

Changing Dimensions of Rice in Garo Foodways

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Abstract

The Garos, a matrilineal tribe from northeast india, are traditionally known to be shifting cultivators. They are known to cultivate a number of crops, inclusive of cereals, tubers, leafy vegetables, fruits and shrubs in their plots as a part of multiple cropping, of which rice is the most important crop both in terms of prestige and value. Garos are known to grow different traditional varieties of rice possessing diverse properties. This paper is an attempt to look into the present status of traditional rice vis-à-vis newly introduced rice in the Garo economy and foodways. The economic pressures and competition of the newly introduced market economy will be looked at in detail. It will try also to study the role of economic and political forces that aid and abet the changing dimensions of rice in the society. For the purpose of the paper, the Garos of Gohalkona, a village in Kamrup district in Assam will be specifically looked at.

Keywords - Foodways, Economy, Shifting cultivators Garo Tribe

Introduction

Food is one of the most important aspects of life, and has therefore elicited innumerable discussions and publications, more on general lines than the academic. Classifications of food vary from culture to culture, however all cultures agree on the presence of a core or staple food. One seldom hears about the cultural meaning of staple food, but it does not take much to notice the reflective representational meanings assigned to staple food everywhere.

In staple food, a distinction is often debated between “we” v/s “they”, often expressed through “our” v/s “their” staple food. “Rice-eating Asians v/s bread-eating Europeans” is a familiar

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expression of difference between Asians and Europeans. In India, such a distinction is made between wheat-eating north Indians v/s rice-eating south and east Indians or rice-growing east India v/s wheat-growing west India. Roughly one third of the world population in Asia, the Middle East, and Africa rely on rice as exclusive staple food. Some rely far more on the quantitative value of rice than others while some produce rice more for export than for domestic consumption. Yet, among all rice-eating Asians, the symbolic/religious importance of rice is amply expressed in its ubiquitous presence in major festivals and rituals — rice planting rituals, harvest rituals, weddings, etc.

Rice is also the staple food of the Garos, a tribe living in north-eastern part of India and northern Bangladesh, more distinguished for their system of matriliney. This paper is an attempt to look at rice among Garos, and the changes that have come about; the causes of these changes and the after-effects are also dwelt upon. In conclusion the future prospects of traditional vis-à-vis non-traditional rice are laid down.

In India Garos predominantly live in the state of Meghalaya in the districts of East, West and South Garo Hills; however, they are also found in small pockets in different states such as Assam, Tripura, Nagaland and West Bengal. Across the political divide, they are also found to reside in the northern districts of Bangladesh. As in other systems of matriliney, lineage, succession, transmission of property and residence after marriage is through the female line, i.e., from mother to daughter. However unlike other systems of matriliney, Garos do not follow any rules for inheritance (i.e., neither ultimogeniture nor primogeniture), rather the most “favourite” and “capable” daughter inherits the lion’s share, with smaller shares going to the other daughters.

Garos are shifting cultivators, cultivating a large amount of crops in their fields, starting with the staple, which is rice, and followed by other crops such as millet, tapioca, pumpkin, varieties of gourd and bean, sorrel leaves, chillies and other crops. This is such a case in some of the hilly pockets of Garo-dominated areas of Garo Hills in Meghalaya (India) even today. In marginal areas such as Assam and Bangladesh, where Garos are plains-dwellers and a minority, shifting cultivation is now being replaced by wet paddy.

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Material And Methods

The data incorporated herein is original, empirical data collected through a period of three years, from mid-2006 to year end-2009, in my pursuit on Garo foodways. Only a part of the field data generated has been used for the purpose of this paper. The focus of my study was geographically contained in a village called Gohalkona situated in the Boko circle of Kamrup district in the state of Assam in India. This village is uniquely situated between the predominantly caste populated areas of Assam and the Khasi Hills of Meghalaya. It falls under Boko Police Station, Kamrup District, though it is only a few kilometres away from Nongstoin, West Khasi Hills District in Meghalaya state. In all, Gohalkona has 258 Garo households, with a total population of 1367, males numbering 632 and females 735 (from personal census data collected by the researcher in December 2006). The mainstay of the inhabitants is agriculture. Every household does some form of cultivation. Their methods of cultivation vary from slash and burn to wet paddy, and vegetable gardens to cash crop plantations. There are only 29 individuals engaged in some kind of service/jobs ranging from school teachers to peons, drivers and security guards. Besides agriculture, a few engage in sericulture, carpentry, weaving and basketry as well.

Results and Discussion

Rice and its Centrality in Garo Life

The structure of a food system is heavily influenced by the nature of its staples or focal foods. Such foods are eaten frequently and generally constitute a large portion of a people's caloric intake. Rice (mi) is the staple food of the Garos. This is the most frequently eaten food item, which is served at home and outside, to family members and guests. Other cereals like millet and wheat are also grown (though the latter, in less frequency, is said to be a new introduction). Interestingly rice is referred to as "mi", whereas millet is called "mi-si" (literally meaning "small rice") and wheat "mi-gom" (meaning "rounded rice"). This seems to underlie the significance of the staple or core food - rice, which is the reference point in terms of other cereals, which are less important in comparison.

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It is again a food item which is served in different forms throughout the meal cycle: as cooked rice, the first item to be served, as a curry, in the form of ground rice preparations, as a drink (rice-beer, *chu*, was frequently served earlier before Christianization set in), and also as snacks (pancakes, rice-cakes, cookies etc.).

Rice plays a special role in the ritual and ideological life of the Garos. There are special planting, maturation and harvesting rituals for it that does not exist for any other plants. Majumdar (1980: 60), while giving an account of rituals connected with shifting cultivation, says that the cycle begins with the ceremony connected to burning of the plots, called *agalmaka* comprising the worship of the spirit of the *aba* (shifting plot) by each household individually by sacrificing a fowl. This ceremony is accompanied by dancing, feasting and drinking. In some areas a second ceremony called *michil tata*, in honour of *Rokime*, the spirit of the rice plant and general prosperity is held by the entire village. Just before the harvest, another ceremony is jointly held by the villagers called *rongchugala*. At the end of harvest, another ceremony called *ahaia* or *jamegipa* is performed to cast off taboo on certain food crops. The final ceremony connected with shifting cultivation, *Wangala*, takes place immediately and this marks the end of the year for a shifting cultivator. This is held in honour of *Saljong*, the spirit residing over the crops of the shifting plots. These later rituals are for all important crops inclusive of paddy.

Some rituals still exist in Gohalkona especially those connected to harvesting of rice. The studied village takes part in an annual three-day *Wangala* festival held by the Garos of lower Assam. This is held in the month of November (supposedly after harvest, even though in practice many would not have yet harvested their crops) to mark the *Wangala* ritual of the forefathers. This is marked by dancing, playing drums and drinking rice-beer. This festival, first started in 2000, has now taken a festive mood by introduction of traditional sports, dances, songs and story-telling competitions.

No celebration is complete without rice. No communal feast or communal gathering connected with birth, death, and marriage or in connection to clan activities is complete without the serving and eating of rice. There are special varieties that are sacred and

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must be used in rituals, such as mimitim doka and mimitim dokru. During festive occasions, jaha mi is cooked and served. The rice species that is used for making festive cakes, pancakes, cookies etc. is mi minil, mimagisim, mimitim gitchak and mimitim doka.

There is a strong emic value put on the consumption of rice. “Have you eaten rice?” is a very common greeting. In fact, mid-day meal is referred to as mi sal (daytime rice) and evening meal as mi attam (evening rice). Rice is avidly sought after by guests at feasts as though it was of extreme value. No feast among the Garos is complete without rice. It can always be exchanged for other commodities due to its high prestige value whereas the same is difficult about other food crops.

Again, the quantity of rice harvested and how long it subsists the family forms the basis of affluence or poverty of the family. If the produce of a household lasts for a year, the family is manechaom (literally meaning, getting to eat = affluent). If a household has excess rice that has to be sold after a year’s consumption then they are manechabeom (getting too much to eat = very affluent). If a family does not get enough to subsist for a year, they are referred to as manechajam (not getting to eat = poor); if a family lives hand to mouth, kangalongbeom (nothing to eat = very poor).

The symbolic foods appropriate for ordinary meals and for sacrifices have significant overlap. As Douglas (1997: 37) observes, there is “a very strong analogy between table and altar”, in village Gohalkona too, a large number of food offerings to God (i.e., Church) have been seen. These offerings include rice, betel nut, coconut and orange trees, fowls, and at times vegetables as well. These offerings are made in memory of a beloved one who passed away or whenever there is bountiful harvest. It is seen that the best food items are offered.

Besides these, some obligatory donations are also collected for the church. Mi jakep (mi = rice, jakep = handful, meaning “handful of rice”) is collected from every household for the church. Mi jakep refers to a handful or fistful of rice kept aside every time rice is prepared for cooking a meal, be it mid-day or evening meal. Every time a meal is cooked a fistful of rice is kept aside for the Supreme Being. This uncooked rice, so stored, is collected every

week by the church collector from every household. All the rice thus gathered is then sold off for 10 INR per kg on Monday and the money thus collected is kept in the church treasury. Again, every year after harvest half a mon¹, approximately 15 kilograms, is collected from every household for the church, and another half a mon for Krima Soba, the VIIIth Garo Baptist Convention.² The pamong, who is a full-time church leader, also receives a donation of 1 don/duli (5 kgs) per house in a year. The above donations are not mandatory and those who cannot afford are exempted while those who are affluent give more than the required amount.

Traditional VIS-A-VIS Non-Traditional Rice

Garos are known to be rice cultivators since a very long time. This is supported by oral literature too which talks of a time when celestial beings made rice known to them³. Even though in Garo Hills it is not clear (from archaeological and ethnological evidences) which type of cultivation (wet or dry) began first, in Gohalkona it is obvious that they were shifting cultivators (dry cultivation) before, where traditionally only some specific varieties of rice was grown. These varieties are those which are known to have passed down through generations, and moving with the people as they moved from place to place.

Presumably the first settlers of Gohalkona too were initially fully dependant on cultivation of rice and other food crops in shifting plots also called dry paddy. This can be gleaned from stories of how the first settlers on seeing the area on a swampy valley were reluctant to settle down. They did not know how to go about cultivating rice except in the far away hills where much fear and terror reigned⁴, on which a few nevertheless ventured. However few adventurous early settlers sowed rice on the swampy lands, and their initial consternation gave way to a joyous surprise at the bountiful harvest. The initial dismay was perhaps due to lack of experience in tilling land in a swampy area since all experience must have been focused on the hills.

Therefore, in the village there were two kinds of cultivation carried out simultaneously: dry and wet paddy. However in the past four decades the practice of dry or shifting cultivation has dwindled and is replaced by wet cultivation. This is due to lack of available land for carrying out multiple-cropping and due to the diminishing

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fertility of the soil. Many rue the fact that the outcome is not equal to the effort put in into dry cultivation. Food acquired from it is never found to be sufficient to meet the needs of the family; it only supplements the food from wet cultivation. Nevertheless, every family has a token plot where some cultivation is done reminiscent of aba chaani (shifting cultivation) of the forefathers.

Some of the varieties of rice that were earlier grown on shifting plots include chidare, chabachang, migra, miminil, mima, mikotchu, malbok, padrap, mikidip, misokmil, mirimit, midokru, mimagisim, mimitim gitckak, mimitim doka, mimitim dokang and chualjo. These are all traditional varieties as their name too suggests. In those limited areas in the village where the former practice still continues the number of species (of rice) grown has come down tremendously. Only varieties such as chasep, migra, miminil and mima are now grown, while all the other traditional varieties have disappeared.

In permanent wet cultivation fields it is not the traditional but the non-traditional and newer varieties of rice which are grown. These are mostly hybrid, fertilizer enhanced and high yielding ones introduced by the State Agriculture Department. These include species such as mibangal, heldiram, varieties of parimal, aijong, betguti and others. These are non-Garo names indicating that these species are foreign or new to them.

There exists a huge difference in the quantity of the produce (i.e., rice) from dry and wet cultivations, i.e., traditional and non-traditional rice yields. Regarding labour, it is seen that in the former the household is the working unit. The men clear the plot and set it on fire. Thereafter clearing and ploughing of the plot is a job completed by both men and women. Sowing and weeding is done by women. Harvesting is done by both the sexes. On the other hand, in wet paddy cultivation, help from relatives, neighbours and labourers are taken on payment basis, either in kind or cash. Moreover tilling of the soil is done with the help of the plough, bullocks and even power tillers. Despite dry cultivation being more labour-intensive, need for help from outside the family does not arise since the plots are small in Gohalkona (plots of land are given/claimed according to the capability of the family concerned), Rice

procured from the aba or shifting plots, is consumed at the family level. However, close relatives (both fictive and real) are called for a feast in which the rice (abani mi) is cooked, and served with meat curry. If there has been a good harvest of some vegetable crops like pumpkin, tapioca, arum, chillies and sorrel leaves it is shared with those who had little or none. Sometimes when there is a bountiful harvest, some of the produce is donated to church as thanksgiving. Rice procured from the wet fields are also consumed at home after a “new rice” feast to family and relatives (depending on affordability), but are mostly sold off to traders and co-villagers.

Growing traditional rice in the aba is mostly ceremonial. However, the value attached to it is much more in comparison to non-traditional or newly introduced rice. The former is said to be tastier, better, more fragrant and more filling than the latter. Again, the former variety has more prestigious connotations than the latter, whereas it is the latter which defines wealth and prestige. This is due to the fact that newly introduced rice has more yields in comparison to traditional rice and therefore not only subsists the family throughout the year but also aids the owner economically through trade with co-villagers and outsiders thereby leading to accumulation of cash wealth.

Role of the State Agriculture Department and Market Economy

At Boko town, about 10 kms from the village, there exists an office of the State Agriculture Department which assists farmers with subsidized seeds and fertilizers. It is from this centre that Garos buy newer breed of rice-seeds and fertilizers for their wet cultivation. These rice-seeds are hybrid and lab-produced, which give higher yields. Due to its high-yielding properties, Garos prefer to grow them. Interestingly, these seeds are ones which do not grow as expected in the dry fields (the shifting plots), and are ones which grow luxuriously in the wet paddy fields.

Why do Garos prefer to buy these rice-seeds and not use the traditional varieties in the wet paddy plots? The reason lies in the higher-yield of the former, and the not-so-luxuriant growth of the latter in the plots. The traditional varieties even with the use of fertilizers have been seen to give lesser yield. In fact, due to the dwindling size of shifting plots (as a result of increase in population,

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lesser forest cover and extremist activities⁵), the final produce from shifting plots are much less than those from the wet fields. In fact, as mentioned earlier, the traditional varieties of rice do not suffice a family even for a month, whereas the wet paddy produce suffices a family for months at a stretch such that 62% of the households are able to sell a part of the produce.

In a span of 5-10 years, however, the fertility of the soil dwindles and it becomes necessary for the farmer to use artificial fertilizers from the market. Initially Garos used bio-products such as cow dung and ash from burnt jungles. Later however, they started procuring subsidized chemical fertilizers from the Agriculture Department. Unfortunately once these fertilizers were used, the plot became useless unless more of the same was used repeatedly. This led to an unbroken cycle where the same kind of rice (genetically enhanced) and fertilizers had to be used continuously. This is the second alarming outcome of these government initiatives. It is due to subsidies on chemical fertilizers promoted and introduced by the Government of India through the aegis of the State Agriculture Department that the rural Garo populations in Boko have been using these to enhance their crop-output.

In the past the role of “cash” money among Garos was negligible. Money involved in food exchange was in kind or service. Reciprocity was the usual practice. If some rice grains were given to a kin, he or she would reciprocate in the form of other food grains or at times in the form of service by helping out in the fields. This kind of distribution of food was mostly among kin members. However, needy non-kins have also been known to work in the fields of the better-off co-villagers in exchange for food.

At present, the increasing role of money and wealth is witnessed in Garo life. In Gohalkona, more and more shifting plots (and in many cases the garden within the compound of a house) are being converted to plantation areas for cash crops like betel nut and leaf, pepper, coconut, oranges and cashew nuts. Again, the amount of time and energy spent in the shifting plots has shifted to wet paddy cultivations due to greater yields in the latter. In short, Garos are seen to be beginning to focus on crops that have marketability.

At the end of every season, vendors (and in many cases
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big-time traders) visit the village to buy rice and other food crops. Previously villagers would sell off rice at very minimal price depending on what the vendor offered. Nowadays villagers prefer to go to the markets and do a survey themselves wherein they try and find out the market price and therefore are able to bargain for a better price.

However, the biggest result of the pressures of the market is the replacement of traditional varieties of rice with newer and non-traditional varieties. The latter as mentioned earlier gives higher yield due to its genetically enhanced properties. This is the reason why Garos of Gohalkona over the years shifted its focus from the traditional to the non-traditional varieties. The use of chemical fertilizers has also been an outcome of market pressures, with villagers wanting more production to sell to the traders in the weekly markets and in larger bazal (market) in the nearby towns.

Conclusion

Garos in Gohalkona were traditionally shifting cultivators and food was added on by hunting, gathering and fishing. The harvest from the shifting plots was very rarely in excess. In spite of less food being harvested, a small token amount was shared with close kins. At present, shifting cultivation has given way to wet paddy cultivation. Many Garos now possess only a token shifting plot where some practice slash-and-burn cultivation while others prefer to keep it fallow. For a minority few, cultivation on these plots continue but on a minor scale. The produce from these plots, therefore, is insufficient to subsist for long even for a month or two for one particular crop.

The change in cultivation methods implied reduced range of food choice, as only the ecologically favoured species were cultivated. The earlier varieties of rice grown in shifting plots like mima, chidare and chabachang are no longer grown. However some of the stronger varieties which grow in spite of hostile environment like the chasep and migra are still found in smaller plots. At present, the variety of rice that is replacing the traditional varieties in the wet paddy plots are hybrid species with greater yield like lochmon, aijong and betguti saved over years and used. The varieties grown in wet paddy fields are therefore newer introductions.

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This change has come about due to two reasons. First, is the systematic introduction of newer varieties of rice advertised by the state government at subsidized rates. Due to the annual decrease in soil fertility, fertilizers freely supplied by the state were used, thereby leading to an unbroken cycle of using the soil for the same species with stronger fertilizers over and over again. Secondly, due to pressures of the market, the traditional varieties (with lesser yield) were systematically eased out by the higher yielding newer varieties.

As a part of its development initiatives, the state government had no doubt tried to help the villagers overcome issues such as the dwindling fertility of the soil, lesser rice production and outbreaks of pests by introducing newer and stronger varieties of rice. This however has led to a negative impact on traditional rice as spelled out.

Despite the change in the species, rice, however, it is still the staple food of the Garos. This is a food item that is still eaten twice (or thrice) a day: they still remain “hungry” if they do not eat rice. It is still a sacred food with prestigious and wealth connotations and one that plays a central role in their life and economy. However, due to the systematic easing out of traditional varieties (aided by the market and hostile environment), it is likely that in the future traditional varieties of rice might only remain a myth and no longer a reality.

Notes

- 1 *Mon* is a corrupt form of *maund*. *Maund* is a unit of weight used in India. By the definition of the Standard Weights and Measures Act of 1956 (amended 1960, 1964) one *maund* weighs exactly 37.3242 kilograms. In the studied village, 1 *mon* referred to 30 kilograms approximately.
- 2 All the Garo villages in Assam and Meghalaya are a part of the Garo Baptist Convention and they have been grouped into certain geographical groupings.
- 3 Folklore says that the god of wind in collaboration with the god of hail and storm shook off seeds from the celestial tree. These seeds were picked up and sown by the ancestress of a bird called *doamik*. From her the supreme god of the celestial region obtained the seeds of rice and planted them

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in his own fields. Pitying the human beings living in those days without grain, he gave them the seeds, with instruction that at the beginning of every harvest a portion of the first harvest must be kept aside for him.

Another story talk of the first man to have carried out shifting cultivation in the Garo Hills was Bone-Nirepa-Jane-Nitepa. He harvested six big baskets of paddy and six similar baskets of millet from around a rock called misi-kokdok. He was the man who named the different months of the year, each of which is associated with a stage of shifting cultivation (Majumdar 1980:7).

- 4 These hills are still feared not only for wild animals prowling about, but also due to the rumoured presence of malevolent *mite* (spirits). Scores of stories are retold about how evil and harmful the spirits were.
- 5 The nearby hills and jungles are “rumoured” to be the camps of the Rabha and Bodo militant groups. Due to the rumoured presence of these groups, the villagers are reluctant to use some parts of the jungle for their cultivation.

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