



AN  
INTERIM REPORT ON

**ART, ARTISANS, AND CULTURE**  
A Study on Garo Traditional Craftsmanship

Submitted to  
**Sangeet Natak Akademi,**  
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Submitted by  
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Title of the Project: **Art, Artisans, and Culture: A Study on Garo Traditional Craftsmanship**

Duration of the project: **12 months**

Commencement of the project: **April 2014**

Number of research assistant engaged: **1 (part time)**

Place of fieldwork: **Garo Hills, Meghalaya**

Nature of Work done so far:

1. Official procedures and appointment of Research Assistant - 1 month
2. Library consultation - 2 months
3. Fieldwork and documentation - 1 month

## **1. INTRODUCTION**

Traditional craftsmanship is the most tangible manifestation of intangible cultural heritage. There are numerous expressions of traditional craftsmanship: tools; clothing and jewellery; costumes and props for festivals and performing arts; storage containers, objects used for storage, transport and shelter; decorative art and ritual objects; musical instruments and household utensils, and toys, both for amusement and education. Many of these objects are only intended to be used for a short time, such as those created for festival rites, while others may become heirloom that are passed from generation to generation. The skills involved in creating craft objects are as varied as the items themselves and range from delicate, detailed work such as producing paper votives to robust, rugged tasks like creating a sturdy basket or thick blanket.

This project initially envisioned to do a detailed study on traditional craftsmanship of the Garos including all art and artifacts made of wood, bamboo and cane. However, due to financial constraints (since the amount granted is 1/12<sup>th</sup> the original estimate), it was decided to work only on one aspect of craftsmanship – **the Garo Drums**. The Garo drums are not only a

feature of ceremonial celebrations but also have a sacred or solemn aspect, and some are treated as heirlooms. Thus it was decided to study the traditional craftsmanship involved in the making of these drums, and the knowledge system involved in it.

### **Brief Review of Literature**

A musical instrument is a tool that both produces sound and carries meaning (Dournon, 1981). Traditional musical instruments are instruments that have been in use for centuries, the manufacture and use of which has been passed down through generations as a part of an oral tradition. Such instruments are found in almost all societies of the world. A brief overview of relevant literature is given below.

Musical instruments, are used not only because they produce sounds, and therefore form a part of many ceremonial functions; but they also carry many meanings. These sound-producing objects are instrumental in retaining cultural memory, act as embodiments of meaning, constructors of identity, icons of ethnicity and as sensors of place (Schmidt, 1994; Neuenfeldt, 1997; Dawe and Bennett, 2001; Kartomi, 1990; Leppart, 1993; Waksman 1999; Stokes, 1994). Thus in the case of the Sami of Lapland, not only the markings on the drum but also its manipulation in shamanistic performances reveal the significance of this multi-sensory experience as a source of life-sustaining information for the community (Keski-Santti *et al.* 2003).

These instruments are usually made by musicians or ex-musicians, and the work is considered to require special ability (Merriam, 1969). The making of musical instruments, including drums, is thus a social and cultural process (Merriam, 1969; Schmidt, 1994; Dawe, 2001; Keski-Santti *et al.*, 2003). This is an excellent methodology for making friends, establishing rapport and observing social life. A substantial number of bits and patterns of culture patterns were revealed, and these included among others: taboos, children's games; patterns of badinage and boasting; real and ideal behaviour; technological information such as

types of woods, the sources of colors, and tool-use patterns; linguistic information, including terms for parts of the drum, tools, woods, and others, as well as singular and plural forms; concepts of design; institutional friendship; learning by imitation; and tricks and jokes.

This brief review reveals that the traditional craftsmanship involved in the making of musical instruments, such as drums, are much more than a mere act. Thus, it would be of great value to document the types of drums and their manufacture among the Garos of Meghalaya.

### **Brief Ethnographic Account**

Garos are a tribal group from Meghalaya, one of the states in northeast India, predominantly residing in the Garo Hills region. Though found in the three (now 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.

The Garos are a matrilineal group of people who follow lineage, inheritance, succession as well as residential patterns based on the female line. Thus a child takes after the name of the mother; a newly married couple moves in

Traditionally the Garos are agriculturists, and therefore much of their livelihood and religion revolved around it. Thus, various music (songs/incantations/ballads/prayers etc) forms a part and parcel of their livelihood. Additionally, various musical instruments are used not only as accompaniment to these songs and incantations, but also as symbols to various social situations. For instance, the *wapipi*, long bamboo pipe, is used as a part of ritual during incantations.

Though there has been much change in their present day lifestyles due to forces of modernization, urbanization, industrialization, and proselytization, their traditional customs and traditions can still be seen.



Plate 1: Garo men and women dancing during Wangala



Plate 2: Men beating drums during Wangala

With this backdrop, a 12-month project was proposed titled, “**Art, Artisans, and Culture: A Study on Garo Traditional Craftsmanship**”. The project was approved and started in April 2014. However as mentioned due to financial constraints, the project aims to study only Garo Drums. At the moment ethnographic data collection has started, and some preliminary data on drums. The collected so far is briefly mentioned in the following pages.

## 2. DATA COLLECTED

### Oral History of the Garos

It is difficult to say from where the Garos originated, or came from. So far, no origin myths have been found which talks about how they originated. All stories, however, talk about their migration from different places, while a strong oral tradition exists that they came from Tibet. The history of their migration is contained in the epic lore (*katta agana*), in verse as well as in prose which has been handed down from generation to generation. They probably lived in a country known as *Turua*, which they refer to as *A-song Tibotgre Chiga A-piljangsane A-song Nonoi Chiga Nengkuchot*. Their various stories mention that the reasons for their migration were famine, and frequent conflict with other tribes, which forced them to leave their original homeland.

Possibly it was scarcity of food, which was predominant in their search of a new land, as the saying goes:

*“A·ba cha·na a·namjaana,*

*Mina dango minamjaana,*

*Kilgron puo kilgojaana,*

*Songdongna a·song gitalko am·na,*

*Chiringna chiga dingdangko nina”*

*English translation:*

*“...As the fields are arid,*

*Rice crops are poor,  
Cotton seeds do not germinate,  
To search for the new land,  
And look for fresh flowing waters”*

According to stories, after crossing the Himalayas (*Chuma A•bri*), they reached Kalimpong in Bhutan, also known as Dhon Kuta. From here they moved and settled down in Cooch Behar for about 400 years which is referred to as *A•song Patari Chiga Suunchi*. The king of Cooch Behar received them warmly, but later persecuted them fiercely one of the reasons being their habit of meat eating. From here again, they marched eastward and settled in Dhubri and Bongaigaon from where they crossed the mighty Brahmaputra river by making a raft of plaintain stems. After a long eastward trail, they reached *Ka•magiri* and occupied *Nangachol A•bri*, present-day Guwahati which is known as *Nilachal Hills* or *Kamakhya*. After much wandering they made a permanent home and settled in present-day Garo Hills.

### **The Garo Drum**

The Garos have a wide range of drums ranging from 4 feet 3 inches in length to the tiniest which is about 5inch in length. They prefer the *gambil* (b. *Careya arborica*) wood for the frames of the drums. The wood is hollowed through with a sharp tool called *batra* which is made by the local blacksmith. However the construction of the drum is purely done by the Garos themselves. The drums are usually hung from the neck and played by both hands while dancing, and at times, they are placed on the ground and played while sitting.

There are different types of drums, the three major categories being the following:

- (a) *Dama*: This is the ceremonial drum used in different ceremonies and festive occasions. These are long drums. There are different varieties of *dama* which will be discussed in the final report.

- (b) *Dama dalsangl Kodorengl Nagra*: It is a large drum consisting of an earthen pot covered with skin. This will be detailed in the final report.
- (c) *Kram*: This is the sacred drum. It has two other similar ones attached to it known as *kram nadik* and *bitchimani bisa*. Except for the *nagra*, *kram*, *nadik* and *bitchimani bisa*, all the other drums are kept in the bachelor's dormitory (*nokpante*).

The Garos have different styles of playing the drum depending on the area they come from. They also have different players such as a single lead drummer called *dadigipa*, one accompanist or second drummer known as *rikkakgipa* and any number of bass drummers known as *onlgrimgipa*.



Plate 3: Garo drums (*dama*) stored in the bachelor's dormitory of Gondenggre Village



## Functions of the Drums

The *dama*, the ceremonial drum, is the one which is played during festivals and celebrations. During the Wangala festival, these long drums are slung from the neck by the men while they dance. While carrying the drum the dancers have to make sure that the larger side of the drum (called *bidap*) falls on the left hand side and the narrow end (called *bichok*) falls on the right hand side. Usually the drums are played with both hands. At times sticks are also used to beat the drum to give a different sound. This is called *dadigol* (drum beating with sticks). At times when the girls and the warriors dance, the men sit on the sides and play these drums. These drums are kept in the bachelor's dormitory. They are constructed by the bachelors, and taken care of by them.

The *nagra* is kept only in the *nokma's* house and is believed to host a spirit. It is sounded in order to assemble the people to the *nokma's* house when he gives an entertainment. It is also used when a special feast is given for a visitor, for announcing a death in the village, and as a warning of impending danger. In a call for a feast, the first beat invites one to the feast, the second beat informs the feast has commenced, and the third and final beat informs all those present that the drink is over and no more serving will be done. This drum is not supposed to be taken out of the owner's house at all, misfortunes being certain to overtake anyone who allowed this rule to be infringed.

The *kram* is the sacred drum used only on solemn occasions like religious and funeral ceremonies. The *kram* is heavily endowed with supernatural power that no one else except the owner (the *nokma*) dares to keep in his house. It is usual for each *nokma* to keep a sacred drum and ordinarily all those who do so perform the ceremony of *sasatsoa* (burning of incense) at the Wangala ceremony. Before a household first acquires this drum, the man should have a dream indicating that it is appropriate, otherwise he will die. Once acquired, however, the drum, may be inherited by the heir without any additional dreams. If the *kram* is to be played the owner or one of his relations must be the first to strike, and not until then may anyone else touch it.



Plate 4: A *kram* being repaired by the priests



Plate 5: The head priest first smears the *kram* with the blood of sacrificed rooster



Plate 6: The head of the *kram* being measured



Plate 7: A piece of dried cow-hide being cut out for the *kram*



Plate 8: Repairing of the *kram* underway

### Traditional Craftmanship

Since only one month has been used for data collection, therefore not much information on this aspect, i.e., about its construction etc, has been garnered. In the next phase of the project, it is proposed to collect information on this aspect.



Plate 9: Men checking the drums (*dama*) stored in the bachelors' dormitory



Plate 10: Men tightening the strings of the drums

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

#### **Plan of Action**

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

1. Collect data on socio-cultural functions of the Garo drums, construction and maintenance of these drums, and sale or inheritance pattern of these drums; and
2. Photo-document drums, their usage, and their construction.

#### **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: The Garos*

This chapter will discuss the socio-cultural, economic and religious lifeways of the Garos.

##### *Chapter 3: The Garo Drums*

This chapter will detail the different types of drums used by the Garos.

##### *Chapter 4: Socio-Cultural Functions of Drums*

The different functions associated with the drums will be detailed out here.

##### *Chapter 5: Construction of Drums*

This chapter will discuss the construction of the drums.

##### *Chapter 6: Conclusion*

This chapter will conclude all the above findings.

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