

*Interim Report*

## **THE GARO HOUSE**

### **TRADITIONAL CRAFTSMANSHIP AND CULTURAL EXPRESSIONS**



Submitted to

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Garos are a matrilineal tribal group of people residing predominantly in the Garo Hills region of Meghalaya. Though found in the five Garo Hills districts, they are also to be seen in the adjoining states of Assam, Tripura, Nagaland, and across the political divide in Bangladesh.

They traditionally live in the midst of nature – living in bamboo and wooden houses. The art of living amidst and with nature manifested itself in the form of beautiful long bamboo and wood houses with wood carvings in some. These artistic traditions are being followed not by a single group of people (unlike the caste populations), but as a societal repository and a cultural tradition of the whole tribe.

The construction of art and artefact, however, goes beyond the material aspect, and reveals much more about the intangible part of culture. For instance, the long bamboo residential Garo houses called *Achik nok* or *nokachik* have not only many rites and rituals connected to its construction, but also have many cultural expressions manifested in its functionality. There are separate areas meant for separate members of the family, as well as for different deities. The latter gets reiterated when rituals are conducted to appease them.

Similarly, the bachelors' dormitory, called *nokpante*, now defunct in most villages, have artistic traditions manifested in carvings all over the structure, rules and regulations connected to them, as well as areas where instruments of war (spears, bow and arrow), and joy (drums and gongs) etc. were kept. The art of making these items of war and joy were themselves connected to many rituals. These cultural expressions connected to traditional crafts need to be documented, and disseminated to a larger audience.

Garos in recent decades have been impacted by forces of change such as modernization, education, Christianity, and even market economy. These forces have played a substantive role in eliminating much of their traditional knowledge system

and cultural expressions. Thus, at present, there are very few locations where the traditional art and craftsmanship, in the sphere of houses, can be seen. The traditional knowledge, now known to only a few, needs to be safeguarded and passed on to others of the same community as much as possible.

Hence, this project plans to study traditional craftsmanship in the context of the Garo House and its connected cultural expressions among the tribal Garos.

### **1.1: Objectives**

The project proposes to study the traditional craftsmanship of Garo houses and their cultural expressions. However, the specific objectives include the following:

1. To study the different types of traditional Garo houses,
2. To study the cultural expressions connected to these houses, and
3. To document the traditional craftsmanship of these houses.

### **1.2: Method of Data Collection**

Data is being collected through fieldwork in different areas of Garo Hills, where traditional houses are still to be seen. Since variation occur from region to region, therefore it is different villages of different districts are being covered. Additionally, since bachelors dormitory are a different category of houses and are found only in some of the interior villages of Garo Hills, these will be specifically looked into.

This entails fieldwork in different villages for data collection and photo documentation. Data on different methods of craftsmanship such as procurement of wood/bamboo, methods of construction, beliefs and practices connected to construction, rituals connected, sculpturing and carving methods, notions behind them etc. are being collected.

All the above information will be collected through interview and observation. The data collected will be supplemented by audio-visual aids.

### **1.3: Expected Outcome of the Project**

This study is expected to lead to the following:

1. A project report on traditional craftsmanship of Garo Houses [in publishable form]
2. Still photographs 30 in number approx.,

### **1.4: Implication**

This study could lead to much needed documentation on traditional craftsmanship in connection to houses in Garo Hills, which is lacking at the moment. This could also provide an avenue for safeguarding the skills involved in making the crafts, and passing it onto the next generation.

## **2. PRELIMINARY DATA COLLECTED**

In the following, preliminary data collected so far from the field is given below.

### **2.1. Types of Garo Houses**

The Garos use different types of houses – the main house (*nok achik*) for the purpose of residing, including a number of houses for different purposes. The different types of Garo houses on the basis of function include the following:

1. *Nok achik* – main residential house
2. *Borang* – watch tower in the jhum fields
3. *Jamadal* – field hut in the jhum fields
4. *Jamagap* – field rest house
5. *Bandasal* – rest house in the village and on the way to market etc.
6. *Ambol nok* – house for storing firewood
7. *Mi jam* – house for storing rice and other food



*Figure 1: A side view of the Nokachik, the Garo House*

### *2.1.1: Brief Description of Nok achik*

The Garo traditional houses are long rectangular structures built on a steep incline or uneven land. As seen in the above photograph (Figure 1) one side of the house is on the ground, while the other end is on posts. Traditional houses have three rooms, lined up behind each other in a row. The main room is the living room (*nok ganchi*). The entrance room (with a fireplace for cooking) is on the ground level, but the living room contains a hearth (for making rice beer), and a centre post (*maljuri*), the abode of spirits, and a post with a liquor pot (*chusimra*).

Wood and bamboo are the main construction materials, with wooden posts or standing stones to support the platform. Flattened and woven bamboo is used for the floor and walls, while the roof is thatched with jungle grass. The sliding door hangs on a bamboo rail.

The long rectangular houses have three rooms: a front room on ground level, the main room and a sleeping room on raised platform. Over a high threshold with stepping stones is the *nokkra* (ground floor), where the kitchen fireplace is, three



hearths in a row, beautifully modelled in mud on the floor. At the other side, firewood is stored.



*Figure 2: A front view of a Nokachik, the Garo House*

A short bamboo staircase led into a long central hall (*nok ganchi*) on a raised platform. Around its hearth, guests are welcomed. Through this room, one can enter the bedroom (*nokdring*) at the end. Children (sons and daughters) sleep in the central room. Earlier unmarried sons of around 7-8 years older slept in the bachelors dormitory.

There are two special columns in the main room (*nok ganchi*) – the *maljuri* post near the wall of the front room. The *maljuri* is the place of the spirits and a place for sacrifices. The *chusimra* near the fireplace is the place for brewing rice beer and for its storage.

### *2.1.2: Photographs of Other Types of Houses*

In the following a few photographs of different types of houses are given. A full description will be given in the final report.



*Figure 3: Borang, the watch house*



*Figure 4: Jamadal, the field house*





*Figure 5: Jamagap, the field rest house*



*Figure 6: Bandasal, the rest house*





*Figure 7: Ambol nok, house for firewood*



*Figure 8: Mi jam, house for storing paddy*

## 2.2: The Bachelors Dormitory

The bachelors dormitory known as the *nokpante* is a house that looks different and is structured differently. Traditionally, all the bachelors of the village would stay in this house together, and learn the different arts – of warfare, agriculture, dance & music, carpentry, incantations, story-telling, etc. Today, the bachelors dormitory as an institution has become defunct, however, the house as a structure is still seen in many villages. These houses today are a meeting ground for bachelors where they occasionally meet herein to learn the making and playing of drums etc. Therefore, in the present day bachelors dormitory, a large of drums known as *dama* can be seen.



*Figure 9: Nokpante, bachelors dormitory at Gondenggre village*

Traditionally, the bachelors dormitory was a large imposing structure. They were often of great sizes and on a much higher platform than the other houses. To reach these platforms, notched logs of wood served as staircases and long pieces of cane were



often suspended from an overhanging beam to assist the inmates to climb up and down. The main posts were usually carved and coloured. In fact, the Garo dormitory houses are an excellent example of wood carving and sculptural work (see Figure 10).



*Figure 10: A view of the nokpante built at Naga Heritage Village, Kisama*

The bachelors dormitory is full of wood carvings. An important symbol is the *do'kaku*. *Do'kaku* is carved on a pillar that connects the roof above the entrance which signifies the 'beginning and salvaging' of what has been practiced in the past shall be redone and remembered through totems and cultural preservation. *Do'kaku* consists the symbols of diamonds (*miksep*) which signifies 'keeper and the holy eye', shield (*sepi*) which signifies 'protection', Closed gongs (*rang kingkipa*) which signifies 'property' and necklace with a precious stone (*ripok dokatchi*) that signifies 'beauty and high status'.



These symbols act as the signs to inculcate the bachelors of their origin and the need to preserve their culture through visual communication or traditional media.

Other totems on the woods inside the Nokpante are made for judgment and oath taking. The cause and effect of the crime can be known after having taken the oaths by touching the totems if a person is really saying the truth or lying. The totems consists of the sun, moon, star and all the wild animals and insects that are liable to hurt human beings. Animals and insects like elephant, tiger, alligator, snake, goral, scorpion, centipede etc, are engraved on the posts. Nokpante at the same time acts as the court for judgement for them. Sun, moon and star refers to witness and proof both for truth and lie. Fear of these animals groom the bachelors to live a truthful life and life in peace inside the Nokpante and in the society in future.



*Figure 11: A close up view of the sculptural work at Kisama*

### 2.3: Construction of Houses

The construction of Garo houses are not random but follow different methods. This is embedded in Garo beliefs and practices.



*Figure 12: A nok achik being constructed (Photo credit: Semberthush Sangma)*

Usually the raw materials required for construction of a house include the following:

1. Wood
2. Bamboo
3. Large stones
4. Thatch
5. Aluminium or steel wires

Main construction of the house, the circular central columns and the heavy roof and floor beams were made of wood. The supports of the raised floor were also made of wood or sometimes large standing stones. The rest was mostly made of bamboo. On the floor beams lay a grid of two to three layers of thick bamboo, on top of which was a cover of woven bamboo which was springy to walk on.



*Figure 13: An elongated stone is used as a pillar to support the main frame of the house*



*Figure 14: Another view of a stone used as pillar*





*Figures 15-16: A house being constructed (Photo credit Semberthush Sangma)*

The walls were made of bamboo framework with shores and crosses, all cleverly inserted through each other and covered with woven bamboo. On the roof beams, all separately supported (triangular roof constructions are not known), lay bamboo rafters and thatch laths. The joints of the whole construction are made with cane, which is used to bind; no nails are used. The woven covers of floor and walls are made with flattened bamboo in strips about 10 cms wide.

The wood and bamboo that is used for construction are usually first soaked in water. This is believed to make the wood and bamboo stronger.



*Figure 17: Wood being kept under water for days before construction*



*Figure 18: Split bamboo that was already soaked in water being dried*





*Figure 19: Thatch being dried in the sun*



*Figure 20: Bamboo posts being kept ready for construction*





*Figure 21: The matted floor of the bandasal (rest house)*

#### **2.4: Beliefs and Practices**

The following are some beliefs and practices connected to houses and their construction among Garos.

1. *Women should not build houses for it will bring in bad luck.* It is strongly practiced among Garos. Even today, women do not take part in building of the main structures – foundations, pillars, posts, flooring, walls etc. However in some villages they help in the bundling and making of thatched roofs. In all cases, since house construction is a communal effort, therefore, women would be present in a construction by making and serving tea, snacks, and rice.
2. *Do not use old/ripe bamboo to make house.* Garos usually use young bamboo to make houses, for it is believed that older the bamboo is, the more it will attract insects like cricket which will eat the bamboo. Additionally, they also believe that the bamboo and wood has to be immersed in water for over a week for it

to be ready to use in construction. That way, the bamboo and wood will be stronger and insects will not attack it.

### **3. PROPOSED PLAN OF ACTION**

#### **3.1: Plan of Action**

The following is the plan of action for the next stage of the project.

1. 3-4 months fieldwork to collect data
2. Photo-document houses, their usage, and their construction.
3. Report writing

#### **5.2: Tentative Chapterization of the Final Report**

The following is a list of tentative chapters and the proposed contents which will appear in the final report:

*Chapter 1: Introduction:* This chapter will briefly introduce the project, discuss the statement of the problem, objectives of the project, review of literature, methods used in the project, and its limitations.

*Chapter 2: Types of Garo House*

*Chapter 3: Construction of Garo Houses*

*Chapter 4: Cultural Expressions Connected to Garo Houses*

*Chapter 5: Conclusion:* This chapter will conclude all the above findings.