

# Rice from *A·ba*: Stories, Rituals and Practices of the Garos

QUEENBALA MARAK<sup>†</sup>

*Department of Anthropology, North-Eastern Hill University,  
Shillong 793022, Meghalaya  
E-mail: qmarak@gmail.com*

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**ABSTRACT:** In indigenous tribal societies, much of what they do and how they do is connected to their worldviews. Rice, the focal food of the Garos, is much more than just a food item. Undoubtedly, in its different forms (as food and drink), and numerous species – it stresses its role and status in the society, but it is the symbolic aspects which reveals much about the society and its ethos. This paper deals with rice or paddy and discusses its cultural connects through stories, myths and narratives. It becomes clear that a self-other dichotomy exists in the conception of rice – that from the *a''ba* and *apal*. The former can be referred to as 'hill paddies' and seen as a traditional method, while the latter refers to paddies from wet fields cultivated with the plough, and seen as a new introduction. Behind the *a''ba-apal* nomenclature issues of self, deities and ultimately life itself can be seen.

## INTRODUCTION

“Take this,” Teronima<sup>1</sup> said, and handed over a wrapped (in plantain leaf) packet of *mironjanggi* or *ronjanggi* to Teronipa. The latter was going on a hunting trip, and Teronima knew that it could take days altogether and he might not return soon. She packed *mironjanggi* (*trans.* ‘life-giving rice’), that she had cooked and prepared the night before, and gave it to him. This was to sustain him when he was hungry and weary. Teronipa never returned from the hunting trip, and his wife died wondering whether her *mironjanggi* gave life to her husband, and whether he was lost but alive somewhere.

Narrated by Teronima,  
A·chiksong, Assam, India

If rice is self for the Japanese (Ohnuki-Tierney, '93) – it is much more for the Garos. For the latter, it is not only an apical food; it is also self (with multiple identities, politics and power relations) embedded in it, and that which sustains life. Locally

referred to as *mi*, rice plays a central role in a Garo's life. It is the first solid food that a child takes, and the last food item that one partakes on death, though ceremonially. It is that food which marks all celebrations and rituals and without which no ritual or social event is complete. Not only is it the most important staple food occupying the apex of all, but that which gives “fullness” and around which all else revolves; other cereals like wheat and millet are named in reference to it (Marak, 2013, 2014b, 2014c). Just like other small-scale tribal societies, Garos were also traditionally shifting cultivators using simple tools, which have today given way to wet paddy (with the plough), cash crop plantations and permanent vegetable farms. However, it is the paddy from the shifting plots, what I will refer to as 'hill paddies' or *a·ba* rice, which is considered of supreme value and ranks above the rest socially, ritually and ideologically. Again, rice (more so in hill paddies) is that food, plant and non-human entity that has a soul and a deity – the propitiation of which is of utmost necessity for bountiful harvest, and ultimately for life.

<sup>†</sup> Professor

Garos are a major tribal group from Meghalaya, one of the smaller states in northeast India, predominantly residing in the Garo Hills region, and famously known in anthropological circles as one of the few living matrilineal people. Though found in the five Garo Hills districts, they also reside in the adjoining states of Assam, Tripura, Nagaland, and West Bengal in the Indian Union and across the political divide in the northern districts of Bangladesh. There has been much change in their present day lifestyles due to forces of modernization, urbanization, industrialization, and proselytization; however their customs and traditions continue to prevail in a few pockets in full or modified form or as a vestige.

This paper discusses rice (or paddy) as a life-giving force for the Garos. However, in deliberating on this, it focuses on hill paddies, and its concomitant rituals and practices. As examples, stories and practices are cited from different spatial zones across geo-political boundaries.

#### *Rice from the A-ba*

*Defining A-ba:* Etymologically the term *a-ba* refers to a farming plot on the hills where a number of crops are grown according to the agricultural cycle. This method of cultivation is known as *a-ba cha-a* (*trans.* 'to eat or subsist on the *a-ba*'), *a-ba gama* (*trans.* 'to till the *a-ba*') or *a''ronggani gamani* (*trans.* 'to till the hills'). Technically, an *a-ba* cannot be a plot in the plains, valleys, and creeks – rather, this is a specific cultivation undertaken on the hills. Therefore, in this context *a-ba* cultivation can be referred to as 'hill' cultivation, and rice grown on the hills as 'hill paddies'. In contrast to this, plots in the valleys and creeks where paddy cultivation take place, is referred to as *apal* (*trans.* 'a plot that is outside', possibly referring to a plot that is beyond or 'outside' the hills), and the cultivation as *apal cha-a* (*trans.* 'to eat or subsist on the *apal*'). The distinction made between the terms *a-ba* and *apal* is revealing – for the former is what is considered a 'traditional' plot wherein 'traditional' methods of cultivation is undertaken, while the latter (with the plough) is considered a later introduction. In this connection it is to be mentioned that finds of stone hoes in the creeks of villages such as Misimagre and Selbalgre in West Garo Hills indicates that in the prehistoric past,

cultivation in the creeks and valleys took place with stone hoes.

Traditionally, *a-ba cha-a* is a method of shifting cultivation wherein the plot shifts either annually or after every two years. The first year's plot is referred to as *a-dal*, while the second year's plot is called *a-breng*. These plots are not owned by a single family, but belong to a village and clan. In Garo village administration, all land (hills, forests, homesteads etc.) referred to as *a-king*, belong to a clan who might have been the earliest settlers in the region. The head of this clan is the apical household of the village or group of villages. From the apical household, the husband (who belongs to the 'correct' intermarrying clan) of the inheriting daughter is looked upon as the *nokma* (chieftain). Therefore, a village or group of villages is owned by a clan, the custodian of which is the daughter of the apical household and her husband, the *nokma*. A man becomes the chief on account of his marriage to the heiress; thus, in many villages the term '*nokma*' refers to both the heiress and her husband.

The claim that *a-ba* refers to 'hill' cultivation, and not solely to shifting cultivation, can be gauged by situations witnessed in different Garo villages of Assam, where land and ownerships plays itself out differently today. In Achiksong and its adjoining villages in Boko area, Kamrup district (Assam), though ideologically the concept of cultivation of a 'shifting' plot exists today, in reality the *a''ba* cultivation is undertaken on a permanent plot on the hills which is inherited 'orally' through generations. It is undeniable that in the past, *a-ba cha-a* was shifting cultivation when the surrounding forests were successively cultivated. Today, the fallow period is maintained by cultivating a part of the plot for a couple of years, and then cultivating another corner the next few years. In some cases, there is no fallow period at all – with families maintaining it in the form of a garden of traditional vegetables (arum, yam, tapioca, varieties of beans, chillies, pumpkin etc.) which requires less maintenance, only to supplement their main cultivation which is wet paddy, kitchen gardens and vegetable gardens in the floodplains. Some of these *a-ba* plots have also been converted into orchards of cash crops like cashew, orange, areca nut and betel leaf, pepper etc.

*Beginning of A-ba Cha-a*

Garos believe that the knowledge of cultivation is handed down to them from the gods as revealed from origin myths. The first man to cultivate was Bone Nirepa Jane Nitepa<sup>1</sup> (henceforth referred to as Bone Nirepa) who decided to settle down somewhere towards the north. In the following, the origin myth of this cultivation is given.

Story 1  
*The First Man to Cultivate*

Long ago, Garos were always wandering from place to place. For the first time, a man named Bone Nirepa decided to settle down. Under the advice of the god Misi Saljong, who befriended him, he started clearing the forests by cutting down trees and chopping off the branches. In those days there was a continuous drought for seven successive years and famine was everywhere. Bone Nirepa did not know the different seasons of the year, so he continued to cut down trees all over the hills.

At the end of seven years, the god Misi Saljong asked his servant Nambokmea-Namsangpante to enquire about the rains. The servant sent the heads of the magpies and barbets to the goddess of rain, to enquire about the time of her visit to earth. The goddess taught them to read the signs of her approach to the earth, and informed that she would visit soon. Ever since, magpies and barbets are the messengers of an impending rain. They soon returned and informed Nambokmea about the coming rains.

Nambokmea relayed this information to his master, who in turn bade him to tell Bone Nirepa. He relayed the news to Bone Nirepa and told him that the clearings are to be set on fire for the rain goddess was approaching. In turn, Bone Nirepa remarked that he will invite the fire god. Out of curiosity, Nambokmea who had never seen the fire god before got up on a tree in the middle of the field to watch the fire god. Soon he was enveloped in the fire and burnt to death. It is said that the soul of Nambokmea was reborn as a chameleon, which is why in shifting fields chameleons are commonly seen watching over from a tree.

After the rains came, Bone Nirepa sowed millet and paddy, and was able to harvest six baskets of millet and paddy each from Sokhadam near a cluster of big rocks which came to be known as 'Misikokdok' (i.e., six baskets of millet). Bone Nirepa settled down on the hills here, carrying on the same cultivation process which came to be known as *a-ba*.

(Abridged from Rongmuthu, 2008[1960])

*Cultivation Method*

The method of cultivation and the crops grown in the *a-ba* vary widely from village to village as do the fallow periods. Traditionally, the following stages can be seen.

1. *A-ba nia* (*trans.* 'to see the *a-ba*'): This refers to selection or distribution of plots. Selection of plots is made sometime in the last part of November or early December even though an individual may have kept an eye on a particular plot of land for some time. On the day of selection and allocation of plots, each head of the household clears a token patch and marks the boundary. Actual clearing may be postponed for some time.
2. *A-ba so-a* (*trans.* 'to burn the *a-ba*'): This stage refers to burning of the plot. Scrubby undergrowth and branches are cut, but big trees are not felled. The cut grasses and branches are left to dry for a few days before they are set on fire after informing one and all. Immediately after the jungle is set on fire, men get busy building a field house called *a-ba nok*, *borang*, or *jamatal*.
3. *Bitchil sata* (*trans.* 'to sow seeds'): This stage refers to planting of seeds. Some days after the dried undergrowth in the plot is burnt, seeds are planted. There are different ways of planting seeds in an *a-ba* which include the following: (a) *Ge-a*: Here, a hole is dug with the digging stick (*matta*) or the iron hoe (*gitchi*) and the seed or root or head of the plant is planted and covered with soil; (b) *Baka*: In this strategy, seeds are first broadcasted and then the soil is lightly hoed, so that the seeds become embedded in soil; and (c) *Sata*: Here, the seeds are strewn over the lightly hoed plot.
4. *Aba O-a* (*trans.* 'to clear/weed the *a-ba*'): The next stage after the crops are growing is weeding. The first weeding takes place when the seeds sprout and attain a certain height, which depends on the crop. For weeding, the soil is lightly loosened with the hoe, taking care not to damage the growing saplings, and unwanted weeds are disposed off. Second

major weeding takes place when plants are firmly rooted. Planting, sowing of seeds and weeding are seen as a woman's job.

5. Harvesting is the last stage in such a method of cultivation. Crops are harvested as and when they ripen. However, consumption of ripened crops takes place after the first harvest is offered to the gods. Only after this offering can mortals partake of the fruits of the soil.

*A-ba cha-a* is a multicrop cultivation and includes paddy (different varieties), maize (different varieties), tapioca (red, white, etc.), sorrel (red, white), gourd (different varieties), ginger, sweet potato (red, yellow, white), brinjal, yams (different varieties), arums (different varieties), job's tears (*megaru, gong-git*), beans (different varieties), leafy vegetables (leek, *garu* and *me-jak*), pumpkin (white and red), melons (*te-e, te-raja, sosra*), millet (*sarang, jongsku, anil*), chilli (different varieties), lady's finger, cotton, arecanut, betel leaf, orange, pepper, rubber, tobacco, lac tree, *mendubol*, sesame (*spin, anem*), onion (*chisik, doki*) and others.

The different varieties of paddy grown in the *a-ba* in Garo Hills (Meghalaya, India) presently include but not limited to the following varieties: *airit, ajanchi, asu, atti banda, boldak, chawaljo, chondok, choreng, churengga gitchak/gipok, dangban, dimbra, do-ka dodang, dongban, gorim, greora, jagin, jaia, kisor, kotchu mi, maibok, matchi, menggo, mi babret, mi bi-sa/mikomchit/mibandik, mi ja-sku, mi tom-bet, mianchengmikitima, miapal michet, mibisa, mibol, micheksi, michibol, michidari, midokru, midopit, migongma, migopma, mijasku, mikidep, mima boldak, mima cham-bak, mima chuseng, mima gimbil, mima gisim, mima midokri, mima/mima gorim, mimasarang, mimitim dila, mimitim dokdang, mimitim wa-tre, mimitim/minil, minatik, minil an''chi, minil gipok, mirikra, mirimit, miritte, misarang, misimil, misokmil, miwagil, padre, pangkas, rongdan, ronggisim, sarengma jakip, wa-rep, and wakde*. These varieties differ not only in terms of size and appearance, but also taste and fragrance. Understandably, some of the varieties are ranked higher than others, not only in terms of taste and smell, but also function.

### Calendared Months

The Garo annual calendar is based on the cultivation activities and festivals connected to the different stages. This pertains to activities of *a-ba cha-a*, and is shown in Table 1.

TABLE 1  
*The Garo agricultural calendar*

Sl. no. months	Garo agricultural	Agricultural field activities
1	<i>Jabils</i> (November)	Selection of sites and distribution of new field
2	<i>Silginchi</i> (December)	Clearing and weeding of old field
3	<i>Roro</i> (January)	Cotton harvest
4	<i>Dongro</i> (February)	Clearing of new field, cutting of trees and shrubs; building of road to the field; preparation and collection of raw materials for construction of field house.
5	<i>Gal-mak</i> (March)	Burning of new field; Field burning ceremony
6	<i>Migi</i> (April)	Construction of field house; cultivation of paddy and ginger; first weeding
7	<i>Kilgi</i> (May)	Sowing of cotton seeds
8	<i>Bandoni</i> (June)	-
9	<i>Wasosi</i> (July)	Millet harvest
10	<i>Sampang</i> (August)	Second weeding
11	<i>Micha</i> (September)	Paddy harvest
12	<i>Wanma</i> (October)	Post-harvest festival

Note: Garo months and its Gregorian equivalents are only an approximation.

The above table clearly shows that the Garo calendar is based on *a-ba cha-a* activities. For example, the New Year (*Jabils*) begins with the selection of new plots which take place sometime in the month of November; while the end of the year is marked by celebration of a good and bountiful harvest and year, i.e. the celebrations after the *Wangala* or thanksgiving rituals.

### Practices and Rituals Connected to Rice

It is clear from the foregoing sections that *a-ba cha-a* is not only an economic strategy, but also strongly connected to Garo ideological life. Thus much of the practices connected to it will not only be unique with an emic perspective, but will be connected to their psyche and spiritual life. In this context, it

has to be stated that the ritualistic practices are related to the traditional animistic religion, Songsarek. The number of Garos following Songsarek beliefs are today much dwindled, but nevertheless the remaining few, in Garo Hills (Meghalaya) and northern parts of Bangladesh, continue to follow and adhere to *pagitcham-magitchamni niam* (trans. ‘forefathers-

foremothers’ norms’). Understandably, regional differences occur not only in terms of *lingua franca* but also in terms of specific practices. In the following, the beliefs and practices of the Matabeng<sup>2</sup> subgroup of West Garo Hills, Meghalaya are given in Table 2.

The following Table 2 shows the rituals connected with the different stages of the *a-ba cha-a* cycle.

TABLE 2  
*Rituals connected to agricultural cycle among Garos*

Months	Rituals	Field Activities
November	<i>O-pata</i> and <i>Jumang Sia</i>	Selection of sites and distribution of new field
December		Clearing and weeding old field; Cotton harvest
January		Clearing of new field and road Preparation and
February		collection of raw materials for construction of field house.
March	<i>A-siroka</i> and <i>Rokkime Ringgama</i>	Burning of new field; Cultivation of paddy and ginger
April	-	Construction of field house
May	<i>Bang Cha-a</i>	Sowing of cotton seeds; First weeding
June-July	<i>Mi Amua</i>	Second weeding; Millets harvest
August	<i>Rongchugala</i>	Harvest of other crops
September	<i>Ahaia</i>	Paddy harvest
October	<i>Wangala</i>	Post-harvest festival

#### *O-pata and Jumang Sia*

Selection of site for new field is done by the *nokma*, the custodian of an *a''king*. After selection of area (where cultivation will take place by all households of the village), the villagers gather at the *nokma*'s courtyard. Land is distributed to each family, and care is taken to adhere to each family's requests for specific sites where their ancestors had cultivated. The ownership of land is given to the families only for a period of one calendar year. The new area ranges from 20 to 30 acres approximately, referred to as *cha-rinsa*. The individual plots are demarcated by natural boundaries such as a tree, or a stream. Once the plot is prepared, demarcation of plots is done by planting the *mendu* plant along the borders (see Story 2). When the formal distribution is over, the ritual of *O-pata* and *Jumang Sia* is performed.

#### Story 2

##### *Misi Saljong takes Revenge*

The death of the servant Nambokmea enraged Misi Saljong who blamed Bone Nirepa for the unfortunate event (see Story 1). He was more enraged when he saw that Bone Nirepa had prospered. He [the god] then sent Dohkangkare, another servant, to set up a

boundary for Bone Nirepa's fields so that he may not prosper further and to avenge his servant's death.

The servant picked up the charred bones of Nambokmea and set them up in lines as pegs to limit the boundaries of Bone Nirepa's field. Out of these bone pegs there grew the *mendu* plant which remain in existence to this very day, and are used as boundary markers.

(Abridged from Rongmuthu, 2008 [1960])

*O-pata* is the ceremonial clearing of a token patch. If a person without permission from the deity of the land, Abet Mite Chisik Mite, clears the plot, the spirit will be wrathful and may cause illness and death. Therefore, after clearing a token at a corner seeking permission from the deity, the head of household goes home. At night, if he has a bad dream, he abandons the land and looks for another plot of land where omens are more favourable. Dreams of cutting or plucking *sokmil bite* (cane fruits), is a good omen and indicates that there will be plenty of paddies. Dreams of *do-mi* (head gear made of rooster feathers) are good omens and signify happiness. Dreams of animal or fowl being slaughtered, such as the red rooster, are a bad omen, and the plot has to be changed. Reading omens through dreams is referred to as *Jumang Sia*.

### *Agal Gala and A-ba Soa*

Once the trees and shrubs are cut down, they are left to dry for some time. The dried debris is then burnt in the following manner:

- (a) Stage 1: *Agal Gala*: This refers to clearing of a patch of land all around the plot. This is done a day before the fire to prevent its spread to other areas. Raw materials ready for the construction of *jamatal* (field hut) are removed to safer places; and domestic animals like ox and cow are chased away from the land.
- (b) Stage 2: *A-ba So-a*: The burning of new field is usually done in the second week of March. Before burning of debris, villagers assemble at the *nokma*'s courtyard in the morning to decide how and at what time debris will be burnt. Fire is ignited through a traditional method known as *wal-du ra-a*, where using an old dry bamboo as abrasive, a strip of dry bamboo is repeatedly rubbed against the bamboo pole atop dry bamboo shavings, and fire is thus generated.
- (c) Stage 3: *A-ba Nia*: When fires die down, every cultivator goes to their individual fields to see whether the debris is completely burnt or not; and whether there are burning embers. Incomplete burning of debris is either removed or burnt again on the same day; and burning embers are stamped out.

### *Agalmaka*

Immediately the next day, after the plot is burnt, families get ready for the *A-galmaka* ritual. This is to cleanse the land from pollution which results due to the fire which killed plants, insects and small animals. At dawn, women get busy with cooking rice and curry; readying seeds of corn, millet, chilli, roots of ginger, and branches of tapioca etc; and men get busy with construction of altars for *Asiroka* and *Rokkime Ringgama* rituals.

- (a) *A-siroka* – This is performed to cleanse the polluted field, so that the paddy goddess, Minima Kiri Rokkime<sup>1</sup>, will reside therein. The priest selects a suitable site for erection of the altar; this is also the site for construction of the field hut. He offers eggs, breaks it, and keeps the broken egg on top of the altar. After the ceremony

is over, seeds of millet, chillies, brinjal, onion, sorrel, local lettuce (*garu/mejak*) etc. are sown by way of broadcasting. Sowing and dibbling other crops take place the next day. The best variety of paddy is grown the next day around the place of *A-siroka* (see Figure 1).

- (b) *Rokkime Ringgama* –This ritual calls upon the paddy deity, Minima Kiri Rokkime, to come and reside in the new fields. This is performed by the priest through prayers and chantings, at a temporary altar made just near or opposite the *A-siroka* altar. Here, rice beer (*chu*) along with *chuste* (rice from which the beer was made), cooked rice and curry are offered to the deity. After this ritual, they come back home, where the *Churugala* (pouring of rice beer) to Misi Saljong (considered the creator) is done. This takes place in front of *maljuri*, the main post of the house. In the evening the beating of *kram* (sacred drum), *dama* (long drums), and blowing of *adil* (buffalo horns) can be heard (see Figure 2).



Figure 1: The *Asiroka* altar meant to cleanse the land of pollution after the burning of the *a-ba* plot



Figure 2: *Rokkime Ringgama* altar meant for the paddy goddess to welcome her to the *a-ba*

#### *Bang Cha-a and Mi Amua*

In a few weeks to a month or so after the seeds are sown, when the rains come and plants start growing, the time consuming task of weeding takes place. Weeding takes place a number of times, however the usual practice is intense weeding for two times. In between the first germination and intense weeding there are two rituals – *Bang Cha-a* and *Mi Amua*.

(a) *Bang Cha-a* – This is performed when the crops of the field have germinated and started to grow. A fowl is sacrificed for Jugi, the god of plants and herbs. During the sacrifice, the priest asks the god not to damage and spoil the crops of the field, but to help them flourish. In some places, a pig is additionally sacrificed. The blood of the pig is mixed with sand, and starting from the rear of the field, it is sprayed all over the plot while chanting follows. In the evening the *Doka Rika* ritual is performed in which young men carrying an effigy of Bang, the malevolent deity, try to enter every house and destroy the items that they can lay hands on, which the owners vehemently oppose.

(b) *Mi Amua* – This is performed in the last week of the month of June or first week of July when the

saplings are growing in the fields. The purpose of this ritual is to drive away all diseases that cause crop failure. To perform *Mi Amua*, three altars of varying sizes are erected – (i) *Chabolma* (meant for the deity Minima Kiri Rokkime) (see Figure 3), (ii) *Rakasi* (for the demon Rakasi), and (iii) *Miasi* (for the deity Miasi). Pig and fowls are sacrificed first, followed by *Churugala* (offering of rice beer) before calling upon Minima Kiri Rokkime. These altars are erected in different locations – one in the *a''ba*, where the ceremony was performed by the priest; one at the boundary of the jhum field to prevent migration of paddy spirit/soul to another field; and the last is erected in the tri-junction of the footpath to the *a''ba*, to give information to one and all (humans and spirits) that *Mi Amua* is over.

#### *Rongchugala and Ahaia*

Garos harvest crops as and when they ripen. However, the crops of the *a-ba* are not eaten before being offered to the deities. For the harvest of all crops, except paddy, they use tools such as the axe, chopper, or hoe. However for paddy grown in the first year's *a-ba*, the harvest is done with bare hands. However for second year's harvest on the same plot, a sickle can also be used. Once the rituals have been completed, and taboo on crops lifted, then all crops are harvested and carried in baskets and taken home. Some crops are consumed immediately while others are stored to be consumed later. The following rituals are connected to harvest:

- (a) *Rongchugala* – This literally means 'offering of flattened rice'. The purpose of this ritual is to offer the first harvested paddy from the field to Misi Saljong. This rice is the first harvest from the *a-ba* referred to as *sarengma*. It is performed in the early part of October. Earlier, during the day, the *tuara* (priest) goes to the *a-ba* alone and cuts one small basket (*kirang*) of paddy and returns to the house. At the *maljuri* post of the house, a bunch of paddy is tied and offered. At the same place, a handful of flattened rice (*rongchu*), and *tematchu* (a citrus fruit) are also offered. Next the priest performs *Churugala* while thanking and offering rice beer to the deities (see Figure 4).



Figure 3: A priest conducting the *Mi Amua* ritual for the paddy goddess *Minima Kiri Rokkime*



Figure 5: The altar at which the *Ahaia* ritual bidding farewell to the paddy goddess is conducted



Figure 4: Offerings of the first harvests for the deities at the main post of the house during *Rongchugala* ritual

(b) *Ahaia* or *Ambi Rimona* – This ritual is conducted as a means of bidding goodbye to the paddy deity. This is normally held in the month of September–October after the annual harvest is over. On the allotted day, people go to the field carrying one pot of rice beer, cooked rice and curry. As soon as they reach the field, the beer pot is uncovered. The priest pours out the rice beer in front of the altar, and offers cooked rice and curry to the deity. After the offering, they feast together. Thereafter, he uproots the *miampok* (sitting stool) kept for the deity. This indicates leave-taking of the deity, and that she would be recalled the next year. From this day onward, the people can shout freely. It is believed that before *Ahaia* ritual, it is improper to shout, whistle, beat drums, while paddy is growing,



for it is believed that the paddy deity/spirit/soul will run away from the *a-ba* (see Figure 5).

A priest conducting the *Mi Amua* ritual for the paddy goddess Minima Kiri Rokkime

Offerings of the first harvests for the deities at the main post of the house during *Rongchugala* ritual

The altar at which the *Ahaia* ritual bidding farewell to the paddy goddess is conducted

### *Wangala*

Paddy, once harvested, is first dried out in the sun, and stored in the *mijam* (trans. 'rice house'). These paddy grains are then husked in a wooden mortar and pestle. Once clean the rice is ready to be consumed. Once harvest is complete, it is the time for rejoicing and the *Wangala* celebrations take place – where Garos host friends and family, open their coffers and give feasts, and celebrate it communally.

*Wangala* is the last and significant event in the cycle of *a-ba cha-a*. It is considered an absolute necessity as an annual thanks giving ceremony to deities, gods and goddesses who blessed them (see Story 3). Before the event, rice beer is cooked and kept aside for the occasion, the houses are cleaned, new clothes are procured or old clothes washed and kept ready, ground rice for *wanti toka* is kept ready, and the sacred drums are repaired. *Wanti toka* is a ritual that takes place prior to *Wangala* in which boys prepare a solution of water and ground rice which is plastered (with their hands) on different sections of the house as well as possessions (see Figure 6).

*Wangala* comprises of the following rituals:

- (1) *Churugala* (trans. 'pouring of rice beer'): The priest or *nokma* blows the *adil* (buffalo horn) signalling that it is time for the ritual. All harvested crops such as white gourd, *rasin chisik*, *re''ching* and arums are offered at *maljuri* (main post of the house). Then the first draw of rice beer is offered to Misi Saljong and Minima Kiri Rokkime. The next draw is then poured at all important places of the house. A feast next take place, followed by beating of drums, dancing and singing.
- (2) *Sasat So-a* (trans. 'burning of incense'): This takes place only in the *nokma's* house. This

function is observed the day after *Churugala*. Around noon, the first beating of *kram* (sacred drum) and *rang* (brass gong), and blowing of *adil* is heard. Cooked rice is provided to the guests and at the same time *mirim goa* (throwing of cooked rice signifying the rain) takes place. The priest burns incense inside the *nokma's* house and makes the inner house smoky (thus, representing the gathering of clouds before a big storm). The sounds of drums and shouting reach a climax when the *sasat* smoke blows through the ridge of the house.

- (3) *Chroka* (trans. 'dance'): Immediately after *Sasat So''a* a gunshot leads the beating of drums – slowly at first referred to as *dokgria*. Then a dance begins where it is believed that it is with the deity that they dance and for her blessings. Here, all the female dancers join their male counterparts, and enter and dance in the different sections of the house, finally coming out to the courtyard and performing the following dance steps: (a) *Ajema roa* (trans. 'Ajema roams/walks about'), (b) *Kotip den-a* (trans. 'cutting off the turban'), (c) *Kotip suala* (trans. 'distributing the turban'), (d) *Do-krina ajesia* (trans. 'pecking of wild doves'), (e) *Rutong riria* (trans. 'shaking the hog plum fruits'), (f) *Am''panggong rekreka* (trans. 'shaking thatch grass'), (g) *Do-reng meraa* (trans. 'kite hovers'), and (h) *Do-me gonga* (trans. 'lowering of the rooster's tail'). It is said that these steps should not be left out or else Misi Saljong will not be happy.

### HILL PADDIES AS CRUX OF GARO CULTURE

In this paper the term '*a-ba* paddy' or '*a-ba* rice' refer to the crop grown in the *a-ba* –underlying the importance of space, i.e. where this variety of paddy is grown. Therefore, from the Garo worldview, the closest that comes to the term *a-ba* paddy or *a-ba* rice is 'hill paddies'. This food crop, which ultimately became the 'core' of Garo foodways is said to have been handed down by the gods.

## THE STORY OF RICE

### Story 3

#### *How Rice was Introduced*

In the land of the deities, there was a gigantic tree of wealth with twelve branches to the east, and twelve branches to the west. These branches bore jewelled fruits of diamond, gold, silver, iron, as well as plants like rice, silk, cotton, etc. The branch bearing rice, had twigs of different coloured rice such as yellow, red, blue, green, violet, purple, orange, and white. However, no one could pluck it, not even the gods and goddesses.

The god of wind made friends with the gods of hail and storm, and together they shook the fruits of rice off the branch. Once he was successful, the god of wind did not care for the fallen grains and spent his time playing flutes. It was the head of the bird *do''amik* (which the Garos believe to be the guardian of rice plants) who picked up the grains from the ground and sowed them in her own garden.

Misi Saljong, the god, procured the grains from her and planted them in his garden. With the planting of rice grains in his fields he now had monopoly over all grains.

One day as Misi Saljong was on the way to the market, he met a man who had in his hands a small hoe. He was clothed in shabby, tattered garments of bark and covered with mud from head to foot. When he saw Misi Saljong resplendent with jewels and costly attire, the man became conscious of his appearance and hid himself. However, the god saw him, and ordered him to come out, and asked him his name, and to what clan he belonged. The man timidly replied: "I am Aning Apilpa<sup>1</sup>. I am one of the patriarchs of man."

The god and man became friends, and they sat down on a big rock to take their respective midday meals. Misi Saljong ate white rice and fish, while the man consumed only yams and roots and was not aware of rice. So when Misi Saljong noticed the food of his companion, he asked him: "Do you not clear jungles, cut down trees and sow paddy?" To this, the man replied: "I used to clear jungles and cut down trees, but I have never heard of paddy before."

The god took pity on him and shared his cooked rice with him. When they were about to part, the god promised his friend that he would send paddy seeds to sow in his fields. He also said: "When you are blessed with the first fruits of paddy harvest, remember me, and set aside in my honour some of the first fruits

of your harvest. Every year do the same thing before you and your family consume it".

(Abridged from Rongmuthu, 2008[1960])

## RICE AS STAPLE

Many times it is seen that 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 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 maize are also grown, and constitute a part of their traditional foodway. However, without consumption of rice, no meal or social occasion is complete. Rice is that 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 curry preparations), as a drink (rice beer is frequently served during ceremonies and rituals) and as snacks (pancakes, rice cakes and cookies).

They usually consume rice two or three times a day – the morning rice, mid-day rice and evening rice. The central role that rice plays in their ideological lives is clear from the fact that the terms 'rice' and 'food/meal' mean the same. Thus, it is not surprising when a person enquires: "*Mi chajok ma?*" (*trans.* 'Have you eaten rice?'), but in reality is asking whether one has had the day's meal. Thus, *mi-pring* (*trans.* 'morning rice') stands for rice taken early morning; *mi-sal* (*trans.* 'day time rice') stands for day-time rice/meal, i.e. lunch; and *mi-attam* (*trans.* 'evening time rice') stands for evening-time rice/meal, i.e. dinner. This indicates that the two or three meal format followed by communities across the world which Garos too follow is centred on rice. *Mi-pring* comprises of left-over rice of the previous day which is consumed with left-over curry, or else in isolation, at day break before they disperse to their respective fields. *Mi-sal* is the main meal of the day comprising of freshly cooked rice and a curry, in the absence of which, rice would be consumed with a pinch of salt and chilly or *nakam su-a* (*trans.* 'mashed dry fish'). This meal, except on days they do not work, is usually packed in plantain leaves and consumed in the *a-ba*. *Mi-attam* is consumed at home after they return from the day's labours.

In Songsarek villages, where Christianity has not been adopted, rice beer called *chu* or *chu bitchi* continues to play an important role (see Figure 6). Types of beer, just like rice, vary according to smell, colour, consistency and function. There are beers that are cooked and prepared for specific occasions – such as rituals and ceremonies – while there are many meant for every day consumption. This is the first drink that is offered to a guest; and the first draw on sacred occasions is offered to the deity and then communally consumed. The worth of a woman is reckoned by her expertise in making beer – *chia* (*trans.* ‘sweet’) being the best, and *mesenga* (*trans.* ‘sour’) being the worst. However, malevolent and mischievous spirits (including ghosts) can also turn rice beer sour, and boiled rice slimy.

#### *Rice as Life*

Rice is not only a synonym for food and meal (as discussed in the preceding sections), but it is also stands for life, and by default even hunger. It is that which sustains life – without which one will wither and die away. Unlike other ethno-medical practices which restrict the consumption of rice, when sick (whatever the etiology), Garos insist on eating rice to get strength and to recover. Thus, it is not uncommon to see a man suffering from malaria eat a plateful of rice with *jagu nakam*, or a woman suffering from diarrhoea eating rice and green banana curry (Marak, 2014c).

That rice stands for hunger can be gauged from everyday conversations. When one is famished and hungry, one says: “*Mi okria*” (*trans.* ‘hungry for rice’). Additionally, there is an herb referred to as *dikgi mijanggi* (*trans.* ‘herb for rice spirit/soul’), which makes one who comes in contact with it continuously hungry unless and until an antidote is given.

Since cooked rice rots in a day or two according to environmental conditions, and uncooked rice is a botheration on long unknown journeys (since one would then need to look for a pot/bamboo stump, water and firewood), Garos have devised a rice preparation that can be stored for days and months and consumed at will. This cooked and pounded rice is commonly referred to as *rongchu*. *Rongchu*, as a by-product of rice can be seen as life-giving specially when taken on long journeys. This preparation meant

for a specific purpose is popularly known as *rongjanggi* or *mirongjanggi* (*trans.* ‘life-giving rice’). This is the rice preparation that was given to Teronipa by his wife when he set out on the tragic hunting trip (opening story).

*Chujanggi* (*trans.* ‘life giving rice beer’), on the other hand, refers to a beer that is cooked and prepared for a special purpose, i.e. child birth. This life-giving beer is made of the ‘best’ available rice, in usual parlance, a variety of sticky rice (*minil*), and prepared 2 or 3 months prior to an impending delivery by the expectant mother. On delivery, especially after a difficult delivery, this beer will give life to the new mother and rejuvenate her. It is also believed that all the ‘dirt’ from the delivery will be cleansed. With this, the woman is expected to feel rejuvenated.

Rice continues to play a role in death and after. When a Garo man/woman/child dies, the dead body is first washed and clothed and placed on a mat of bamboo cane (*wasi rika*) under which is placed unhusked paddy. In between the paddy and the mat are placed heirlooms like gongs (*rang*), jewellery and coins which are considered wealth. Atop this, a piece of red coloured cloth, which is also an heirloom, called *bara marang*, is placed, and with which the body is wrapped. When the body is cremated, a few items of the dead along with a few grains of paddy are burnt together. After the cremation, a structure known as *delnang* is constructed for the dead in which will be placed some items meant for him/her (see Figure 7). Here, the rice grains (on which the body was laid previously) and eight pieces of rice grains that was plucked with bare hands will be kept; and a rooster and a goat will be tied to its post. This rooster and goat are later slaughtered and consumed in a feast. The idea behind tying them to the *delnang* is gifting it to the dead, so that when he/she goes to the land of the dead, he/she carries them with him/her. On the *delnang*, for approximately a month, cooked rice and curry are regularly placed as an offering. Thus it is common to find different food items, as well as rice beer placed on the *delnang*. Again, when harvest is over, a bundle of paddy harvest is kept tied at a tall pole and offered for the ghost (*mimang*). This is called *midong ka-a*.

Rice beer meant for Wangala rituals. Note the white marks of *wanti toka*.



Figure 6: Rice beer meant for Wangala rituals.  
Note the white marks of *wanti toka*.

A *delnang* for a deceased on which uncooked and cooked rice, rice beer and other food items are placed.



Figure 7: A *delnang* for a deceased on which uncooked and cooked rice, rice beer and other food items are placed.

### *Rice as Self*

If Garos identify themselves as ‘*a-ba chagiparang*’ (*trans.* ‘people who eat/subsist on the *a-ba*’), as I discussed in another publication (Marak, 2014c), in contrast to others who do not – they clearly draw a line between themselves and others. Again, all crops from the *a-ba* are of importance, but rice is the most important of all. There again exists a difference between *a-ba* rice and *apal* rice (as discussed earlier), the former being the important variant even though its production is much lesser than the latter. The reasoning behind the ideology and nomenclature between *a-ba* and *apal* rice can be seen through a historical perspective. Possibly in Garo Hills, cultivation of crops might have started in the prehistoric period in the marshy creeks (as supported by archaeological evidences) (Ashraf, 2010; Marak, 2014a; Marak *et al.*, 2017). However, paddy cultivation appears to have started on the hills with simple tools like digging sticks and stone hoes for dibbling. This *a-ba* cultivation seen as an indigenous method can therefore be looked as the collective ‘self’. Subsequently, Garos learnt the art of *apal* cultivation from their neighbours the Hajongs and others using the plough. The term ‘Hajong’ is said to have been given to them by the Garos who were astounded by how the new people tilled the land like *jo-ong* (worms). Thus, *apal* cultivation, even though giving more production and used by Garos across political spaces in a large scale, can be seen as an ‘outside’ cultivation. In comparison, *a-ba* rice is not only considered more filling, but it is more fragrant and tasty. The importance of this crop increases since it was the gift of the gods (see Story 3) and it is through this crop that a divine covenant exists between gods and mere mortals.

In terms of commensality, this food (both in its solid and liquid form) is the food that connects the celestial and terrestrial world – thus the same is offered to the gods first, before communal consumption. Again as evident from the cases of Achiksong (Assam, India) and Mandisong (Mysensing, Bangladesh) rice commensality clearly reveals the self-other ideology in Garo world view (Marak, 2014c). In the former, the majority Assamese Hindu community has a prohibition on open sale of beef, while in the latter the Muslim community does likewise for pork

consumption. Garos consume both the food items and depending on where one is situated (Assam or Bangladesh), the priority and importance of the meat protein increases. Therefore, rice appears to be the connecting fabric for the whole social system irrespective of clan and kinship affiliations. Mealtimes for Garos are extremely unstructured, and often guests (even uninvited ones) are offered rice and curry, anytime one visit. However, this offer is not extended to non-Garos in both the villages due to commensal politics connected to concepts of clean and unclean food among Hindus and Muslims.

In a similar manner, rice beer today appears to have divided the Garo society into Songsareks and Christians – since for the former it continues to be a sacred drink offered to the gods/goddesses and an everyday drink, while for the latter it is considered a taboo. Thus, Christian Garos have not only given up brewing rice beer, but also consuming it.

#### *Rice as Deity*

Among all crops, rice has a soul, variously referred to as a deity or a goddess, and in essence rice can be looked at as a deity. The soul in rice is called *mijanggi* (*trans.* ‘rice soul/spirit’), whose mother is Minima Kiri Rokkime. Thus, the deity Minima Kiri Rokkime is variously referred to as *minima* (*trans.* ‘mother of paddy’), *mijanggi* (*trans.* ‘rice soul’) and the *mite* (*trans.* ‘spirit/deity’) overlooking paddy. Garos believe in a number of *mite* – an all pervading spirit equivalent to the soul – that exist in nature. They are life giving forces and responsible for all life and death. So long as this soul or deity exists in paddy, the latter manifests in lush growth free from all diseases, and bearing abundant fruit; but once the soul departs, just as in human life, the paddy too withers, is eaten by caterpillars and termites, or even dies.

Because rice has a spirit/soul, a series of rituals are conducted in a cyclical manner indicating its birth, life and eventual death. The first ritual is *Rokkime Ringama* conducted immediately after the firing of the plots. Here, the deity is called upon to come and reside in the plot through incantations, prayers and sacrifices of animals (rooster or a pig), that is seen in the succeeding rituals as well. It is believed that after the ritual, the deity comes and resides in the *a-ba*,

and therefore at dawn the next day, sowing of paddy seeds take place with the wooden digging stick. The second ritual, conducted after 2 to 3 months, is *Mi Amua*, the purpose of which is to drive away all diseases that cause crop failure. It is believed that the deity leaves the *a-ba* due to the actions of other malevolent spirits and humans. Her absence is manifested in thick weeds, sickly paddy plants, attack of pests etc. Once the ritual is complete, it is believed she will come and reside therein. The next day, clearing up of the *a-ba* and weeding take place. The third and final ritual is conducted at the end of the paddy harvest. As paddy starts to ripen, immediately after *Rongchugala* (in which the first products are offered to various deities), paddy harvest take place. Except for paddy near the *Mi Amua* altar, all the rest is reaped and taken home. On the final day of harvest (on the day of *Ahaia* or *Ambi Rimona*), the paddy that was left unreaped near the altar is symbolically cut off with an iron sickle, indicating the death of the mother, and placed on the altar. With this the paddy deity is sent off to be recalled the next agricultural cycle.

That rice is deity herself is underlined by the practises that are followed. The sowing of paddy take place with the *matta*, a freshly prepared wooden digging stick that is considered sacred (since it comes in contact with the deity) and therefore cannot be touched after the sowing season. Again, for first year’s crop and until the *Ahaia* takes place, harvesting is done with bare hands by pulling the sheaves. This is because the contact of iron (i.e. the sickle) will kill the deity which is tabooed. It is only on the last day, when they are ready to bid her goodbye that she is symbolically cut off with the sickle. The death of the deity is seen as a solemn event, but necessary for rebirth. Thus, on the way back from the *a’’ba* after ‘killing’ the deity, the group walks back home without frolicking, joking or talking among themselves or with other passersby.

#### CONCLUSION

Even though, traditionally, Garos are shifting cultivators, and this way of life is connected to their history and culture, it would be wrong to equate it with ‘*a-ba*’ especially in the context of present-day lived experiences from Assam. *A-ba* cultivation refers

to a cultivation undertaken on the hills, irrespective of whether the plot has ‘shifted’ or not. Nevertheless, it is clear that it is “easy to uproot a Garo from the *a-ba* but very difficult to uproot the *a-ba* from their lives (Marak, 2013:289). This cultivation is not only connected to their identity, but is synonymous with prestige, tradition, ritualistic practices and even life. It is through the network of cooperative groups maintained during labour in the fields that kin groups are made and re-enforced through generations.

Therefore, a line of difference can be drawn between *a-ba* rice that is grown in the hills, and *apal* rice that is grown in the floodplains in valleys and creeks. It is not only the technology that differs, but also the varieties of rice grown, and the intrinsic value attached to them. The former is seen to be traditional or indigenous, while the latter is seen to be a later introduction. Therefore, in looking at a politics in rice, the following can be surmised.

Firstly, after Ohnuki-Tierney ('93:102), domestic rice grown in the *a-ba* can be seen as ‘self’ and foreign rice grown in the *apal* as ‘other’. This is re-enforced when we look at the oral historicity of the technology and crop connected. The former (rice seeds) was gifted by the gods along with the technology and commandments to adhere to norms and practices. The latter (both seed and technology), possibly borrowed from the neighbouring tribes (such as the Hajong) due to its high yield which can now sustain them the whole year.

Secondly, a distinction can be seen in terms of attaching differing values to quality and quantity. *A-ba* rice is considered tastier, fuller and more fragrant. Despite a dependence on *a-pal* rice due to its high yields as well as a growing reliance on markets, both of which make up a majority of a Garo’s food intake, it is still the rice from the hills that is yearned and is culturally valued.

Thirdly, cultural practices clearly reveal the belief in the existence of a deity in *a-ba* rice, as opposed to *apal* rice, even though some practices are carried forward. For *a-ba* rice, traditionally a sickle is not used as a harvesting tool for its contact will kill the spirit/soul/deity; harvested rice is not consumed before offering first to the deities; and no whistling, frolicking and noisy activities conducted while paddy

is growing. In order that paddy soul is not spirited away, ends of harvested stalks are knotted – this is seen even among Christian folks.

It is clear that despite changes having taken place due to a monetized economy, market and Christianity, the intrinsic value of hill paddy or *a-ba* rice continues in Garo worldview. Its production, distribution and consumption are intricately connected to its ethos, and continue to be the link between gods and humans. In that it was gifted by the gods and in which resides a deity – it assumes the form of a deity – and hence like the Japanese, every grain is a deity.

#### NOTES

- Garos are a teknonymous people. Out of deference to age, status and kinship ties, they do not address or refer to each other by name, but by the name of the first-born child. Therefore, Teronima is Teroni’s mother, and Teronipa is Teroni’s father; the suffix ‘ma’ and ‘pa’ standing for ‘mother’ and ‘father’ respectively. Therefore, the following names that appear in the text can be explained thus:
  - Bone Nirepa Jane Nitepa – A folk hero whose name is Bone, father of Nire; also known as Jane, father of Nite.
  - Aning Apilpa – One who lives on earth (*aning*) and father of Apil.
  - Minima Kiri Rokkime – The deity known as Rokkime who is the mother of *mi* (rice/paddy).
- The Matabengs are a sub-tribe of the Garos living in the areas near the Arbella range. There is no agreement on the number of sub-tribes among the Garos. Playfair (1975[1909]) talks about 12 ‘tribal divisions’, Majumdar (1980) mentions 9 ‘sub-tribes’ and Sangma (1984) 12 ‘dialectical and cultural groups’.

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