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## Garó Subsistence Diet : A Modern Day Perspective

The matrilineal Garos inhabit the Garo Hills of Meghalaya and its adjoining areas. The following information have been gathered while undertaking anthropological fieldwork in the village Bakrapur, near Damra, Goalpara District, Assam ( from March 17-4 April, 1998 ) and in the Rongram-Ganol Valley, Garo Hills ( 2-9, December, 1999 ). That the data incorporated herein, is inexhaustive and inconclusive, cannot be denied.

Today, food consumption as well as food collection methods have changed. Earlier, the Garos subsisted on food gathered from the forests. Now-a-days food is produced, the surplus being sold in local markets, others being marketed to neighbouring areas too. For instance, the surplus pineapple cultivated in Garo villages like Hahim, Kamrup District, Assam find outlets in Guwahati City. That Garo diet inspite of rapid industrialisation, has a lingering fragrance of a subsistence level cannot be denied. The forest products like roots, tubers, shoots etc. sold in the local markets in towns give ample evidence. Wild faunal products too are sold openly and at times on the sly. The daily diet used is mainly cooked in alkali, *kalchi*, prepared by burning plantain stems. The ash is then mixed with water and filtered and then used. Steaming, boiling and roasting are other methods of food preparation among them.

### Diet Procured by Subsistence Strategies

That food is gathered only for daily consumption or for storage is not tenable in the present context. For both faunal and floral products were gathered for medicinal purposes too. In this paper both these aspects have been tried to be highlighted, but it falls short of laying down a recipe or concoction.

### Food Collection

Collection is a specialised method used by both men and women and more frequently by the latter. Certain tools are used too. The chopper, *ate* a long stick with a curved head at one end to reach tall

plants and trees, and a digging stick to dig out tubers and roots. The *a'e* is for clearing jungles and creepers as well as for safe keeping.

The Garos exploit the forest products mainly for food. They gather different parts of a plant such as the root, stem, leaves, shoot etc. Some are eaten raw, while others are roasted or boiled. These are invariably cooked in alkali (*kalchi*), salt and chillies. The following table gives a list of wild plants gathered for food as shown.

Table 1  
Wild Plants gathered for Food

Botanical Name	Parts of Plants Used
<i>Alocasia indica</i>	Whole plant
<i>Amarantus spinosus</i>	Leaf, stem
<i>Amarphophalus companulatus</i>	Tuber, stem
<i>Alpina allughas</i>	Root
<i>Artocarpus hateropyllus</i>	Fruit
<i>Artocarpus lakoocha</i>	Fruit
<i>Averrhon carambola</i>	Fruit
<i>Bambusa tuida</i>	Shoots
<i>Bauhinia variegata</i>	Flower, shoots
<i>Canavalia gladiata</i>	Pod
<i>Carissa carandas</i>	Fruit
<i>Chenopodium album</i>	Stem, leaf
<i>Citris grandis</i>	Fruit
<i>Colocasia esculenta</i>	Flower, stem, flower, offshoot
<i>Curcuma aromatica</i>	Tuber
<i>Dioscorea alata</i>	Tuber
<i>Dioscorea bulbifera</i>	Tuber
<i>Dioscorea hispida</i>	Tuber
<i>Enhydra fluctuans</i>	Leaf, stem
<i>Impomoea reptans</i>	Leaf, stem
<i>Ipomoea batatas</i>	Tuber
<i>Lathyrus aphaca</i>	Pod
<i>Leucas linifolia</i>	Leaf
<i>Manihot esculentus</i>	Tuber
<i>Monordica charantia</i>	Fruit, leaf
<i>Paederia foetida</i>	Leaf
<i>Phoenix sylvestris</i>	Fruit
<i>Psidium guajara</i>	Fruit
<i>Solanum ferox</i>	Fruit

Botanical Name	Parts of Plants Used
<i>Syzygium jambos</i>	Fruit
<i>Tamarindus indica</i>	Fruit
<i>Typhonium trilobatum</i>	Flower, stem, leaf, offshoot
<i>Zingiber casumunar</i>	Tuber
<i>Zizyphus ornoplia</i>	Fruit

Besides, the Garos use certain plants for medicinal purposes as the following table shows :

Table 2  
Medicinal Plants and their use

Name	Parts Used	Disease
Amchi mrang	-	Sprains, fractures
Agru ( <i>Aquilaria agallocha</i> )	bark	Stomach ache, constipation
Alct ( <i>Phyloganthus tyrsiflorus</i> )	root	Spleen enlargement in case of excess malaria
Boldubak ( <i>Cordia grandis</i> )	-	Polio and headache
Bolchirring ( <i>Glochidion voluntium</i> )	-	Preparing amulets for babies who suffer after bad dreams
Boldikkim ( <i>Hymenictyon excelsum</i> )	-	Headache
Bolmandal ( <i>Erythna stricta</i> )	-	Amulet for persons attacked by spirit
Bolsal ( <i>Shorea robusta</i> )	bark	Dysentery
Bolgipok ( <i>Gmelina arborea</i> )	bark	To remove poison
Chisak	-	Amulets to avoid being attacked by spirit
Chaggro	leaves	Baldness and pain in hand
Dodem	leaves	Dysentery
Khoring ( <i>Orexyllum indieum</i> )	-	Jaundice
Mega ( <i>Sacharum spontaneum</i> )	-	Cerebral palsy
Misinachil ( <i>Holskioldia sanginea</i> )	roots	Gastric
Matchaduri	stem	Epilepsy
Sonaru ( <i>Chameoseyporia obtusa</i> )	leaves	Itching
Wakme ( <i>Mucuma bracteata</i> )	-	Toothache, headache

The Garos use certain grinders like *samphal* and rongpleng for grinding and mashing ingredients to prepare medicinal concoction.

## Hunting

Besides gathering, hunting was also a prime subsistence strategy of the Garos. However due to present stringent forest laws and the Wild Life Acts, hunting has considerably decreased. Playfair (1909) is of the opinion that although the hills are so full of games, the Garos know very little about hunting and tracking. He puts it to the immensely thick jungles which shelters wild animals, while impeding the movement of hunters. However, ingenuity is shown in the setting up of some of the traps. The methods of hunting are :

### a. By Spear

Hunting by spear involves the throwing of the spear in the direction of the animal. Spears called *selu* may be *pasrok* or *dikil*. The spearhead is made of iron. At times a split bamboo is also sharpened to act like a spear. A hunting strategy with the help of a spear is the *boblina wajol chaka*, where the speare is tied in tension with a rope from a tree of great height. When an animal passes, the hunter cuts the ropes.

### b. By Bow and Arrow

The Garo name for bow and arrow is *bra-chre*. The bow string is made of jute while the bow and the arrow is made from bamboo fitted with an iron arrowhead. A trap called *bra-dona* or *bra-chaka* is also seen among them.

### c. By traps

Hunting by traps is very common. For catching and killing tigers the Garos use a trap called *matcha nol*. Other animals are also caught by this trap which may then be called *dengrip chaka*. Different kinds of noose traps are also used. These are called *baga chaka*. This trap is used to catch animals like the stag or deer which are swift-footed and not easy to follow. Here a noose is kept loosely suspended from a tree so that when the animal is running, its head gets into the noose and thus gets caught. At times a noose is also placed on the ground to catch porcupines and rabbits. Another type of noose trap called *gongsot sa'a* is used. Here, a noose trap is made on a bamboo platform but a bamboo in tension with a bait placed over it. Modern day traps made of iron are also used widely.

### d. By Net

Hunting by net is usually carried out on a small scale. Earlier jute nets were used. Now-a-days nets of synthetic fibre is used.

### e. By Pitfall

For killing animals like the elephant, the Garos dig a pit on its tracks and cover it with thin bamboo strips and dried leaves and

shrubs so that the animal does not suspect anything. Inside the pit are placed spears so that when the animal falls into it, it gets speared. This practice has however been abandoned due to high incidence of innocents getting killed.

#### f. By driving the animals into a stockade

A long V-shaped stockade is built and spreading out across the area, drive into it all the animals they can find. While the two wings of the stockade meet, several openings are left at which men are stationed armed with spears, to dispatch the animals as they pass through, while the women line the outside of the stockade and by beating on with sticks and uttering shrill cries deter the animals from any attempt to break through except at the openings left for them.

#### g. By Catapult

Here a rubber strand is tied to a 'V' shaped handle made of wood. The rubber strand is pulled with bullets of stone or earth and left. The force applied makes the bullet go with great speed and hit the target often laming it or killing it.

#### h. By Guns

This has become popular now-a-days. In Garo Hills sometimes it is left in tension with the trigger tied to a string and the latter left over the usual track of the animal esp. a man-eater or one which has carried away many cows and buffalos. When a tiger attacks a village and carries off a cow, its foot tracks are followed and where the half-eaten carcass is seen, they set up a trap called *slai dorzon*. They realise that the tiger is nearby and will again come to the carcass.

Hunting for the Garos is not only a food-getting strategy but also a strategy for procuring animal parts for medicinal purposes. The following table lists some animals used for medicinal purposes.

Table 3

#### Animals used as Medicine

Local Name	English Equivalent	Parts used	Disease
Mongma	Elephant (female)	foetus	Difficult delivery
Gilwi	Slow Loris	flesh	—
Rarek	Ape-like animal which covers its face with both hands on seeing humans	flesh	—

Local Name	English Equivalent	Parts use	Disease
Marsi	Reddish-yellow cham-eleon like creature	flesh	—
Matwan	Flying squirrel	flesh	—
Gondu	Rhinoceros	horn and biles	—
Kawate	Pangolin	scale and liver	—
Peru	Jackal	bone and horn, if any	—
Dosildura	Mynae-like bird	leg bone	—
Dohchak	Weaver bird	liver and bone	—
Chamchora	Small bird that makes nests inside roof and dwelling houses	flesh and bone	Impotency
Dooramat	Sunbird	fat and bone	—
Renggok	Hornbill	fat and bone	Arthritis
Detileng	Golden backed Wood Pecker	bones	—
Gaanti	Sisica	eggs	Antidote against drowning

## Fishing

As Garo villages are nearly always situated on the banks of or close to rivers, fish forms an important item in a Garo's diet. Most fish are caught when the floods are subsiding. However fish is caught in all types of water. In shallow water, they catch by hand or make a dam. In swift water they use some traps.

Fish is caught by the following methods :

### 1. By Hand

Free hand fishing is usually done by women and children. In small pools of streams, they catch by bare hands. This requires swiftness and considerable practice. At times the riverbed is dried by building a man-made dam and the water is siphoned out. Then from the muddy pool fish is caught by bare hand. They also collect cockle-shells, prawns, eel etc. which form a part of their diet. The most important implement used here is the small basket called *koksi* with a band tied around the hip of the catcher so that the fish caught can be easily placed. The *koksi* also has an interwoven bamboo cap called *silbima*.

## 2. By Poisoning water

The Garos also catch fish by poisoning. They use the roots of *makal* plant which they soak in water and mash. The decoction is then thrown into a stream. The poison stupefies the fish, which float on the water surface and can be easily caught. Sharma (1995) mentions the *Barringtonia acutangula* plant of which roots and barks are used.

## 3. By Implements

Fishing by implements may be by :

### a. By Traps

The Garos use different types of traps. The automatic traps are called *asok* and is of three varieties — *silcha*, is a valveless automatic trap with a bottom which can be opened. It is placed against the current so that the fish gets caught and can be taken out through the bottom. The *simpcha* and the *ripokpea* possess a valve so that the fish that gets caught cannot escape. The workmanship of the *simcha* is like the *silcha*, while the *ripokpea* is made from a single piece of bamboo with the bottom unslit. The Garos use double-valved trap called *chempa*, which may be cylindrical or rectangular. They also use a dip net to catch fish called *cheki*. A plunge basket trap, called *ilgip*, is also commonly used.

### b. By Spears

The Garos also catch fish by spears in swift moving waters. These spears may be monodented, called *cho'ong* or multidented called *kusa*. These spears are also used to kill eels, snakes and other reptiles.

### c. By Nets

Nets may be either round in shape, called *majal*, or square called *chek*. Fishing may be done individually or communally, In the case of the latter the fish is distributed equally among all those who participated. Fish is again not only an item of food but also of medicinal value among the Garos.

Table 4

## Fish and Reptiles used as Medicine

Local Name	English Equivalent	Parts Used	Disease
Nanil	Eel	flesh and bone	Preparing a healing and restorative medicine
Chekgota	Puffer	flesh	—
Chonggna	Small long teathy mouthed fish	head	Chronic vertigo
Cheronggi	z. <i>Bachidanio rerio</i>	flesh	Nutritive pills
Negitchak	z. <i>Cyrenus robita</i>	fat	—
Chipu gra			
Chipu waphang	z. <i>Hamadryad</i>	biles	—
Matpu	Iguana	fat	Restoration of atrophied male genitals
Wakkime	Scorpion-like creature	flesh	—

This does not mean that Garo diet is of a subsistence level alone. Food production strategies, both jhum (in the hills) and wet paddy cultivation (in the plains) are undertaken. *Mi*, paddy, *misi*, finger millet, *mekop*, maize, *tabulchu*, tapioca, *te'e* melon, *akaru*, white gourd, *gominda*, pumpkin, *jalik*, chilli, *baring*, bringal, *ta'a*, arum, *tamatchi*, yam, *karek*, *nakap*, *narikep* all varieties of beans, *e'ching*, ginger etc, are some of the crops cultivated. As regards animals, mention has been made of the dog and the yak in folktales. Besides they also keep *wak* (pig), *menggo* (cat), *matchu* (cow), *matchu bolot* (ox), *do'o* (chicken), *dobok* (goat) etc. In the plains buffalo and birds like pigeon, parrot and duck are also reared. Pork is a delicacy preferred on festive occasions. Another delicacy is *na'kam* prepared from smoked or fermented fish. Faunal taboos are rare.

Though daily food consumption<sup>1</sup> is prepared in alkali, steamed, boiled or smoked, preparations in oil (mustard, olive, etc.) are not rare. How nutritious Garo diet is, still remains to be seen for only a scientifically measured process will reveal. Moreover there are still people living on the edge who live on *te'brong* jackfruits, or *te'e* melon alone for want of a proper diet. In short it may be said that Garo diet is an amalgamation of both procured as well as produced items, with the former playing a very important role.

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