the logic is clear. The more we are developed industrially, the more we are higher up the ladder.<sup>29</sup>

This reduction of development with western civilization and consumeristic pattern of growth, which takes the material

28. Ibid.

29. A. Wati Longchar, The Traditional Tribal Worldview and Modernity (Jorhat : N. Nimala, 1995), pp. 157 f.

economy as its criterion, and which sets the western technological culture and the western individualistic society as the model for any other society, denies the possibility of flowering of the indigenous art and culture. It also denies a technology with a human face. It undermines the cultural values, which are often both holistic and eco-friendly. The tribal societies, Garos included, have become victims of a mindless consumerism. The present trend of movement towards "progress", with the ideology of "catch up", not only denies, in a real sense, the possibility of growth, as a people, in their own culture and experience of cosmic realities, but also sets in motion an unhealthy competition among the dominant Garo elites themselves in amassing wealth, invariably at the cost of the basic amenities to the poor. For in this model of growth, one's amassing of wealth is directly related in inverse proportion to the other's deprivation.

What is more, these people, adopting and cultivating the materialistic and consumeristic culture, are no longer considerate and sympathetic to nature, the Mother-Earth (Mane-Pilte). Nature is viewed by them as what is "out there", as a mere raw material, to be exploited and enjoyed indiscriminately for human consumption. This is abundantly exhibited in their consumeristic culture that sanctions the denudation of nature for the benefit and profit of a few elites. As a result, the vast number of traditional people is being dispossessed of their land, forest resources, minerals, to say nothing of the erosion of their cultural values.

Under the patronage of the government, hundreds of trucks  
are carrying everyday coal and limestone from Garo Hills.  
The latter are mined by the greedy, by unscientific methods,  
creating terrible pollution of air and water, unprecedented land-  
slips and the reduction of forest coverage. All these resources  
need to be protected, if we care for the sustenance of life on  
earth. Until the recent Supreme Court Order, banning the movement  
of timber outside North-East, huge quantity of timber, bamboo  
and cane had been supplied from Garo Hills through the land  
and river routes. We are shocked by the most recent "forest  
scam" in Meghalaya, which is said to be the greatest in 25  
years. It has been perpetrated in the Chimabangsi Reserve  
Forest of the East Garo Hills. Had it not been openly criti-  
cized by the media, this indiscriminate destruction of the  
forests would have continued even to this day. Human cons-  
cience is yet to be touched against the crimes against nature.  
Such unmindful destruction of natural resources had been  
going on for a long time now, and it is still continuing  
in many ways in other parts of the Garo Hills. However,  
when it is brought to light, often, the scapegoats are the poor  
traditional people, who are blamed for destroying the jungle  
by their shifting cultivations. This situation is by no  
means on the decline, since the demand on the land and its  
resources is on the rise, on the part of the greedy industri-  
alists, who are constantly on the look-out for ever new  
natural resources as the grist to their industries. This has  
been damaging to the eco-system of the Garo Hills, to say  
nothing of its impact on the Garos' traditional worldview.

To conclude, ecological crisis today should be seen as a spiritual and moral issue. What is at stake is the, spiritual vision and the violation of justice for the poor tribals. While all are affected by the ecological crisis, the life and self-consciousness of the traditional Garos, because it is intrinsically an eco-consciousness, is being affected the most; the life of the poor and the marginalized, who are dependent totally on their hills, forests and rivers, is pushed to the brink of disaster. The government programmes, if they are to be people-oriented, have to be geared to a recovery of eco-justice among the tribals. Concern for social and economic justice, today, must be seen as entailing a commensurate concern for the ways in which people relate themselves to earth's life, before they learn to utilize earth's resources judiciously. To use the expression of Eric J. Lott, "The renewal of the economy and authentic people's development are inextricably inter-linked with ecological recovery; any form of development that are not based on sustainable eco-justice will quickly be seen to be pseudo-development".<sup>30</sup>

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30. Eric J. Lott, "The Indian Contribution to a Global Eco-Theology", Bangalore Theological Forum, Vol.XVIII, No.4 (October-December, 1986): 149.

## CHAPTER-V

### CONCLUSION

In this concluding chapter, besides summing up the results of this study, I wish to explore how far the Garo concept of Creation, as available to us in their primal religion, may contribute to the recovery of the eco-consciousness of the Garos as a tribal community. The preservation and the healthy growth of our environment, the whole eco-system, depends largely on people's clear perception of, the right attitude towards and the sensitive activity in, nature. This does not suggest any immediate return to the experience of the past. The flow of human history is just not reversible in any simplistic way. Nor is it desirable. However, we do desperately need to search for a more integral vision of life, which perceives human life as having originated from, dynamically nurtured by, and organically participative of, earth's own life, faced as we are by the unprecedented ecological crisis. Let no one take this chapter as an invitation to return uncritically to the past traditions or to revert to a pre-scientific consciousness. Rather it is a plea for learning from our past mistakes, and for appropriating such aspects of religious heritage as may creatively contribute to the spiritual, moral and cultural reorientations for recovering our symbiotic relationship with nature and, through it, with God and man. This chapter is divided into three parts : (1) God-World-Man Relationship, (2) Tribal Spirituality, and (3) Creating an Eco-Conscious Culture.

### 1. God-World-Man Relationship

The Garo primal religion conceives the whole universe as being born of, or created by, the Creator God. The Creator God is the First Cause in the sense of an efficient cause that sets in motion the being of everything. He is also the Final Cause of this universe in as much as the Creator is the goal of the created order. In this respect the concept of creation is similar to the one we encounter in Aquinas. And yet it may not be interested in certain discussion on creation that engaged Aquinas' <sup>g</sup> attention, partly due to the latter's indebtedness to the Greek categories of Aristotle freely borrowed by Aquinas. Thus, while Aristotle holds that the world is eternal, the eternal existence of the world, closely connected with the question of the origin of this universe, is extensively debated in the Scholastic philosophy. Proceeding on the assumption of the revelatory truth that God created the world out of nothing (ex nihilo), Aquinas argues for the position that the truth of creation out of nothing however can be demonstrated rationally. However, to the question whether the world was created in time or from eternity, he maintains that either position is possible, though neither position can ever be demonstrated rationally. What the actual position is, is only a matter of revelation, according to Aquinas.

One would not expect such philosophical quibbling of the Schoolmen in the Garo primal religion, as it freely makes use of the mythical insights bearing directly on the lived experience of the community. Hence, the basic thrust of the Garo primal religion is not so much on the question

of "origin" and "eternity" of creation as on the "relationship":

The relationship of a creature to the Creator God, and, to the rest of the cosmic "realities", is what engages the attention of the Garo mythmaker. Even while stating that God is the source of every being, or that this universe is "born" of God, the basic intention is an expression of its understanding of a living category of "relationship". This explains why, in the traditional worldview of the Garos, there is no dualistic tension between "matter" and "form", "matter" and "mind", "finite" and "infinite" and, "sacred" and "profane", as in the case of the ancient Greek and the Christian philosophies. The God-World-Man complex is perceived and experienced as closely interrelated by the Garos. The cold philosophical categories put on the flesh and blood in the myth-dominated, but life-centred, vision of the tribal thought. What M.M. Thomas states perceptively of the traditional worldviews is specially true of the Garos :

The primal vision, characteristic of tribal life, saw the cosmos as a total unbroken unity, as a spiritual continuum within which the dead and the living, natural objects, spirits and gods, the individual, clan and the tribe, animals, plants and minerals formed an unbroken hierarchical unity of spiritual forces. The self of man is not an individual self but an extended universal self present and actively participating in parts of totality.<sup>1</sup>

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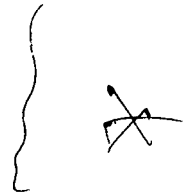
1. M.M. Thomas, "The Cultural Mission of Catholic Education in Nagaland", in Culture, Religion and Society, edited by S.K. Chatterji and Hunter P. Mabry (Delhi: ISPCCK, 1996), p. 75.

The Garo primal religion conceives of the whole God-World-Man complex as the "family affairs" of the Creator God. The Garo imagery is directly drawn from their matrilineal culture, in which the Garo household revolves around the Grandmother, or Mother, as its primal source. Hence, the Creator God is understood in the character of motherhood - as Grandmother or Mother. It is in their perceived universal household that every conceivable thing or person is seen as having been bound to the Creator God and to one another by a bond of close kinship relation.

Here, the nature of interrelationship is not merely to be understood passively as a "relatedness", but also actively as a mutual "dependence". In the Garo creation myth, when the Creator creates a thing, it is created for a purpose : Every creature needs every other creature to work out its purpose. The whole creation has a purpose, and it can be realized only in inter-dependence with one another. Every being is seen as having its own creativity, as having its role and function in the general order of creation. It is, as it were, a "co-creator" in the whole process of creation, in the cosmic order. Even the Creator God is perceived as making use of the created life-forms and natural objects for the furtherance of the creation. Creation is not an act finished once and for all, rather it is a process in continuation, everything playing out its role in the ongoing process.

On the contrary, the relationship between the Creator God and the creature in the philosophy of Aquinas is a unilateral relation. For Aquinas, every creature, in virtue

of its status of being created, has a "real" relation to God, as its efficient first cause; but God may not be said to have such a "real" relation to his creature, lest he should make God even inadvertently dependent on his creatures. He thus categorically asserts that every creature, being created by God, depends on him for its existence (being) and perfection (becoming). The creature, in particular, man, may not be said to have been endowed with any creative power in the strict sense of the term. Creatures, being finite, cannot have any creative power that we associate with God's own creative power. Aquinas may not be free from an internal contradiction, here. While denying the creatures any creative power, he however maintains that, in the divinely ordered hierarchical structure from higher to lower, the ordered perfection of the universe demands the existence of some intermediary intelligent creatures. This is to ensure that the species of the higher order - human species is specifically presumed by him - could make use of the potentiality of the species of the lower order for the attainment of its own perfection. Aquinas may be confronted here that a creature, lacking in creative power, even of the higher order, cannot make use of the potentiality of the species of the lower order, and thereby cannot as a matter of fact contribute anything for the perfection of the universe. Moreover, what disturbs me the most in this type of philosophy of creation is its ecological insensitivity which, in my considered opinion, the Garo concept of creation may perhaps overcome. The modern philosophy of materialism

and consumerism, according to which human species gets an unmitigated sanction to occupy the dominating position over against the other creatures and the unrestricted power to exploit them for his own selfish ends, may receive a philosophical justification in the Christian philosophy of creation, as interpreted by Aquinas. 

On the contrary, in the Garo primal religion, the inter-relatedness and interdependence of the Creator and the whole created order, cosmic 'realities', constitute the focal point. The dominant ideas of the Creator God as the Grandmother, and of the Mother Earth, as the nurturing Mother, and of the entire created order of natural objects, animals, plants and human beings as the children sustained and nurtured by God, constitute the core of the creation myth. The whole creation is a "great household" of children, brothers and sisters, servants to one another - a household ruled by the God the Mother. The hierarchy in this household does not run from top to bottom. Rather it is a hierarchy in a circle, in which the Creator God as the nucleus has all other lesser spirits, human beings, plants and animals, and even inanimate beings, revolving around the nucleus and fulfilling their functions in the great household. Human being is then only a part of the creation, by no means occupying a domineering position. Though humanity has a distinctive place in the created order, this distinction is to be judged in terms of its function and responsibility, rather than of superiority and exploitative governance. By no means does it indicate that humanity is above other

creatures; much less that it has any dominion over the whole creation. Creation is God's, not man's. Although it is indicative of the presence of humanity as inevitable in creation, it forcefully teaches us that the very existence of humanity would be impossible apart from the other fellow creatures, both animate and inanimate. Such an interdependence between God, nature and man may be described aptly as "cosmotheandric", to make use of a term coined by Raimundo Panikkar. He writes :

It is neither a mere divine affair, nor a purely human endeavour, nor a blind cosmic process; it is human, divine and cosmic all in one. That is, it is cosmotheandric. God, Man, and the universe are correlates. God without Man is nothing, literally 'no-thing'. Man without God is exclusively a 'thing', not a person, not a real human being, while the world, the cosmos, without Man and God is 'any-thing', without consistency and being; it is sheer unexisting chaos. The three are constitutively connected.<sup>2</sup>

## 2. Tribal Spirituality

One may look askance at the term "tribal spirituality". Yet, its use is perfectly legitimate, when we take into consideration the availability of such rich religio-philosophical concepts as God the Mother, sensitivity to nature, universe as a living organism, purification and sanctifications, etc. - all making for a profound spirituality. K.C. Abraham writes, "The spirit of non-acquisitiveness, of sharing, of harmonious relationship with human and nature is the essence of tribal

2. Raimundo Panikkar, The Vedic Experience, Mantramajari - An Anthology of the Vedas for Modern Man and Contemporary Celebration (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1979), p. 73. The emphasis is mine.

spirituality"<sup>3</sup>. "Spirituality" is a much misunderstood term in religions, as it is easily confused often with the empty rituals. In Christianity, too, the term has not had a smooth sailing in its theology. Yet, spirituality is central to the Biblical vision of life. In the Bible, "spiritual" is not opposed to "material". Likewise, we can rightly observe the absence of such distinction as "spiritual" and "material" in the Garo primal religion, too. From an ant to a mountain, from a sparrow to a river, from a piece of stone to the Creator God, from arts and crafts to singing and dancing, from sowing the seed to observing the festival, from birth to death, all are taken into the realm of the "spiritual" in the spirituality of the traditional life of the Garos. According to the primal vision of the Garos, every conceivable thing is sacred, because God is the Mother-Source of them all; it has sprung up from this Mother-Source. Therefore, plants, trees, animals, birds, land, rivers, and human beings are all interrelated by a divine kinship bond, and they are interdependent too. I am inclined to believe that, in virtue of this relation, the self-consciousness of the Garos is intrinsically a cosmic-consciousness, therefore, at once, an eco-consciousness.

On the contrary, the imported Western spirituality, often sundered from its Biblical moorings, is steadily becoming dominant among the contemporary Garos to replace their

3. K.C. Abraham, "Third World Theology : Paradigm Shift and Emerging Concerns", in Confronting Life : Theology out of the Context edited by M.P. Joseph (New Delhi : ISPCK, 1995), p. 220.

own eco-conscious spirituality. It indulges in such distinctions as "religion" and "culture", "sacred" and "profane", "spirit" and "matter". Much of the spirituality of the Western Christianity, often in its fragmented denominationalism, has fallen a prey to this fragmentation of life. Little wonder then that people there are often occupied with personal piety, salvation of the soul, the Second Coming of Christ (without fully realizing the meaning and significance of the First Coming) and so on. When the Garos too adopted such a fragmented spirituality, it has radically alienated them from their own spiritual heritage which is rooted in their soil. In this kind of spirituality, religion and its activities become remote and "other-worldly", and God becomes the "wholly Other", with little relevance to the day-to-day life of the Garos. The reminder of Choan-Seng Song to the Asian Christians may not be without its significance to the Garo Christians, too :

In Christian theology we have tended to make harsh judgement on nature worship and material oriented cultic expressions common in non-monotheistic religions... In our religious practices we have turned God against His own creation. Nature becomes something to be exploited, conquered and utilized. We are again forced to seek God and hope in the Creation which shares human suffering and hope.<sup>4</sup>

The Garo primal religion does not worship nature or natural objects. Far from it, it does not drive God away from his

4. Choan-Seng Song, "Asia in Suffering and Hope", Asia Theological Reflections on Suffering and Hope, edited by Yap Kim Hao (Singapore : CCA, 1977), p. 57.

creation. God is the Mother-Source of this universe and everything therein. The cosmos is God's household, in which She dwells and gets actively involved in the affairs of her children.

Keshub Chunder Sen, while describing Eastern spirituality, writes :

Do you not know that we, Asiatic, ... never study Nature but commune with her ? In the East all is full of life, all is full of God. There is nothing godless in the East, there is nothing profane. All is sacred.<sup>5</sup>

Having a life of communion with nature and the divine, a significant aspect of the Eastern spirituality, is an integral feature of the traditional Garo spirituality. In it, nature is not understood as a detached and remote object of study; much less is it something to be conquered and exploited. But nature is what we commune with, as if it were their living mother. They talk, sing, dance and work with nature; they learn from nature, and worship in nature. The times of their birth, suffering, sickness and death, of calamities, of seasonal festivals, associated with the agricultural cycle, all become the occasions for the Garos to come closer and commune with nature. The occasions also serve for strengthening the bond of fellowship with man and God alike. In their regular and occasional worship, nature becomes a sacramental link, as it were, between God and man.

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5. David C. Scott (ed.), Keshub Chunder Sen (Madras: CLC, 1979), p. 286.

Today, Christianity has become the religion of the majority of the Garos. This fact cannot be wished away, precisely because it is the religion of the people. What may be asked for is to examine critically how far a Western Christian mind-set may have brought about the imbalances in the environment in the region. Garo Christianity cannot afford to be "insensitive" to, or "unconscious" of, the ecological crisis, threatening the world, in general, and their own habitat, in particular. It is a fact that the Western spirituality has affected the life and culture, dignity and identity, and the self-consciousness and the eco-consciousness of the Garos. Therefore, it is imperative for the Garo Christianity to open itself to the insights of its own primal heritage. It is also incumbent upon it to shake off the irrelevant Western theologies, and dare to contextualize its own theology and spirituality. Only a reformulated and contextualized theology would be in a situation to read meaning in their practice of Garo Christianity. Indeed, the possibilities for contextualization of doctrine and practice are immense.

The person of Jesus, the Christ event and his mission of salvation could be reinterpreted as the "cosmic Christ", the "cosmic mission", and the "cosmic salvation". Garo Christianity could develop a "creational spirituality"<sup>6</sup>, if only it can go back to the Garo conception of creation.

6. Matthew Fox, Original Blessing : A Primer in Creation Spirituality (Santa Fe : Bearad Company, 1983), p. 57.

A creation-centred spirituality can be at once an eco-  
spirituality as well. Who knows that a reinterpreted Garo  
spirituality may be even closer to the original inspira-  
tion of the Bible. There is much scope to develop a life  
and spirituality of stewardship, participation and deep  
reverence towards creation. Garo spirituality would hardly  
make any room for a dualism of spirit and matter. Much less  
would it subscribe to a hierarchy of "from-top-to-bottom"  
and of "man-above-nature". A creational theology would  
discourage the language of exploitation of nature to  
satisfy the unlimited ends of man, driven by greed. This  
can be a new freedom in Jesus the Gospels speak of. Jesus  
amply demonstrated such a freedom in his earthly life :  
He was in complete harmony with the natural world of  
flora and fauna, and even the mineral kingdom of rocks,  
hills, valleys, lakes and deserts. Jesus asked people  
to learn from the birds of the air and the lilies of the  
field. Many Psalms praise the greatness of the Creator, and  
appreciate his creation; nature is the gateway to God  
for the psalmist. Prophets see the vision of Shalom in  
the fulness of creation, where harmony would be the  
characteristic mode of existence : Beasts and human dwell  
together, the lion and the child play together, swords  
are turned into ploughshares. Prophet Amos extends that  
harmony to the concerns of social justice, too, when he asserts  
that shedding blood is to commit violence against the  
Earth.

### 3. Creating an Eco-Conscious Culture

Our contemporary culture is never tired of speaking about the human creativity. What is its range ? The question is specially relevant to us, since man is said to be a "creator" of his culture and civilization. Jyoti Sahi, a well-known Christian artist writes, "The human being is basically and fundamentally a culture-creating, art-loving creature. To be creative is a part of inalienable dignity of human being".<sup>7</sup> The statement is an assertion of the range of human creativity as extending to the creation of his own culture. In the creation of cultures there necessarily is a tension between transcendence and immanence, on the part of man. Eric J. Lott insightfully writes on the process of creation of culture :

What is found in common in the cultural process, in a wide spectrum of human communities, are life-patterns that aim both to transcend (in varied ways) and transform the natural process of the bio-physical environment, and also to be adapted and attuned to this natural environment. All cultures thus recognise that humans are both participant in and are able to transcend their bio-sphere.<sup>8</sup>

Human creativity, extended for creating a human culture, has to be extremely judicious and sensitive to the human

7. Jyoti Sahi, "The Place of Art in the Process of Inculturation - an Indian Perspective", in Christian Faith and Multiform Culture in India, edited by Somen Das (Bangalore : United Theological College, 1987), p.131.
8. Eric J. Lott, " Religious Faith and the Diversity of Cultural Life in India", op.cit., p.51.

habitat, or natural environment. In other words, the natural environment is the canvas on which the creation of a human culture will have to be painted. It must not be torn asunder. All cultures therefore are specific to our environment. Certainly human cultures have felt the need to transform as well as to participate in the natural environment. In addition to the natural environment, C.R. Agera adds an element of "tradition" as the ground for creating human culture. He writes, "Culture is an organized way of life based on a common tradition and a common environment".<sup>9</sup> Therefore, while we aim at creating a self-conscious indigenous culture among the contemporary Garos as a tribe, we should take into consideration both the traditional heritage and the natural environment of the people.

Being a living creature, man is dynamic; he is active and creative. This makes human culture also dynamic. For better or worse, human culture undergoes constant change. But, the dynamism of culture must not blind us to the dynamism of nature as well. The primal vision of the Garos wants us to be fully conscious that nature is alive and dynamic : the land, rivers, animals, plants, stones, rain, wind, sun, moon, and stars - all are endowed with a life and energy of their own. Nature is one great living organism. This is why the Garo primal religion personifies the Earth, identifying it with Mother Earth (Mane-Pilte). In her own

9. C.R. Agera, Religious Critique of Culture (New Delhi : Intellectual Publishing House, 1991), p. X.

reality, Mother Earth is gentle and benevolent, lovely and loving. Man should realize that he is only a part of this creation. With his creativity, he may create his culture, but in an unflinching harmony and unity with nature. His culture cannot be pitted against the other parts of the same creation. Only a human culture, in total harmony with the eco-consciousness, merits the name of human culture; a truly human culture ought to be a "cosmic-conscious" culture. Only such a culture can sustain its environment and, in return, be sustained by the environment.

The Garo primal religion also recognizes the presence of the "power of darkness", which brings about chaos in the cosmos. The chaotic power can gain the upper hand in God's creation so much so that the very existence of the cosmos may be threatened. The dreadful power of darkness can be represented even by the mindless creativity of man, when it is driven by his greed and lust for power and luxury. It is precisely at this stage that it is salutary for the Garos to reflect over the impact of modernization on their life and worldview. Their primal vision makes us aware that our present ecological crisis has its roots in man's greed and lust for power and insatiable consumerism. Dehumanizing science, technology without a human face and a value-free system of knowledge are replacing the traditional tribal belief-systems and practices which, in turn, are leading the people to a way of life guided by materialism and consumerism. Their corollary in society is an atomised individualism that has no concern either for his fellow being or God or nature.

Today, we are becoming increasingly aware of the fact that the dominant goal of modern science and technology is reductionistic. It wants to remould man everywhere after the manner of Western Man. The culture of the western man and his pattern of growth and development have become the paradigm for all. However, its tyranny is now becoming clear through a host of counter-culture movements in the West. The Western Feminists, for example, are in the forefront of protests against a western science and technology that projects a "macho" image. As a masculine and patriarchal project, the western science and technology entail the subjugation of both nature and woman.<sup>10</sup> Would the Garo conception of the Nature as the Mother help us to recover an eco-conscious culture? Such culture would perhaps not marginalize the women in society, who form half the population of our mankind.

David C. Scott hits the nail on the head, when he speaks of the depersonalization of nature as being directly associated with patriarchy. He writes :

In a real sense, it was the scientific revolution in Europe which transformed nature from terra mater or mother earth into a machine and a source of raw material... Patriarchy as the new science and technological power was political need of emerging industrial capitalism.<sup>11</sup>

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10. Kamala Bhasin and Nighat Khan, Feminism and Its Relevance in South Asia (New Delhi : Kali for Women, 1986), p. 2.

11. David C. Scott, "Some Reflections on 'A Theological Response to Ecological Crisis'", Bangalore Theological Forum (Vol.XXV, No.1, March-1993) : 20.

The pillage of the earth regrettably is sanctioned by the Western ideology of a patriarchal science and technology. Mother Earth is systematically and ruthlessly denuded in many ways by a few capitalists under the pretext of development and progress everywhere. The contemporary Garo societies too have fallen a prey to this lopsided development and progress. It is a sort of species arrogance on the part of man over against the rights of all other species in creation. This arrogance too often gets expressed in insensitive (to nature) creation of arts and literature, socio-political structures, trade and commerce, life-style and, at times, even religion - in short, in an insensitive culture.

Mother Earth is groaning under man's hegemony, dictated by his greed and lust. She is a silent sufferer, today. But, who knows if she will not react with a vengeance, tomorrow. The ominous signs are already visible. She is not merely a source of raw materials to be exploited, a commodity to be used and abused by man for his selfish ends. She is also a power-house of energy. If she reverts to her primal chaos, no life-form can ever be sustained by her, let alone man and his hubris-dominated culture.

Today, tribals in general, and Garos in particular, may do well, in the process of creating their own culture, to return to nature, to Mother Earth, which is their original home. It has become an imperative for their survival. This perhaps is the valuable lesson that their primal religions can teach to the rest of the world. An ecological

imbalance is a global disease that affects all life, man included, because life sustenance is fundamentally symbiotic. A return to nature does not necessarily mean a radical rejection of all scientific and technological culture, but a deep sensitivity to the preservation of nature and our habitat. What is needed is far more truly and ecologically "scientific" transformative cultural approach to our habitat. This necessarily calls for curbs on our unmindful and disrespectful exploitation of nature and non-replicable resources. A return to nature would have to begin first of all with our mind-set for a recovery of the sense of belonging to nature, the sense of kinship bond with other creatures, a sense of living together in an interdependent world. Only a nature-sensitive mind-set can create a self-culture, which at once deeply eco-conscious. In it is the true tribal, therefore the Garo, identity as a people. The self-consciousness of the tribals is not a consciousness of a mere "individual self", but of an "extended cosmic self" present and vibrant in the totality of the cosmos. The Garo primal vision of nature as the Mother, reflected in their social structure of matriliney may then contribute its mite both to the Garo community and others alike.

The government agencies and the NGOs, in their attempt at the development and progress of the tribal societies, must not forget the tribals' rootedness in the Earth's life. Without eco-justice, they should acknowledge, they cannot bring about any social justice in the life of the tribal community. If the political and administrative machinery is not

sensitive to eco-justice, extended to land settlements, land ownership and land products, there cannot be any social justice in their community. Their development and progress should be according to their own native genius. This calls for an extreme caution for not disturbing the tribals' integral life with their own environment, particularly with their land, from where their identity is derived. The development of their farming, fishery, social forestry, state and district council forests, soil conservation, mining, factories and industries must not be in dissonance with their earth-integrated vision and life. Our education, religion and political ideologies should foster an eco-conscious culture. Dorothee Solle cautions us that our modern language is aggressively "governed by consumerism".<sup>12</sup> We have therefore to guard against the language of "domination", "exploitation" and "consumerism". Rather our language should be one of serving, caring and nurturing.

In conclusion, while creating our human culture, balance must at all cost be maintained between human survival and survival of the habitat. The tribals, in general, and the Garos, in particular, need now to be consciously concerned with how they can more fully conform themselves to the rhythms of nature. For it is from this rhythmic womb of nature, that they have emerged and are sustained and nurtured. Through this the tribals, with their characteristic

12. Dorothee Solle, On Earth As in Heaven (Wesminster : Maryknoll, 1993), p. 85.

vision of a living relationship with nature, man and  
divine, can contribute their mite to the resolution  
of a global ecological crisis. I conclude with the salu-  
tary words of an environmentalist :

Conservation, not consumerism

Need, not greed

Enabling, not dominating power

Integrity of creation, not exploiting nature!<sup>13</sup>

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13. K.C. Abraham, et al.(eds.), Global Warming (Bangalore :  
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