

MYSTERIES & MARVELS *of Garo Hills*

*Exploring the hitherto unknown and unheard-of places
and tales*

MRS CRISLINE T. SANGMA



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Stories Matter

New Delhi • London

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Crisline T. Sangma

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The Mystique land

The people of Garo Hills are very lucky for the land is endowed with abundant natural resources that it makes it one of the richest oases in the North Eastern region in bio-diversity. This is a land of wide diversities, great contrasts; fascinating lore and legends and spell binding folktales, the land of mystic, magical and surreal mythical creatures, breath-taking landscapes, spectacular picturesque pristine beauty and unimaginable natural resources. Yeah, this is the land steeped in tradition and custom that are deeply entrenched in mysticism. The presence of strange, mythical wild animals both terrestrial and aquatic, rare and exotic plants intertwined with deftly woven folk tales and legends steeped in mystery are to be heard and seen to fully understand and appreciate the true cultural ethnicity of the people. Their origin is unknown and untraced; their history is shrouded in mystery; their transition into modernity in turbulence, all these combined makes it an interesting tapestry for study.

Garo Hills is mystique because of its deeply entrenched mysticism; the oral myths and legends of the tribe as handed down from generations to generations by words of mouth had somehow preserved and amazingly survived till date. The Garos have a story or an explanation for everything and anything they see around them whether they be just common ordinary things or something different and

unusual. The hills, the rivers, the deep waters in the rivers, the streams, the rocks, the cliffs, the groves, in fact almost everything and anything believed to be the abode of some spirit or the other; created for a specific purpose under very mysterious circumstances. The stories of creation or origin of all things are connected and interconnected to one or more epic lore and legends. That is one reason why Garo folktales far surpass the stories of other ethnic groups of the region in their richness and in originality, perception of life and their intimate relation with nature. The traditional beliefs and practices of the tribe, their reverence to the unseen spirits they call *mites*, the strict ethical codes they maintain and their rites and rituals at various solemn or ceremonial functions, their implicit trust in their chief deity for guidance are to be seen and witnessed to truly experience the culture and their traditional practice and the mysticism behind. Anyone who keenly observes their traditional beliefs and practices and the way they strictly adhere to their culture; will surely be astounded at how the present-day generations had deviated from their original dogmas and became superficial in all their dealings with nature and all its bountiful resources. This is probably to a large extent owing to the influence of other cultures; as much as the impact of advancement in education and exposure to modern scientific and technical powers.

Nearly 200 years ago the Garos were living at the bottom rungs of primitiveness with no access to modern amenities. It is truly amazing to note how in the span of two centuries or so, the Garos had advanced so much in all respects. The easy access to modern science and technology played a great role in determining their transition from ethnicity to modernity. At this present age, the youngsters

tend to look down upon the old traditional practices of their forefathers as pagan, primitive and outlandish that they are even ashamed of their ancestry. In their quest to mingle with the rich and the famous elite the application of more modern science and technology to evolve into the enlightened environment, they had either rejected or simply ignored the past history. The present-day youths put themselves on a much higher pedestal considering their ancestor's practices as pagan, archaic and out-dated.

Well, according to Christian doctrine and practice they are pagan no doubt but if we consider deeply how their deep-rooted tradition had influenced their existence, I am convinced that what they believed and practised was nothing short of Christian teachings; except for one thing: *The all-powerful, all knowing, all seeing supreme deity Tatara Rabuga, who is known by many different names could not offer them eternal salvation.* He was revered as the supreme sovereign, very powerful, all knowing, all seeing and controller of the whole universe by whose order the clock like precision of our existence is governed. He was the giver and dispenser of blessings to all his subjects and controls the whole universe with truth and just. People are born and were doomed to die, then be reborn again only to die again and again in endless cycle of life and death. When they die, they all had to go to *Balpakram* the land of the spirits of the dead for temporary respite before being born again, and again. In their pagan *songsarek* religion there was only temporary respite but no permanent or eternal rest. Man was condemned to this world to be born again and again in different forms according to his deeds in the past life; good or bad.

Garó magic: - Before they became Christians the Garó ancestors were well known for their practice of powerful magic and witchcraft. There was nothing they could not do under the sun; they could summon powerful *mites* or supernatural spirits to their aid at will. Sometimes they collaborated with them to form formidable allies. With the aid of those supernatural spirits, they could read into the future and correctly predict the sequence of events to follow; or go back in time to check on the events that had occurred. By the use of their magic, they could order their own spirits to travel around while remaining seated in one place or send out messages or even material things through teleportation. Many of the atheist Garos still practise such witchcraft or black magic and proudly talk about them as if they are ordinary day to day common chores in life.

Shri *Dewansing Rongmuthu* in his book titled *Jadoreng*, narrated some truly bizarre and incredible several cases that actually happened long ago where the person could physically transform himself into anything by use of mantras and return to form with ease. It is bone chilling to realize that in the ancient days such bizarre practices really existed. He narrated that one person by the name of *Chemin Marak* from *Boraigon, Boko*; after successfully completing his training with the expert returned home after three years and entertained fellow villagers by transforming himself first into majestic ram and when someone asked him to turn himself into a buffalo, he did so with elan; after reciting some powerful mantra. But when he snorted and pretended to charge at them all the onlookers sped away in fright and there was no one to help him transform back into human by the simple method of sprinkling water on the bogus animal, as previously agreed upon. He would have been condemned

to remain a buffalo for life, but luckily for him his fellow trainee *Sengrin* immediately recognized him and helped to regain his human form after two days. This is a true account that reportedly happened on the 9th December 1929.

In another case, a young man named *Tosang Marak*, from *Longka* village, *Nowgong*, had returned home on 24th February 1956; after a successful training in psycho-physical art of physical transformation. He wanted to test and demonstrate his newly acquired gift and confided to his friend *Mona Sangma*. By nature, *Mona Sangma* was a timid person but out of curiosity he agreed to participate in his experiment. So, by evening they went to a nearby jungle and after instructing his friend what was required to do; he discarded all his clothes and kneeling down on the ground invoked the powerful mantra to turn himself into a majestic tiger. *Mona* watched the process of transformation with rapt attention but when his friend truly transformed himself into a full-grown majestic tiger, he was so frightened out of his skin that instead of helping him to return to his human form as he promised he ran away. All he was required to do was fling the discarded clothes at the tiger and he would have returned to his human form. Coward *Mona* did not have the guts to pick up his friend's clothes and fling at the menacing tiger and within a few days fled the village altogether without telling anyone what happened to his friend.

In the meantime, *Tosang's* parents and relatives searched for him everywhere with no success; then, on the third day, his mother stumbled upon her son's discarded clothes by accident. Thinking that he must have been killed by tiger she was picking up the clothes for the purpose of conducting the funeral when a huge tiger appeared. It was her son's transfigured being but she did not know that and

out of sheer fright she quickly picked up the clothes and ran back to the village and burnt them. Poor *Tosang* ! the only link which would have returned him to his original form was lost. He was doomed to be a tiger for life.

This kind of magic or witchcraft whatever it is more appropriate to call is still prevalent till today in pockets here and there. One woman told me some time ago how their grandfather who practised magic one day entertained a group of small kids (the woman being one of them) by his magic. Jocularly he asked the children, *hey, you kids want to see some magic? How about picking up water, heh?* Without understanding anything the kids shouted *yeah! Yeah!*

So, he told them to fill a big basin with water. Then when the basin was full, he chanted some mumbo jumbo abracadabra mantra and tipped out the basin. The kids watched incredulously as the tipped off flowing water magically turned into water balls like balloons. With whoops of joy the children began running hither and thither picking up water balls. Surprisingly those water balls or bubbles did not burst. Excitedly the children ran around collecting all the water bubbles and put them in the basin where they magically turned into liquid water once again. Naturally the children were intrigued and begged for more. The old man was more than willing and offered to perform another trick; telling them that this time he would summon the money to the basin and that they should catch them. With eager anticipation the children waited. The old man intoned some mantra and lo and behold, thousands upon thousands of paper money came fluttering in the air from all directions and dropped themselves into the basin. The children clamoured around to catch as much as they could but no sooner had they got hold of them, they all fluttered away

again. However tight they hold it and cling unto it; the money would not stay. Sadly, with longing eyes the children watched all those thousands fluttering away in the air never to be seen again. It was not so much difficult to summon them but it requires another magic incantation to hold them in check and prevent them from fluttering away again the woman explained.

Many people who practise such magic confidently claim that, if necessary, they can summon not only money but other material and immaterial things too including the spirits of the dead ancestors. Also, there are claims of visitations by the supernatural beings even in this age who continue to interact and impart new teachings to the people.

It is in Fairy tales that we learn about the evil spirits turning people into animals or into stones; but here, in Garo mythology too there are many stories of humans turning into stones and even the supposed to be immortal *mites* themselves turn into stones under very mysterious circumstances.

So far so good, more in the following pages. So, buckle up and get ready to dig and delve into the depths of mysteries and marvels of the land and its people; explore the incredible legends and lore 3Ms and discover the very essence of the 3Ms: the mythical, the mystical and the magical aspects of the ancient beliefs and practices of this particular tribal community.

Contents

Chapter I.....	1
Chapter II.....	38
Chapter III.....	58
PART - II Mysterious, magical beings on land and water.....	66
PART - III Dark, deep subterranean wonders:.....	94
PART - IV Legendary deep pools:	110
PART - VI Places of Historical, mythical and Legendary significance	123
PART VII Places of mythical and mystical interest.....	139
Author's profile.....	195

Chapter I

Origin

The hill tribe A·chiks, more commonly known to others as Garos are believed to have migrated from Tibet centuries ago where they resided for unknown eons. They are now settled in the western portion of the small landlocked state of Meghalaya; known as Garo Hills. Being one of the three major tribes of the state, they account for more or less one third of the demographic population of the state. The tribe is made up of a conglomeration of twelve major sub-tribes, and several smaller sects, each one of them speaking their own dialect and practising slightly different customs and religious practices.

They are:

1. The *Awes* - They are the inhabitants of the north and north western plainer areas of the Garo Hills portion, adjacent to the plains of Kamrup and Goalpara Districts of lower Assam. They live side by side with the Rabhas and Kacharis absorbing their culture and practices to a great extent.
2. The *Chisak* - They occupy the north eastern and eastern parts of Garo Hills, bordering Awes.
3. The *Me·gams* - The *Me·gams* also known as *Llyngams* by the Khasis inhabit the eastern extremities of the Garo Hills overlapping the West Khasi Hills areas; where they form a separate sub-tribe. However,

their language, customs and practices are alien to the Khasi culture, being more akin to the Garo customs. Hence, naturally they are considered half Garos and half Khasis.

4. The *Matchi* - This sub-tribe occupy the rugged hilly central portion of the Garo Hills and are more widespread than most.
5. The *Am·bengs* - The *Am·bengs* make up the single largest sub-tribe among the Garos and are found mostly occupying the western parts of Garo Hills.
6. The *Matabeng* - they have occupied the middle portion of Garo Hills and are seen north of Tura town and its surroundings
7. The *Matchi-Dual* - This sub-tribe occupy the lands along the *Simsang* River. A large number of this sub-tribe are found in the *Mymensing* District of present Bangladesh.
8. The *Attongs* - They inhabit the south- eastern part of Garo Hills and are seen concentrated along the *Simsang* and *Siju* areas. They speak a totally different dialect that has no semblance to the Garo *A·chik* dialect.
9. *Gara-ganching* - They mostly live in the southern side of Garo Hills. It is said that the term *Garo* had been derived from *Gara-ganching* or *Gara* and later on corrupted to *Garos*.
10. The *Chibok*- This sub-tribe are living in the southern areas of Garo Hills in the upper valley of *Bugi* river reaching up to *Dareng* River.

11. *Ruga* - One of the smaller sub-tribe the *Rugas* have settled in the south around *Dalu* areas, bordering Bangladesh. They maintain a different costume and dance style. Because of their minority their dance style and even the dialect they speak are on the brink of extinction.
12. The *Koch* or *Kotchu* - The *Kotchus* are seen mostly in the north western part of Garo Hills. Surprisingly, though they are a sub-tribe of the hills people, they are more influenced by Hinduism probably owing to their proximity to the Hindus of lower Assam.

In addition, there are Rabhas, the Hajongs, the Dalus and Banais making up the demographic scenario of Garo Hills

Among the major tribes of the North Eastern Region of India Garos are perhaps the biggest and more scattered than most. They are settled in patches here and there in almost all the seven states of the region except Manipur and Arunachal Pradesh. They are populated in Bangladesh too especially in Rangpur and Mymensingh Districts. And yet, very surprisingly indeed, they do not know their own origin, bizarre or otherwise. Unlike other major tribes they do not have any claims as to how and where they came from. In fact, they have the vaguest idea of their origin and history. They don't seem to have any folklore or legend regarding how and where they came from; and this from a tribe who has the explanation for everything, anything at all. Whatever little information we got of their past is sketchy and does not throw sufficient light to arrive at an intelligible and tangible conjectures. Other tribes of the North Eastern region have some bizarre claims as to their origin: say for instance, the *Khasis/Jaintias* of Meghalaya claim that they were the

offshoots of the seven heavenly beings that were trapped and compelled to remain on earth. According to their legend, there were sixteen heavenly beings that used to come down to earth to till the land. They commuted back and forth by means of a golden ladder that stood at mount *Sohpetbneng* not far from the *Umiam* Lake. One day when only seven of them came they were permanently stranded on earth owing to the crafty scheme of one of them who wanted to establish a kingdom here on earth. He chopped off the golden ladder that connected the earth to heaven; so they could not return to their abode above. Compelled by the circumstances they remained on earth and became the progenitors of the human race. The Khasi/Jaintias believe that they were the offshoots of those seven heavenly beings and so call themselves *Hynniewtrep* meaning seven huts or families.

The *Nagas* claim to have come out from the rock; the details not available. Similarly, the *Maras* formerly known as *Lakhers* of Southern Mizoram say that they came out through the small opening from deep underground. N.E Parry in his book **The Lakhers**, wrote that the story of origin of the Mara tribe as handed down by tradition is that: *Long ago before the great darkness called Khazopha khazhangra fell upon the world, men came out of the hole below the earth.* The Lushais too subscribe to the same theory adding that while each Mara clan came out yelling out his name and position, the Lushais came out quietly that by the time a few hundred Lakhers emerged they were already several thousands in numbers. That was the reason why Lushais are more numerous than the Lakhers or Maras, they claimed.

Many scholars and Researchers had found it baffling how the Garo ancestors who were very good story tellers and could make up any tale at the drop of the hat on any

aspect of life be they animates or inanimate objects and able to make them plausible enough to believe; like how the shrimp got hunchbacked, or why the monkey had red buttocks and so on and so forth; and yet, they did not have any claim as to how and where they came from. The early British Officers and early Christian Missionaries could not find any concrete proof or references of any sort regarding the early history of the Garos. Rev William Carey in his **The Garo Jungle Book** wrote that *"the Garos have no reliable traditions either of origin or arrival which afford any clue as to how and whence they came."* Similarly, many other renowned writers shared the same view; that the Garos are ignorant of their own origin. How and why, they did not know it's a mystery. The only way to infer is from their oral tradition of preserving their history by way of narrating them in a singsong manner. It was concluded that initially they must have occupied a vast tract of land in the upper reaches of Tibet and migrated southwards some centuries back. However, it is not known how long they were there and the reasons for their exodus therefrom.

Basically, the history of the Garos began with the foray of the British officers into the deep jungles of Garo Hills during the latter part of 18th century that culminated in the annexation of the land to the British Empire. Until that time the historical background of the Garos remain in obscurity. Their reports to the Gov't though in bits and pieces regarding their notorious expeditions formed the larger part of the beginning of Garo history. According to Rev William Carey the first time the British Officers came face to face with the Garos was in 1788-1789; when due to regular disturbances created by the savage Garos in the most gruesome barbaric ways by decapitating the heads of their

slain enemies, investigations into the matter was ordered. Back then the jungles of Garo Hills were infested with undesirable elements. For a long period; the Garos had managed to survive in isolation safely cocooned in their lair; except for making occasional forays into the plains for trade and barter. In those days the Garos were notorious for being barbaric savages, especially for collecting human heads for trophies. This fact is well corroborated by many writers much later on. During such forays they often got into conflict with the plains people and merrily killed and decapitate the heads of their enemies. For them it was a matter of great pride and honour to collect the human heads; their social status in the social hierarchy going up by the number of collections of human heads. So, the bigger the collection; higher the adulation they got. Because of such regular barbaric savage attacks John Eliot, the Commissioner of Dacca, was sent by Lord Cornwallis, then Governor General in Council to Garo Frontier on a tour of inspection to investigate.

Much later on, owing to the regular disturbances they created for the British Administration over the hill tracts Garo Hills was brought under British Rule and Captain Williamson was sent as the first Deputy Commissioner of Garo Hills. During his tenure Captain Williamson ordered the preserved human skulls destroyed. Reluctantly they brought piles of them out and burned them publicly. Rev William Carey recalled how the verandas were often piled up with skulls of animals killed during their hunting expeditions such as skull of the stags, bulls, boars, leopards and other ghastly relics; among them their most prized relics were the human skulls. Very reluctantly they piled up heaps of those ghastly relics and set them afire.

Successive British Officers from John Eliot, 1788-89; Francis Hamilton-1807-14; Thomas Sisson 1815; David Scott 1816-18; S.C Reynolds 1849; Moffat Mills 1854; W.J. Williamson 1866-75; E.T Dalton 1872 and Alexander Mackenzie 1884; all compiled reports on Garo society and affairs mainly for administrative purposes motivated by occasional needs and exigencies of the Government. Besides them, John Avery -1884; Ayerst 1880; Esme -1885-87; Austen Godwin -1873; B.C Allen 1905-06 and others also contributed to the studies on the Garos in different journals and reports. However, the information supplied were scattered and by no means a systematic account. The reason for such scattered fragmented information was that they were living very much in isolated obscurity unbothered by other tribes because of their savage reputation. Only Sir David Scott seemed to get along fine with the savage tribes. He was once attacked by the savage miscreants but his faithful Garo servant saved him from being butchered that realizing the loyalty and integrity of his servant, he became a friend and benefactor to the whole tribe.

In 1903, Sir Bomfyller Fuller, the then Commissioner of Assam, initiated a project of preparing a series of monographs on the important tribes and castes of Assam according to a uniform scheme of treatment. Major Alan Playfair the then Deputy Commissioner of Garo Hills District was accordingly entrusted with the task of writing a monograph on the Garos. Major Alan Playfair's monograph thus stood out as the first systematic account of the Garos and any discourse on the subject largely depended on the source provided by him.

However, if we go deep into the monograph compiled by Major A. Playfair it is not entirely complete in its

presentation. There were many loopholes and misinterpretations of the true nature of the Garo people and their lifestyles; their deep-rooted tradition and vibrant culture which were not adequately highlighted. Compared to some other monographs on other tribes of the North East, the monograph on the Garos was lacking in scholarly in-depth analysis and appeared to be somewhat superficial for he had only managed to scratch the surface. And yet, in the absence of a more complete discourse on the Garos and their traditional and customary practices; despite the many lacunae it projected it remained the sole accepted version for study and research. In this connection we cannot put the entire blame on the author; for like all foreign writers completely alien to the tradition and culture of the tribe, there were always the danger of misunderstanding and misinterpretation of the actual facts to a certain degree. Not only that having been forcibly subjugated not long ago; it is very likely that the author could not get full co-operation and truthful interpretation. His conclusions must have been entirely drawn from his own perspectives rather than the actual interpretation of their belief. Because of this, it is high time that some History scholars undertake the responsibility of reviewing and rewriting the History of the Garos in a more compact comprehensive manner.

Many British Officials and even the first Evangelical Missionaries from America must have found the Garos uncouth and repelling for none of them seemed to have a good impression about the savage tribes. Not surprisingly the well-educated and highly cultured high-ranking officers were likely to turn up their noses in disgust at the sight of people living no better than animals of the jungles. So, you find most of their reports to the Government and in their

official records the Garos were given the strongest unfavourable terms as the blood thirsty savage barbarians. This is clear from the way they described the primitiveness of the tribe. As a matter of fact, the Garos were primitive, uneducated, uncultured living at the bottom rung of existence far removed from civilization. In those days they were naked; the men folk wore *gando*, a strip of cloth wound round his waist and passed through between his legs; similarly, the women folk were attired only with a small piece of cloth called *re-king* about 18 (eighteen) inches long wound round her waist and tied in a knot on the side. Naturally it barely covered her buttocks leaving one side thigh open. Apart from this they were utterly naked, filthy, unkempt and probably smelly that would turn anyone making their acquaintance recoil in disgust. It is said that the first impression lingers; and in the case of the primitive ethnicity of the tribe was not favourable to the sahibs. So, we can imagine the intense disgust and dislike to the filthy scenario presented by the uncouth Garos to the educated and well cultured society.

Dr. Milton S. Sangma, former Pro Vice Chancellor of N.E.H.U., in his book titled History and Culture of the Garos agreed that very little is known of the early history of the Garos. He stated that ethnically and linguistically the Garos belong to the great Bodo family which at one time occupied a large part of the valley of the Brahmaputra. The Tibeto Burman race of the Tibeto Chinese family resided in the north western China between the source of Yang-tse-kiang and Hwang Ho Rivers. They sent forth waves of emigrants who spread down the valley of Brahmaputra and other rivers like Chindwin and Irrawaddy that flow southwards. Historians believe that at different times batches of

emigrants entered the Garo Hills from different directions and settled down at different regions for centuries. Such isolated settlements led to evolution of certain regional linguistic and cultural differences in the long run. He further narrated that, *"their history before the British subjugation was a sickening series of raids on the plains and feuds among themselves; of bloodshed, misery and muddle. They had an evil reputation for numerous raids. From time to time they would sally from their mountainous recesses, attack an unarmed, unsuspecting village in the plains, murder, plunder and burn and swiftly retreat again into the jungle leaving behind only the headless corpses of men and women. On return they would collect the whole village round the captured heads, eat, drink and dance chanting songs of triumph."* See, even one of their own could not deny the fact that the Garos were indeed at the bottom rung of social degradation.

Another renowned writer Mihir N. Sangma in his book titled **Unpublished Documents on Garo Affairs** replicated the report of Rev E.G. Phillips of American Baptist Mission, Tura wherein the detailed study of the origin and migration of the Garos was clearly elaborated. While acknowledging the fact that the Garos at one time in the past inhabited a vast territory known as Tibet or *Torua* that was surrounded on three sides by the *Himalayas*, *Karakoram* and *Kuenlum* ranges, he too agreed that in the absence of information of any historical value; nothing is known about the origin and migration of the Garos. Many scholars and writers were of the opinion that the Garos were ethnologically and linguistically a section of the great Bodo race which at one time occupied a large tract of the vast valley of Brahmaputra River. There is certain resemblance to most of the aboriginal tribes of Assam valley like *Koch*, *Rabha* and *Kacharis* who were also a section of *Tibeto Burman* race and said to have been in the North-western China between the uppermost

areas of *Yang-tse Kiang* and *Hwang Ho* Rivers. Considering the information as gleaned through the ages it appears that the early history of the Garos remained not only enigmatic but steeped in brutality and barbarism. Well, that was a despicable reputation to start with. Anyway, there were certain more conforming revelations regarding the ethnicity of the Garos and their other sister ethnic groups. It is more or less confirmed that at one time different ethnic groups from China had migrated in small batches and scattered themselves all over the Far East and Eastern Asian regions.

Recently in 2014, Dr. Rev Laiu Fachhai of Mizoram, an Evangelist Missionary to Sudan, Kenya, Nigeria and other countries; currently the President of Mara Research Society, Siaha, Mizoram, during his tenure as the visiting Professor at Aizawl Theological College, Aizawl, Mizoram, brought out a small book titled **Ethnic Squeezing in Northeast India-A Religio-Political Analysis** wherein he made a very startling analysis about the hill tribes of Northeast India; and emphatically claiming that *"all Northeast Indian people belong to the same race and stock of Tibeto Burman groups and originally they were all Mongolians, more specifically Mongolian Indians."*

Dr. Laiu Fachhai stated that after a thorough meticulous study and in-depth analysis he was convinced that according to Anthropological division the human race species had been categorised into three major races; Caucasian, African and Mongolian. He added that amazingly Biblically too the Bible's presentation of human origins perfectly corresponds to the traditional anthropological division of human races. From the three sons of *Noah*, post diluvia age; came three major races: the Caucasians including the Indo-European groups of western Asia and Caucasians of Europe; are the descendants from

Japhet; the Africans from *Ham* and the Mongolians from *Shem*. These racial divisions are based not so much on religion, culture or worldview and politics but rather on biology: the physical features, genes and the language they speak. The descendants of *Shem* who belong to Mongolian race are mostly located in the continent of Asia and Pacific regions and more dominantly in Far East from Japan, Korea, China, Taiwan, Thailand, Cambodia, Vietnam and Myanmar including the North and North Eastern Regions of India. Surprisingly, Native Americans also called Red Indians too belong to the same genre he concluded.

When we consider the destruction of the whole world by the great flood, where only *Noah* and his wife and three sons, *Shem*, *Ham* and *Japhet* with their wives survived; it is only natural that the world demography traced all the way back to those three sons of Noah and the racial division based on that fact. This is not all; for Dr. Laiu Fachhai in his discourse tells us how to isolate and identify a Mongolian by a specific totally non-conventional method. He continues that a lay person's approach to identifying a Mongolian is one's physical features namely the colour of the skin, facial structure, bone structure, colour of hair and eyes. Since the differences between these three sub-races are physical, racial differences can easily be distinguished by the naked eye.

This is one reason why North Eastern Tribal people are often considered foreigners; and segregated from the rest of Indians; majority of whose origin is considered to be Indo-European Caucasians. Another significant lay approach to identify is the Mongolian birthmark known as Mongolian spot or Mongolian blue spot. It is a biological benign, flat congenital birthmark with wavy borders and irregular shape known as congenital dermal melanocytotic or dermal

melanocytotic discovered by Erwin Balz. The Mongolian birthmark could appear in multiple spots or as one large patch on the lumbosacral area or lower back; buttocks or sides. Normally the spots disappear within three to five years after birth and almost always by the time they reach puberty. Mongolian birthmark is prevalent in about 90-95% of East Asian births and 80-85 % among Native Americans. Further, intensive research on that subject more or less confirmed the claim for almost all the babies born to the ethnic groups living in North East India states like Sikkim, Arunachal Pradesh, Nagaland, Manipur, Meghalaya, Assam, Tripura and Mizoram almost all of them are distinctly endowed with this Mongolian birthmark; this is a strong biological proof that Northeast Indian ethnic groups do indeed belong to the Mongolian race he concluded.

So, now we can understand why the North Eastern people are called Mongoloids because their basic root was Mongoloid, short and stout, flat nose, yellowish skin, dark hair etc. It seems very farfetched, and yet, there is every possibility that what was speculated and arrived at by renowned Researchers, Historians and Academicians must have at least some shreds of truth in it. According to some findings long, long, time ago, there were several ethnic groups living in the Central Asia or Asia Minor which is actually Mongolian region. It is strongly speculated that the Garos and all other ethnic groups of the North East region; the Nagas and their sub-tribes, the Lushais and their sub-tribes, the Maras, the Tripuris, the Sikkimese, the Tibetians, the Gorkhalis, the Bhutias, the Garhwals of Northern India all originated from there. For unknown reasons around 1,000 B.C they dispersed and scattered in all directions; mingled with other groups and in the course of their co-existence they

had partially adopted other culture and practices as a result of which many smaller sects had evolved throughout Eastern Asia.

According to wide speculations gleaned through and from the narratives of folk tales and lore handed down from generation to generation by words of mouth; some two thousand years ago or so, somewhere in the Roof of the World (Tibet as it is known to the world owing to its location at the highest pinnacle in the world); in a place called Garu Pradesh there dwelt a small band of fierce warriors called the *Garu Mandais*. They were assumed to be the original ancestors of the Garos or *A·chiks* who now occupied a small but very fertile stretch of land that is Garo Hills. It is also widely speculated that the term Garo and *Mandai* must have been derived from the name of the place they dwelt in long ago. Retracing their past and delving into the language they speak many scholars are of the opinion that they belonged to the Shan Tibeto Burman race of stock. Many eminent Anthropologists account for the presence of the ancient place called Garu Pradesh in Tibet and hence concluded that the Garos at one point of time did actually occupy a portion of Tibet, or Torua and that the term Garo must have been derived from the name of the land they once occupied known as *Garu Pradesh*.

As mentioned before, since when the Garos settled in Garu Pradesh and for how many eons is not known, but whatever it was it appears that they had a very good prosperous existence there. Apparently, they survived by farming and probably supplemented by hunting like all pre-historic primitive tribes. From the tales preserved through oral tradition we could glean out that the land they settled in was known by many different names some of which are:

Nonoini A·song,

A·song Tibotgiri

Chiga Apel Jaseng Tapojang; some referred to it as

A·song Nenggabat,

Chiga Nengchibat;

A·song Naori,

Chiga Tambori:

all the nomenclatures given above indicate the goodness of land and the abundant life they had out there.

Background history of ancient people:

In the present scenario with so much advancement in science and technology the primitive lives of the ancient forefathers may seem dull, outdated and too much farfetched especially in the face of so much transition and transformation the Garos witnessed in the past one hundred and fifty years. In fact, the new generation x youth have no interest at all in the past and background history of their ancestors, are even ashamed of their own origin, yet, however, we cannot simply shy away from our past; it is important to know appreciate and acknowledge the primitiveness of our ancestors in whatever state they were. By and large the *Garu Mandais* are accommodating, amiable and generous by nature and as such from time immemorial there are stories of how they lived and co-existed with gods. It seems they co-existed in a close congenial and harmonious atmosphere that they gained favours from those powerful benevolent and some not so benevolent supernatural entities which are collectively known by the generic term *mite*. It also

transpired that those powerful amiable *mites* imparted the knowledge of the supernatural realm and the art of using their powers to their advantage in exchange for simple appeasements through offerings of good wine, agricultural products and in some cases sacrifice of some small animals like pig or chicken or dogs. Yet, if some of the not so benevolent *mites* were provoked to anger or was ignored or neglected in any way they used to unleash unpleasant stray incidents like sickness or epidemics or some other calamities.

(Herein I would like to elaborate on the usage of the term mite by the Garos. The term mite is a wide all-encompassing term that embraces all that is supernatural. Ordinarily it refers to graven images, icons, spirits that are not discernible or explicable in human language.)

As a result of their co-existence in the days long gone by, many hybrid- half god half humans were born. Those half god lings exhibited remarkable precognitive and clairvoyant powers, extensive knowledge and wisdom beyond any normal human capabilities. They were no ordinary men and never behaved like ordinary people; because they were godlings. There is a plethora of such stories about those half gods half humans which we cannot simply laugh it off as mere fiction or myths at best. The most prominent of them was *Dikki*, the wise sage; said to be the wisest among men who ever lived on earth. He was gifted with the cognitive insights and clairvoyant knowledge up to the depth of twelfth layers of the world below and up to twelfth stages of heaven. His brother *Bandi* was gifted with unnatural immense herculean strength that he wielded the strength and stamina of twelve men. He could catch the tiger bare handed and skin it alive; get hold of elephants and pulled out their tusks effortlessly. Then there was *Goera*, who

had tremendous insights, even as unborn baby still in his mother's womb. He was the man who fought with the monster *wakskal wakmangganchi aragondi* single handed which terrorised the innocent people. After a long hard battle *Goera managed to* kill him with his bows and arrows. *Gonga* and *Gongja* brothers too deserve mention for they left gigantic footprints behind all over Garo Hills. Those footprints clearly embedded on rocks measured one and half feet in length and more than six inches wide. Imagine a person having that size feet; he must surely be a giant with gargantuan proportions.

The benefits they gained from such close affinity with those powerful *mites* were enormous for despite their total illiteracy and lack of exposure to science and technology they were ably taught by those supernatural beings in all art of science and technology far beyond their age and capability to discern. There are incredible stories how they learnt such valuable knowledge from the *mites*. One such case is of one ordinary villager (name being withheld to protect his identity) from the northern regions of Garo Hills. It is said that the spirit of his grandfather and two other relatives appeared in person and offered to impart a crash course lesson on cult magic for seven nights only, on condition that he would not divulge anything and abide by their rules at least during the impartation period. It was to be sort of a boot camp for him when all the knowledge required would be crammed into his brain in a matter of just seven sessions. This event took place fairly recently before the advent of this new millennium. He was led to the cemetery where each spirit showed his grave and identified himself as a close relative. In six nights, he had learnt so much and was on way to become one of the most powerful

witchcraft/ shamans in the region. Somehow, despite the tremendous stress imposed on him and his inherent fear of the unknown future he was able to keep his secret for six days and nights but on the seventh day he freaked out totally. Whole day he became morose; restless thinking what will happen to him if he completed the course and by evening unable to contain himself, he divulged his secret to some family members. That night the spirits appeared and berated him for his cowardice and breach of trust. They were so incensed with him that they gave him few slaps before disappearing.

If such events are still happening fairly recently in our life time; it can be safely presumed that the *mites* must invariably be their teachers in other departments too. This just confirms how the ancient forefathers gained unimaginable immense knowledge in tackling day to day problems and difficulties. It is amazing how they diagnosed the diseases accurately and cured various types of sickness through the use of common herbs and plants in their own primitive way. How they knew which plant or herb to use for what kind of treatment remained a mystery but of course now we know they were ably taught by their friendly *mites*. The answer to all those unanswerable questions lies in their ability to have a peaceful co-existence with the supernatural beings and learning the techniques from them.

In another incredible event a little more than half a century ago, one blind man by the name of *Rengsin Chalbri Sangma* of *Gabil Gandual* village in the northern side of Garo Hills was supernaturally taught by the spirits the art of singing *Katta Saling*, *Katta Bima* etc., a sort of telling stories in a singsong manner. It all happened one night when he was sleeping in the *jhum a·ba jamadal* to keep away the

marauding animals at bay. He got a visitation from those friendly *mites* (spirits) who taught him the art of reciting *Katta Saling* in a singsong manner. For three nights and three days the session went on continuously as they crammed everything into his head imprinting every word and their meaning in his brain in such a way that when he woke up after three nights and three days deep slumber, he could recite them all very well. This fact has been revealed by none other than his own great, great grandson. *Pa Methoral G. Momin* of *Damra*, *Goalpara*, *Assam* in his small book titled *Katta Saling* as part of his introduction to the book enlightened, how long ago, his father's uncle *Rengsin Chalbri Sangma* was given a full insight into the *Katta Saling* by the spirits.

Originally *Rengsin Chalbri Sangma* hailed from *Gabil Gandual* near *Rongjeng*. Later *Rengsin* adopted the name *Saling* and thenceforth came to be known as *Saling Chalbri Sangma*. The songs *Saling* learnt from the *mites* gave a lot of valuable insights into the past and how the *mite mande* (spirits and man) interacted even in this modern age. From these recent incidents we can safely infer that the spirits have not left the humans after all and that they continue to interact and impart knowledge to the humans willing to be recipients of their knowledge and teachings.

The great exodus

After so many years of co-existence, probably many centuries later when the *Garu Mandais* had increased in numbers and became adept in the use of magical powers they became a formidable force to reckon with. It is conjectured by many that once they considered themselves formidable, they became proud and arrogant and tried to

rule over those *mites* or supernatural spirit beings who were their benefactors once. Through them they learnt to practise powerful black magic then later on tried to control them in turn. This proved very costly to them for when the *mites* could no longer tolerate their arrogance they wanted revenge. They decided to oust them from their original habitat by disrupting their peaceful existence. Accordingly severe drought was caused in the area, slowly but surely the land refused to yield good crops as before. Year by year the drought got more intense, the water sources began to dwindle and gradually dried up altogether. The once prosperous and fertile land became bleak and dreary. Farming was no longer lucrative; the crops did not yield good harvest. Life became so hard that finally they realized that they could no longer continue to live in their ancestral land. That was how the great famine occurred. At last, they decided to leave their land for good and start looking for a better fertile land elsewhere.

That was the reason why the great exodus of the *Garu Mandais* from Tibet took place some centuries ago. Many scholars and historians ascribe this en masse great migration due to extreme famine and poverty in the land they once inhabited which had never been disputed. It is true that this theory had been accepted as the gospel truth but what had been conjectured as above as the underlying factor behind the great famine can neither be simply ignored nor totally discarded.

Apparently, they did not leave all in one group for historians had found records and evidences of several different groups who had started out from different locations and wandered in different directions. Sometimes they split the group into smaller segments from the main

group but re-united at a later stage before entering into the Garo Hills regions. According to the materials collected by Mihir N. Sangma, from the report of Rev E.G. Phillips of American Baptist Mission, Tura; and published in his book titled **Unpublished Documents on Garo Affairs 1993**; they formed four different groups and headed in different directions.

- i. The first group of migrants was led by *Jappa Jalimpa, Sukpa Bonggepa, Asanpa Chukangpa, Kumapa* and others. They started from the source of River *Torsa* or *Tista* and followed the river course towards south western side of Tibet.
- ii. The second group led by *Auk Raja, Asilik Gitel, Durka, Buia, Rengwa, Salbong, Suakpa and Nenggilpa* started off from Central Tibet along the source towards the right bank of Brahmaputra River slowly inching into Assam.
- iii. Yet another group of emigrants from Eastern Tibet departed under the leadership of *Raja Sirampa, Arimbit Raja, Kotta Nangrepa, Koron Dal gipa, Rikwa Nengjapa, Ageng Randa, Akong Resinpa and Mugarik Salmejang* followed the river source of Irrawady and Chindwin Rivers and moved towards Burma. They settled at Mandalay for several years and gave the name *A·song Balimit, Chiga Banbae* to that land. From there too they drifted again westwards, crossed Nagaland and came to Eastern Assam.
- iv. One group separated themselves and moved towards Bengal crossing Cachar and Sylhet and scattered all over the then Bengal; which is the present-day Bangladesh. That group was led by

Matgriks Monsing, Chusung, Goe, Skul, Jugul, Sincha, Bhuia and Raja Sane. In all probability they were the group that entered Garo Hills via *Siju Rewak* area who encountered the giant hawk as big as the campsite hut.

Before starting out on their great journey the priest *Kamal Tuara*, had a close consultation with the supreme deity *Tatara Rabuga*, their chief deity who fully endorsed their decision to move out in search of better homeland. *Tatara Rabuga* made it clear to him that the place they were living in then was meant for a temporary sojourn. The land reserved for them since thousands of years before was somewhere farther south. Through the priest *Kamal Tuara* the supreme deity promised to lead them the way to a land far away reserved exclusively for the tribe since time immemorial. Thus, encouraged and emboldened by the chief deity, putting their implicit trust on *Tatara Rabuga*, the *Garu Mandais* organized their last *wankadu wanbola* (*wangala*) ceremony in the land they had considered their own for so many years and got ready to leave the *A-song Tibotgre* for good. Fully armed and prepared for any eventuality they left their homeland and migrated in several batches heading in different directions.

Thereafter guided and advised at every step by their chief deity for many decades they traversed southward through Cooch Behar, and many smaller kingdoms along the foothills of Himalayas making camps here and there when they completed one lap of their journey of continuous marching on foot. Their journey on foot was arduous beset with problems and difficulties. The animals they brought along from their original land of settlement did not make it any easier or faster for them to make good progress. In many

places where they camped, they were left undisturbed for years till they were ready to leave at the behest of their chief deity who communicated through a sign. The *tilta wa-dang*, was the holy relic that showed the way by tilting to the side in which direction the migrants should take the route and if it was time for them to camp it stood erect indicating it was time they stopped and make camp. Usually, the place the chief deity chose for camp was safe from enemies with good water source and plenty of fodder for their cattle. Occasionally however they encountered unexpected problems where nearby settlers caused troubles out of fear for their own safety. In some places where trouble dogged them, they did not camp for long. In course of their journey, they encountered surmountable as well as insurmountable difficulties and, on many occasions, had to fight their way through with some of the powerful kings. The present-day Assam was in those days ruled by great *Ahomya* kings, their kingdom extending over a vast territory over hills and plains of the great Brahmaputra River which the *Garu Mandais* called *Aema Ditema* or *Songdu*. After so many years of hard trekking they finally crossed the mighty Brahmaputra in makeshift rafts of plantain tree trunks bound together by creepers and reached the dense impenetrable jungles of present-day Garo Hills.

However, his narration about the en masse migration appears to have been based mostly on the verbal accounts of the group led by *Jappa Jalimpa*, *Sukpa*, *Bonggepa*, etc. there is very little account of other groups although apparently, they all converged together at Kamakhya at some point of time. Their migration through mountains and valleys, through the kingdoms of sympathetic and kindly kings and tough enemies enduring persecution, deadly epidemics and untold

misery for forty long years is plausible to the extent that most of the leading *matgriks* were still alive when they reached the fringes of present Garo Hills. According to some accounts of their stay at Cooch-behar area for four hundred years must be some other group who had migrated much earlier.

Somehow, the groups were united at Khamakhya and for some time moved together as one until they reached the fringes of Garo Hills border. Considering all facts and circumstances, it is a mystery how from three different directions they managed to converge towards the same destination, and met up at Khamakhya. Was it a divine providence or simply a stroke of good luck or some sort of communication system that aided to keep in touch with one another or was it just pure chance that led them to the same place? In this connection there are many questions to which nobody can give any satisfactory answer. Anyway, whatever it was, the groups coming from opposite directions united to form one large strong group.

According to the narration of Moniram R. Marak in his *A·chikni Ma·biding*; after continuously moving for forty years they reached the place near the Assam border where the *tilta wa·dang* stood erect indicating that it was time to camp. In course of their entire journey *Tatara Rabuga* guided them by signs. When the *tilta wa·dang* stood erect it was time to camp and when it was time to move on, the *tilta wa·dang* would droop showing the direction of the way to follow. After many decades of wandering, they were finally in the land which would be their own soon enough; their wandering days were over. *Tilta wa·dang* stood erect and gave out a new shoot the next day indicating that they had reached their final destination. When consulted by the *kamal Tuara*, *Tatara Rabuga* confirmed that they had indeed reached

the borders of the land promised to them. Further the chief deity told him to inform the tribe that their wandering days were over and that they could take possession of the land. Overjoyed they had their first real thanks giving ceremony *wangala* to the supreme deity in *A·dokgre* where they camped as nomads for the last time.

From their last camp at *A·dokgre* the migrants decided to go in different directions occupying portions of land allotted separately to each clan. One group proceeded to *Maadi Rong·kuchi* on eastern side of Garo Hills; then came to *Damik A·we*, *Kimrang Pattal* in Garo Hills. *Jengbi Raja*, son of Garo chief *Auk raja*, *Asilik Gitel* came from *Dalram Seksekram*, joined another group and occupied *Mongri Mongram*.

The group under the leadership of *Auk Raja Asilki Gitel* and others like *Durka*, *Buia*, *Rengwa*, *Salbong*, *Sukpa* and *Nenggilpa* moved along the right and left banks of river Brahmaputra. They split into two groups; whereas one group opted to remain and settle along the banks of Brahmaputra the other group crossed the mighty river Brahmaputra near Guwahati and joined the former group led by *Jappa*, *Jalimpa*,,, *Sukpa Bonggepa* at *Khamakhya*. From there too they split again and one group crossed the hill known as *Speram Godoram* and at *Dalram Seksekram* on the north eastern region of Garo Hills. They moved on further through central regions of Garo Hills. It is strongly suspected that they were the forefathers of *A·bengs* and *Matabengs* and *Matchis*.

One group, the ancestors of *Dikil Me·gam*, *Nongritong*, *Nongstong* moved towards eastern part of Garo Hills which are now in western part of Khasi Hills. *Bonepa Janepa* came to *Bonegre*, (named after his son *Bone*) near *Songsak* and started jhumming at *Misi Kokdok Gara Petchok A·bri* where he got six

baskets of millets from just one place around a big rock and named the place *Misi Kokdok* meaning six baskets of millet.

Yet another group under the leadership of *Siram Jamdappa* which followed the source of *Salwin* and *Chindwin* rivers entered into Burma which they called *A·song Balimit*, *Chiga Banbae* or *Bolma A·dok* which was later on identified as Burma; now Myanmar. For some period of time, they occupied the territory known as *Mandalay* on the banks of river *Irrawaddy*. There they encountered Kachari kings at Dimapur and fought against them. From there too they crossed the high mountains of Burma and crossed over to Naga Hills and separated into two groups again. One group occupied *Ganggadol* and *Sibdol* areas. Some of them started off in the south-westerly direction and met other groups at *Khamakhya*. The other group started in the south easterly direction along the river *Barak* and entered eastern Bengal through Sylhet. One Garo chief *Susung raja* established his kingdom later known as *Susung Durgapur*. Another chief *Monsing* established his kingdom known as *Monsing* or *Mymensingh*. Yet another chief *Raja Sane* started off up the *Simsang* river and camped at *Rewak Do·ka Ba·ram* in Garo Hills. They further came through *Do·renggo Wa·dachong* and *Jasatram Samperam* on the south eastern side of Garo Hills.

Intriguing past, turbulent present and uncertain future

As mentioned before the history of the Garos is very vague and intriguing; especially the intervening period after their occupation of the Garo Hills lands till they were subjugated by the British towards the end of nineteenth century. Their presence in the hill tracts of Garo Hills were very little known as only their frequent forays into the plains

for head collecting as trophies were mentioned in the records.

Tradition of head hunting and decapitation: -The Garos had a long tradition of head hunting for trophies. In the olden days until the young man had taken a head, he was not considered a man. In those days man killing was considered noble and a sign of maturity and adulthood. So, in order to secure a place in the society as a warrior it was mandatory for a young man to get at least one head to his credit. Girls would clamour for the attention of the young man who had proved himself brave and courageous and displayed human skulls as trophies. So, to a certain extent head hunting could have been prompted by the social demands as well as the man's need to prove his manhood.

During *Wangala* and other social and religious ceremonies, the priest or *kamal* always yell out self-praising eulogies.

Ka Challang, Ka Sangma, Ka Goera

Ama raka; Apa raka;

Atchu raka; ambi raka;

Mama raka; ada raka,

Angjong raka, gri raka

Ka Challang,

(Ka sangma, Ka Marak),

Ka Goera!

Dewansing Rongmuthu Sangma who wrote the **Dances of the Garos** in 1996, translated it like this:

Ka Challang, ka Sangma, ka Marak, ka Goera;
Strong is my mother; strong is my father;
Strong are my grandmothers, strong are my grandfathers;
Strong are my maternal uncles,
Strong are my elder brothers;
Strong are my nephews,
Strong are my chras (male relatives)
Brave one am I;
Ka Sangma, ka Marak, ka Goera

This sounds like a meaningless mumbo-jumbo, in fact it is for those who do not understand the depth of the belief of the Garos in their *mite* deities. It is in actuality an act of invocation to the gods. In the excerpt above the *kamal* priest was telling the chief deity *Tatara Rabuga* that he and all the male relatives in his family circle and even his mother and grandmother are strong and deserve favours from the *Patigipa Ra-rongipa*, one who bless. They consider it imperative that the *kamal* should advocate his own strong points; his bravery and courage in times of danger and necessity to the chief deity and his sub-ordinate deities so that they would never hesitate to bless and give bountiful harvest. The idea behind is that; it was commonly acknowledged that the gods, or *mites* appreciate and respect only those who are strong and brave; and those who strictly adheres to the social customary laws. They expect every human seeking their blessings to be clean in body and soul, have clean habits, ethics and maintain high moral standards and principles. Anyone who came short of the expectations

of the spirits could not aspire to be great and expect to get blessing.

According to some discerning observers and learned scholars shouting out such eulogies would deter the malignant spirits from unleashing any epidemic or calamity on the society. The malignant spirits were in the habit of hitting back at humans for the slightest mistake or displeasure caused to them, especially if the person was physically weak and vulnerable. They would not dare to touch the person who is physically strong, brave and courageous. The humans acknowledge the superiority of the spirits power, they are aware that on their own they would not be able to fight back the superior powers but by shouting eulogies claiming to be strong, brave and courageous letting the people know that not only the man doing *grika* but all his male *chra* members are strong, the spirits would be deterred from doing any harm.

Therefore, claiming themselves to be brave and strong they never lost an opportunity to blow their own trumpet and if the opportunity presents itself never hesitate to take the head of the enemy especially after arguments and fights with the *rori* or non-tribal traders in market places; that gave them perfect justifications for decapitating their enemy. In latter days scholars attributed their head-hunting forays as revenge for the injustice meted out to them by the cunning *rori* traders of the plains who looked down upon them as illiterate, uncultured savages and blatantly cheated them of their profits in their barter. Well, from whichever way we may look at it, it still amounts to barbaric savagery at its peak.

However, it seems that this barbaric act of head decapitation was not confined to primitive uncultured Garos

only. Most of the ethnic groups of the North East, like the Khasis, the Jaintias, the Nagas, the Lushais and Maras too practised head hunting and head decapitation as socio-religious acts rather than to prove one's prowess and machismo. It was also the customary primitive practice of cremating the dead bodies along with one or two persons to accompany the dead man's soul to serve him in the other world that necessitated the killing of non-indigenous persons for accompaniment. So, it was not only the ethnic tribes of the north eastern residents of India but other societies too practised that gruesome culture, in the long gone past.

The head hunting among the ethnic groups of the North Eastern India came to a virtual stop only after majority of them embraced Christianity. This effected a wide-ranging change from ethnicity and opened up new avenues for them into civilization. The ethnic tribes of the North-East including the Garos in general experienced this type of extreme make over only after they got converted to Christianity which in turn opened up doors for basic education.

After the British Government took complete control over the administration of Garo Hills, during the tenure of Captain Williamson as Deputy Commissioner of Garo Hills; he ordered all the preserved heads brought outside into the open and burned them in an open bon fire. Reluctantly the Garos gave up their most precious prized possessions. Thereafter strict action was taken on anyone killing another for the sake of getting a head for trophy; this way the savage community was brought under some semblance of control. The first two converts to Christianity *Omed* and *Ramke*; uncle and nephew duo worked tirelessly to spread the good news

of salvation and powerfully urged their fellowmen to abandon their wild existence and fully embrace the love and free gift of salvation through the simple act of belief and acceptance of the Lord Jesus Christ, the true son of God. Side by side the spread of Christianity, education too played a vital role in taming the wild nature of the Garos. Looking around ourselves now, who would have thought that we are the direct descendants of those wild savage barbarians? What a wonderful metamorphosis, that was; from darkness and total illiteracy to advancement in science and technology. The present-day youngsters can now hold their heads high in absolute pride; they are no longer behind other literate, cultured youths of the more developed countries.

At the present the Garos seems to be at the peak of their existence; but what holds for their future nobody knows. The way the once virgin fertile lands had been ravaged beyond possible salvage; the turbulent socio-political scenario speaks volumes of its impending doom. Looking round one is saddened to realize how much the land and its abundant resources had been over exploited to the point that the once perennial brooks, streams and streamlets are gradually drying up. The dense forests had been stripped to bare grounds as a result of which, exotic flora and fauna endemic to the land are now in the endangered and near extinct category. Not only the land but the old age tradition and culture too have been invaded and swamped over. The once vibrant Garo culture is slowly dying due to the impact and certain negative influence of foreign culture. Similarly, the land had been ravaged to the point of utter destruction owing to the insatiable greedy nature of man. Now, the question is, when worse comes to worst as it eventually will, where will the Garos go? At the time of taking over the

territory the ancestors full of joy and gratitude promised their chief deity *Tatara Rabuga* that they would take good care of the land but within a span of less than a millennium, the careless, reckless descendants have not only stripped all the good top soil but ravaged the land beyond repair; all the promises of the ancient forefathers thrown to the wind. What a shame!

Advent of Christianity and its impact

After nearly one hundred and fifty years from the time they were subdued by the British monarchy, they have become one upcoming tribe all thanks to American Missionaries who ventured into the primitive, uncultured realm of the savage ethnic tribes. Against all odds they untiringly undertook the onerous task of promoting not only the message of love, peace and salvation but also ushered in the new era of learning. Some years later the Roman Catholic Mission also made their venture into Garo Hills. Very soon within a span of few decades they have established religious foundations side by side opening schools in some of the most remote areas of the jungle land where formerly man or angels feared to tread. In fact, if we consider all facts and factors, the Garos largely owe their huge debt to the Catholic Missionaries for being the true pioneers of not only Catholicism but also good education in Garo Hills. If not for them rural kids would not have access to even basic education in many inaccessible areas. The much-needed enlightenment through the teachings of Christianity in the last quarter of 19th century closely followed by spread of education; the Garos are no longer savage but most importantly transformed and transitioned at par with many other tribes of India if not better. And yet, the conversion

was not without its severe setbacks. When they embraced Christianity they totally and absolutely embraced the new concept of religion and turned away from their indigenous religion and their old traditional practices, to the extent of destroying all of their valuable gongs, precious ornaments considering them all heathen. The conversion from paganism to Christianity worked wonders among the savages for they gave up everything barbaric. Their savage nature was tamed to such an extent that the present day Garos became, submissive, timid and very obliging to foreign authority to the point of obsequiousness. But their exit from the primitive pagan life was not entirely without flaws. They have now discarded most of their pagan nature including many of the good age-old customs and socio-cultural practices. They began to worship the foreign culture as they worshipped God. The primitive pagans began to look up to them and sought inspiration in everything they did. First, they gave up their traditional social culture and practices and then they started discarding their costume and precious ornaments, their valuable possessions like gongs and other materials of great values. They simply threw them away or sold gongs and ornaments at throw away prices and some of them exchanged for just a few kilos of rice or sugar. Because of this very reason amongst all the tribes of the North East Region the Garos shamefully no longer possess any original jewellerys and ornaments of their own. What they have adopted are cheap brass and copper knick knacks not worth anything at all. The Garo ancestors were rich, indeed very rich; that their precious *ripok do·katchi*, *rikgitchak*, *rikgitok*, *kamaka*, *kadesil*, *pilne*, *narikki*, *naderong*, *natapsi*, *seng·ki* and the like were made of gold or silver and ivory and richly ornamented with precious and semi-precious stones and jewels; the ceremonial garments too were richly embellished

with ivory and jewels. Sadly, they are no more; for early Christians had discarded them all terming them pagan possessions. From a tribe with a rich heritage the Garos were reduced to almost pauper stage. They were nearly completely stripped off of their rich cultural heritage. Look at other Christian states; the Khasis and the Jaintias, the Nagas and the Mizos, they still maintain their own costumes, their vibrant richly diverse cultural heritage. They continue to possess their original traditional ornaments and proudly exhibit them. They too gave up their old indigenous religion and embraced Christianity but they did not give up their costume and culture. What made the Garos go to the extreme end to make themselves invisible as a tribal community? Was it their conscience or was it imposed upon them? Well, we may never know but the end results are sadly no longer reversible now. It would do well for the present-day youngsters to realize the importance of keeping their identity intact. It is the language, the dialect to be more precise and the rich traditional cultural heritage that sets us apart from other indigenous tribes. If they are to survive as a community, they should understand that without their culture they are being pushed to the brink of extinction. They are already pushed to the corner and are slowly losing their identity; at this rate it may come sooner than we anticipate. Unless the people take pride in their own culture and work hard to protect, preserve and promote them, their existence and identity is at great risk.

The Promised Land

When Garu *Mandais* finally occupied the vast virgin forests of Garo hills they were at first overwhelmed by its fertility and richness. They carefully scanned the vast land

in front of them and were so overjoyed that filled with overwhelming gratitude they bowed down low before the unseen deity and took their pledge by touching their lips to the ground, symbolic of great reverence to the mother earth. This has been misinterpreted to the extent that many scholars argue that the Garu *mandai* ancestors actually bite the earth and hence the conundrum *A·chik*, or *those who bite the earth* stuck. On the other hand, it could have been the symbolic kissing of the soil, not actual bite with their teeth. There they expressed their great happiness and gratitude to the chief deity and vowed to defend and take good care of the land. From the pledge they made to their supreme god *Tatara Rabuga*, by kissing the earth, they came to be known as *A·chiks*, those Hill men who swear by biting the earth. Many writers and scholars came to this inevitable conclusion because the Garo swearing is often a long winding rhetoric, clearly reflecting their reverence to the mother earth and all that is there on. Prof. P. C. Kar in **Glimpses of the Garos** gave reproductions of some of the detailed accounts the British Officers and Administrations recorded in their accounts. The author explained how the Garo oath taking was a long winding rhetoric consisting of, first, of a declaration of truth of the coming statement and then of calling down upon the speaker of all the worst evils that can be imagined, should he speak falsely. He further elucidated that an oath was taken on the biting of a tiger's tooth or in the name of *Goera* the god of lightning. Sometimes they swear by touching the head of their children or by taking the clump of earth in their hands. Some British Officers like John Eliot 1792; Rev. William Carey 1919; Rev. W. Ayerest 1880; Major A. Playfair 1975; made similar records of different versions of oath. The more common version of the oath was

calling upon the celestial gods in heaven to be a witness and often run as follows:

Saljong dokchina, matcha chikchina, mongma dokchina, jak matchina. The ad verbatim translation of this oath would be; “May *Saljong* (the sun god) strike me, let the tiger kill me or the elephant attack me (if I do not speak the truth).

Rev William Carey also in his *Garo Jungle Book* said that *the ceremony of oath taking was very solemn. They lift their hands to heaven and bow down their heads to a stone and looking steadfastly toward the hill, give their evidence.*

He further added that at one time one official when he first saw and heard the swearing, he was so affected by the awe and reverence with which the man swore that he forgot to write down what was sworn. This was in essence because the ancient forefathers had implicit mutual trust and reverence to nature and all that it represents. Everything on this earth is ruled by someone and something and humans are bound to respect and revere them.

This had been in the past wildly exaggerated or misinterpreted by many writers who had only a limited source of information. In actual essence such oath taking offering himself as bait or calling upon the wild and ferocious animals of land and water to take his life actually signifies their implicit trust in the spirits to not allow them to attack an innocent man. Even till today, it is not uncommon to hear a Garo swearing by the gods and animals when wrongly accused of something nasty. This stems from the staunch belief that unless a person is guilty of wrongdoing no animal or reptile would ordinarily attack. They strongly believe and trust in their spirit deities or *mites* to protect them from harm and injury; they also fully trust

the animal instincts not to harm or maim the innocent. Their implicit faiths were that unless a man was guilty of some wrongdoing and falsely testify no harm could come to him for, he was under the protection of the spirits. They hold the Mother Nature or earth in great reverence. They would never cut down the tree or break the stone or even erect their own living quarters without first paying obeisance and invoking the powers that be.

Dr. Sujata Miri, Prof N.E.H.U in her discourse in the seminar on the **Dynamics of Identity and Intergroup Relations in North East India** in November 1996 passionately observed how the tribal people hold Mother Nature or earth in great reverence. She seemed to have a vast knowledge and understanding about the tribal culture and their practices. Her version of the tribals' reverence to Mother Nature was fully corroborated by Prof P. C. Kar of Tura Gov't College who summed up their primitive beliefs as:

"Although the Garos do not have any well-defined concept of God, sin, heaven and hell; they have their own ideas of the real and supernatural worlds united together through the operations of the principles of peaceful co-existence and reciprocity among the mande, mite and me mang (living beings, god or spirit and spirit of the dead respectively)

As pointed out above unless there is total reciprocity of the local guardians of the world or the local deities who work according to the orders and directions of the chief deity the *Patigipa Ra·rongipa Tatara Rabuga* there can be no total harmonious co-existence; rather there will be total chaos and discord. Hence, their power and assistance have to be sought for at every stage of their lives.

Chapter II

The customary traditional practices

Cultivation practices:

Garos being agrarian by nature most of their rites and rituals revolve round their cultivation activities. From the time of *o-pata and jumang nia* which means first clearing of the jungle for the jhum and reading omen through dreams till the harvest of the paddy is done it is a series of rituals at every stage of cultivation culminating in the most important post-harvest thanks giving ceremony called *Wangala*. There are nearly one dozen rituals to be strictly followed at every stage. In the meantime, all jhumias are expected to observe strict adherence to the rules and were not allowed to eat or sell any of the products, before first making the offering of the preferred choices of their produce for the *Misi Saljong*, the god of Agriculture and Farming.

According to Shri Mihir N. Sangma, an eminent writer himself; published *Maniani Bidik* in 1982 wherein he listed seven main rituals that are generally performed in connection with agricultural activities. They are:

- i. *O-pata and jumang nia*
- ii. *Den-bilsia ba wa-cheng rama*
- iii. *A-galmaka*
- iv. *A-krita ba me-jak sim-a*
- v. *Ahaia ba Rongchu gala*

- vi. *Megap ra·ona ba jamegapa*
- vii. *Wangala ba dru wanbola.*

O·pata:- This is the first ritual of the cultivation. It is in essence the driving out of the unfavourable spirits from the site so that bountiful harvest can be assured. From the very beginning of the creation of the world, *Tatara Rabuga Ranagama*, the supreme creator, had assigned duty to all the sub-ordinate gods and goddesses. *Abetpa Renggepa*, the patriarch deity of all sorts of sickness and pestilences was assigned the responsibility of taking good care of the land and water resources. Hence it is believed that the patriarch deity of land and water resides everywhere be it thick copse of bushes or the source of perennial stream and rivers or big boulders. Therefore, before cutting the jungle for the jhum, they consider it necessary to find out if it is by chance the abode of the deity; if that be so; it was imperative to make him move to another place or get his permission for cultivation. The *songsarek* Garos hold all deities with much reverence that it is absolutely imperative not to cross lines with him lest some calamity befalls.

By November/ December when the monsoon has passed it is time for the village chief *nokma* to decide which particular side of the *a·king land* they would choose to cultivate in the next year. Normally seven years gap was practised before but nowadays, due to shortage of land they re-cultivate even before seven years had elapsed from the last cultivation. Every family is allotted a plot preferably the same plot he had cultivated years before, but if he prefers to get another plot, the *nokma* has to agree to it. If there is any other person from outside willing to cultivate, he is allowed to do so but on payment of *awil* or non-resident or an outsider fee. On the day fixed for clearing, every family cuts

a small patch from his plot, calling out to *Abet Rengge*, the spirit of sickness and pestilences to leave the plot free for his cultivation. He then keeps tufts of cut grass and twigs at the tree trunks or between small bush branches indicating that the plot is already claimed. This action is called *samsepa*. The basic idea behind this is to show that the plot is already claimed. After that they go home and do not work for the rest of the day observing *salnima*. If that night he has a favourable dream like grains of sands or clear water streams or catching fish or any other favourable dream, it is interpreted as a good omen and clearing of the whole plot follows. If however, the dream is not favourable the plot will be abandoned and the *nokma* has to give him other plot. This determination of the viability of the site or otherwise is called *jumang pe'a*; or omen through dreams. *Jumang pe'a* after *o·pata* is necessitated by the belief that in case *Abet Rengge*, the patriarch deity of diseases and pestilences is residing anywhere in or near the plot he should be allowed to shift his dwelling to another place. This particular spirit likes to dwell in thick dense copses or the source of the springs; for if by chance he was not given any prior notice, some calamity might befall they believe.

This ritual of *o·pata* and *jumangsia* is adopted not only for the purpose of jhumming but also, to establish new village when they decide to abandon the old habitat and set up new village or to construct a new house. This is done to ensure that no spirits dwelling therein are not encroached upon and inadvertently cause them to get annoyed or provoked.

***Den·bilsia*:** this ritual is observed after the entire plot of the proposed cultivation area has been cleared. After clearing the jungle, the area is allowed to dry naturally;

before burning it to ashes. This period is called *wa·cheng rama* or *wa·cheng balrroa*. This is the time when preparations are made to invite the *Minima Rokkime* the mother goddess of agriculture to their jhum, so that she would be pleased to come and reside in their jhum and bless the cultivation bountifully. For this, the whole village and its surroundings and the jungle path from the village to their jhumming area needs to be cleared, overhanging branches of the trees have to be cut and the uneven bad patches of the path made clean and levelled. This ritual is necessitated in the belief that *Patigipa Ra·rongipa Misi Saljong* and *Minima Rokkime* will not be happy to bless them unless cleanliness is maintained in the village and the cultivation area including the path that leads to it. This is in the belief that when the village and the surroundings and the footpaths are clean the *Patigipa Ra·rongipa Misi Saljong* and *Mini Rokkimema* will be pleased with their cleanliness and bless them abundantly. Then they make blood offering by sacrificing a dog at the entrance to the village and the whole village take part in this ceremony.

A·galmaka:- This ritual is connected with the start of sowing season and is observed on the very next day after burning the jhum. The *wa·cheng* or the dried patch is usually burnt on the last week of March or beginning of April. According to the forefathers when the green cicadas called *jong·tiket* comes out of their hibernation and start singing that indicates the time to start sowing. The next day after burning the cleared patch the jhumias are required to make blood sacrifices of either a fowl or a dog in their respective jhums to invoke the guardian deities to come and bless. For this ceremony each jhumia select the best patch of their jhum near which they would later on build their jhum huts called *jamadal*. The place where blood sacrifice was made is sacred

to the deities and is called *kimindam*. Blood and the feather and hairs of the sacrificed animal are smeared on the sacred post at the same time offering of the rice beer to the deities are done. On the day of *a·galmaka* only millet seeds are sown along the boundary. Clearing of the half-burnt twigs are done from the next day and sowing or planting of seeds follow. The whole village burn their jhum plots at the same time; hence this ritual is observed in the same morning by the whole village but separately in their own respective individual plots.

A·krita ba me·jak sim·a:- This particular ceremony is observed to invoke the deities for their protection from marauding animals and any kind of pestilence that may befall on their crops. This particular divination to the gods is usually done in the month of May before the first weeding is undertaken. The first round of weeding is called *a·jakra gama* and the second-round weeding is called *bamil gama*. Sometimes, if the weeds growing among the crops are dense, they may go for third round of clearing. The ceremony is observed at the main pathway leading to their respective jhums. The *kamal*/priest gets everything ready at the path junction while in the meantime every jhumia goes round his jhum driving out the spirits of sickness and pestilences; propelling them towards the main pathway where preparations for divination is prepared. They pluck some leaves from their respective jhum, symbolic of catching the evil spirits and put them in the basket; which will be destroyed by the *kamal* and left hanging on a branch. This way they believe that the *marang sta* or the evil is driven to the same place where they would be properly destroyed.

Ahaia ba Rongchugala:- This ceremony is performed when the paddy is almost ripened. The unripe grains of rice

are collected and pounded into flattened rice and offered to the gods and goddesses associated with cultivation. The legend says that long ago, when the earth was just created and the people began inhabiting, they survived on fruits and roots. One day *Misi Saljong A·ni Apilpa Chini Galapa* was making his round checking on all creatures and their works, he came across a man of his namesake. Seeing that the earthling was eating raw yams he took pity and promised to give him seeds for his cultivation on condition that when the seeds ripened and harvested a portion of his produce should be offered to him in honour and thanksgiving. In keeping with his promise to the *Patigipa Ra·rongipa* and in return for his kindnesses this is the first thanksgiving offering made to the deities. This ritual is strictly imposed for before offering a portion of their products nobody is allowed to pluck or eat any of their products. Before the *Rongchu* gala ceremony *Ahaia* which is a form of yodelling is taboo and is strictly forbidden but this ceremony opens up the chance for happy yodelling and partaking of all fruit products of jhum

Megap ra·ona ba jamegapa:- After the harvest of the main crop which is paddy, some portion is kept aside for the next year's cultivation. For that a few of the best rice plants are pulled out from their roots and tied up in a bundle. This ritual is essentially inviting the *Minima Kiri Rokkime* to leave and follow them and stay in their house and village. At the time of bringing in the sheaves they burn the incense and slowly come from their jhum to the village carrying the sheaves at the same time inviting the mother deity of rice to follow him to the village and continue to shower blessings on them.

Wangala ba Dru Wanbola:-This is the biggest and the most important ceremony connected with jhumming. This is

the ultimate thanksgiving ceremony for the past and inviting the deities to come again the next year. When the paddy harvest is completed and brought home calling the *Minima Rokkime* to follow them from their jhum to their village granary; it is time to prepare themselves for the biggest ceremony and festival of the year. Big jars upon jars called *dikka* or the vat for rice beer are prepared by all households according to each one's capacity. The whole village and all its surroundings, the pathways are repaired and made clean and new clothes and ornaments are purchased in preparation for this once in a year festival. The Garos believe that *Patigipa Ra·rongipa Misi Saljong* comes round only once a year to bless them; so, this post-harvest festival is basically to offer their thanks and gratitude for the bounty and plead with him to come round next season and bless them again. Therefore, the festivities go on for at least one week or as long as the brewed rice beer lasts.

However, the first *wangala* ceremony was performed by *Drongma Me·enma Sangkni* and not the jhumias; when she realized that despite her huge frame of physique and her strength there is someone bigger and greater who deserves all honour and praise. All living beings be they big or small creatures of the earth they attended the first *wanbola* ceremony. Owing to some indisposition the humans could not make it to the festival and had to learn from other animals later on who willingly demonstrated what they saw and learnt. The humans were so impressed by the graphic demonstrations that they simulated all dance moves and replicated all details of the ceremony.

Wangala festival is usually celebrated in October or November when harvest of the paddy is completed and goes on for at least one week. It is not celebrated on the same day,

each village set different days depending on the completion of their preparations. The day before the *wangala* is *salnima* or holy to the *mites*, the *nokma* himself will catch some crabs to give send-off offering to the gods and observe the day as the day of rest. No one does any work on that day of *salnima*.

The ceremony starts in the *nokma*'s house with *rugala*, or offering of rice beer to *Misima Rokkimema*. Only when the ritual of rice beer offering to the gods is completed, then only the public can partake of the beer. The young girls draw out beer from the *dikka* or big earthen vats with *pong*, the long-handled gourd and start pouring out the beer down each person's throat. This marks the beginning of the festival and the village comes alive with the reverberating sounds of drum beats and gongs. The next day of the festival start with *cha·chat so·a* or incense burning. The *nokma* scatters the cooked rice all over the floor, (virtually representing the hail stones during the rain storm) all the time invoking to the gods of rain and hail storms to send rain and hail stones in the next season also. This ritual is called *mirim goa*. The idea behind is that just as rain is, hail stones are also important for the crops. Then he burns the raw incense lumps to please the gods with its invigorating fragrance; to the accompaniment of drum beats and gongs. When the *nokma* finishes the *cha·chat so·a* ceremony in his house, it is the turn of his son in law to follow suit. Both these rituals are observed inside the house but thereafter they take out all drums, gongs and other musical instruments outside and celebrations and merry making starts which may last for a week or more as long as the rice beer lasts.

In addition to the above rites and rituals Shri A. C. Momin in his booklet *A·chikni Ku·andik* published in 1984

mentioned at least three more rituals which are incorporated here. They are:-

Attepong su·gala meaning cleaning of all cutting implements: - This is one of the few rituals often overlooked by many considering them less important since the ritual does not involve the entire community performance. Well, they may seem trivial but nevertheless an important ritual. This ritual is observed right after the clearing of the plot is completed. During the clearing time all cutting implements that were used for jungle clearing are never brought inside the house lest it brings in contamination to the house. They are all kept outside in the *balim* (veranda). It is strongly believed that while clearing some insects and worms might have been harmed or killed accidentally that would bring upon the curse; therefore, it is absolutely necessary to cleanse them with rice beer for if they are not cleansed *Kiri Rokkime* would not be pleased to enter the house and bless.

A·ba jamadal nokdonggaa or inaugural ritual for occupation: -

In the earlier days it was mandatory for every able-bodied man and women to shift their dwelling to the jhums until the harvest was done. The old and infirmed and smaller children who are yet to reach the age of working in the jhum were left in the village to take care of their domesticated animals like pigs and cattle. As the sowing and planting of seeds are going on, side by side men folks get busy setting up the *a·ba jamadal* or temporary jhum huts. Before formally shifting to the huts each jhumia has to perform individual ceremony by pouring out wine as a cleansing ritual at the place and scattering rice grains so that evil spirits *katchi rangsi* and *nawang skal* will not dare to create havoc. After that inaugural ceremony only they occupy the huts.

Gitchipong a·siroka ba chiga roa meaning cleaning the weeding implements: - this ceremony is somewhat similar to *attepong su·gala* except for the fact that this particular ritual is observed before the first round of weeding. The hoes which are to be used for weeding are cleansed with rice beer to get rid of its dirt and curses. If no cleaning ritual is performed and the weeding is done with unsanctified by rice beer implements *Kiri rokime* would not be pleased and refuse to stay with the family and bless them.

Bo·rang

The tradition of *bo·rang rika* or making small shack on trees had evolved from time immemorial or at least since the time they came to the present land. *Bo·rang* is essentially a small shack built on tree tops to watch over the jhum from marauding animals and is actually a night vigil watch hut. Somehow due to limited source of information many visitors who are fascinated or impressed by those small untidy *bo·rangs* on the trees misunderstood and misinterpreted it as the primitive way of locals living on trees but this is totally out of context. The truth is those small shacks are meant as temporary shelters for men to sleep during night vigil while watching over their crops especially during harvest time to scare away any marauding animals. In earlier days Garo Hills region was so densely forested that the jungles were teeming with wild ferocious predators that prowl at night. Since their cultivation areas are far from the village it became necessary to make temporary shacks to stay at night in comfort and safety from wild animals. Therefore, in order to protect themselves from those wild beasts as well as to have a wider panoramic watch view of their cultivation areas

bo-rangs or little tree huts were constructed high up on the trees out of the reach of ferocious animals.

Nokpante: The Garos from time immemorial exerted strict code of ethics and morality among the youngsters. The young males of the village once they reach puberty or have crossed eleven or twelve years are not allowed to mingle freely with the girls. They are required to sleep in the *nokpante* where they practically grow up under the tutelage of their older inmates. The youngsters in the dormitory are required to maintain a strict code of conduct. Once they start sleeping in the *nokpante* they rarely enter the main house where his parents and female siblings sleep unless required to do so by the exigencies of certain matters. The *nokpantes* serve as the learning institution for the growing adolescent boys. It also serves as the meeting ground for important decisions. In days gone by too when *Nokma Bonepa* called a meeting to decide on the system of inheritance he held the meeting in the courtyard of the *nokpante*

The older inmates of the *nokpante* impart all kinds of lessons from the art of constructing the house to the making of musical instruments, in the art of games and sports. Daily meals are provided for by the individual family by keeping the packed food in a *kok* or basket receptacle kept hanging on the wall meant for that purpose. Each family will have their own separate *kok* for this purpose. Once the boys start living in the *nokpante*, he rarely enters the main house except on certain emergencies.

Earlier it was customary for youngsters of every village to have their own *nokpante*. In some villages they may even have two or even three *nokpantes* maintained separately by respective clan boys especially if the village is big. Among the village *nokpantes* *Emangre Nokpante* was once very

famous for its magnificent decors. It was imperative for the youngsters to have a healthy competition amongst other clans or villages, hence each clan boys would literally compete with others to construct the most eye-catching handicrafts. People living in the south eastern areas are renowned for their skill in craftsmanship; weaving and handicrafts. It was no wonder therefore for the youngsters of that region to decorate their dormitory in such fashion that it evoked worldwide interest in their craftsmanship. The exquisite carvings on the pillars, the beams and the rafters were sculpted from individual single dressed timbers. The rafters, the beams and pillars are all carved and sculptured into various forms from one single timber. Usually the figures of tigers, the leopards, the mermaids, the hornbills, pythons and humans are more commonly sculptured. The step ladder is also carved from one block of timber depicting a mermaid or a python. Such wood carvings representing the traditional designs called *do·kaku*.

Entry for girls into the *nokpante* is strictly forbidden. This code of ethics is equally imposed on visitors and outsiders too. If anyone trespasses through ignorance or out of curiosity, she is liable to be fined very heavily. Sometime in late 1988 some visiting girls from outside fascinated by the exquisite sculpture and out of sheer curiosity climbed up the ladder to see the inside of the forbidden sanctum sanctorum of Emangre *Nokpante*. Immediately there was a big hue and cry in the village as the taboo had just been violated. The unsuspecting girls were taken aback as they were surrounded by angry villagers for breaking the strict social code. They were made to pay for a big jar of rice beer and a live pig costing several thousands of rupees for cleansing rituals. They were not allowed to leave the premises until the

heavy fine was paid in full and the *nokpante* cleansed of the curse from the inadvertent breach of social code.

Kima:- Anyone visiting the *Songsarek* or Non-Christian villages will find blocks of wood crudely carved in the human form erected in front of the houses. Well, they are memorial mortuary totems erected in memory of the dear members departed. Such mortuary totems are known as *kima songa*. Soon after a person died usually before or soon after the funeral rites have been conducted the *kimas* are erected. Often, they are dressed in the old clothes and ornaments of the deceased that from afar it can easily be mistaken for a person standing in front of the house. The number of *kimas* erected in the front yard represents the number of the dead people from that particular household. In the days gone by those mortuary totem poles could be seen in front of every village house. It has become a dying tradition by now since the Christians no longer follow this tradition. *Kimas* can only be found now only in the interior villages where they had not embraced Christianity and staunchly still follow the traditional indigenous religion.

Religious practices

Traditionally the *Garu Mandais* were animists; they believe in the presence of gods and goddesses that directly or indirectly influence the nature and lives of men. They are given the generic common name as *mite*. *Mite* in Garo dialect represents a wide-ranging connotation; it could mean an unseen spirit; the idols, the gods and goddesses or local deities and sometimes if they find something inexplicable, they refer to it as *mite*; hence *mite* could mean any invisible super natural being, not excluding the demons.

They believe that there is one supreme all-encompassing god whom they called *Tatara Rabuga*, who is also known by a host of different names like: -

*Tatara Rabuga, Rabugama Ranagama, Bisikrom Bidatare,
Stura Pantura, Dakgipa Rugipa, Korabok Korapin,
Maresu Marebok, Jipjini Jipjana, Ba.anggipa Imbanggipa,
Janggini Nokgipa, Jamani Biambi, Pattigipa Ra.rongipa,
Suulgipa, Imbanggipa, Chijanggiko Ripinggipa,*

Chichriko Rakkigipa and many more; are according to the stage of ever continuing creations. The nomenclatures attributed above describe the qualities of *Tatara Rabuga* as the all-encompassing god; the supreme primeval creator, nurturer and the sole custodian of life; the absolute source and preserver of the water of life; the dispenser of blessing etc.

According to the Garo belief there are countless numbers of *mites*, assisting *Tatara Rabuga* in maintaining order in the universe according to the set of rules as ordered by the supreme god. Each *mite* is put in charge of one or more activities, directly working under the order and control of the supreme god. At one time three friends wanted to find out exactly how many *mites* are there; so, they started collecting the names of all kinds of *mites* and came up with an astounding three hundred plus names. It is primordial belief that human existence in this world hugely depends on the mutual understanding and reciprocity between man and the spirits to avoid utter chaos. For this very reason the *Garu Mandai* ancestors were in awe of those *mites*, and took great care not to offend or provoke them to anger in any manner. They always first sought the guidance from their chief deity

Tatara Rabuga and would never venture out on any undertaking without first seeking his blessing lest they fall into calamity. They consulted him for every detail, every problem and made an all-out effort to please him in every way humanly possible. When we consider the way the *songsarek* Garos uphold their virtues and observe all social and religious codes very strictly; it is truly commendable.

It is therefore not surprising at all that they hold everything sacred for they believe that the *mites* exist everywhere and anywhere; be it a small grove of forest, a big tree or huge rock and rocky cliffs, hills or streams especially the source of water springs; all of them are the potential abode of the *mites*.

Social practices

Matrilineal system of inheritance: - The unique system of lineage and inheritance by the daughters as adopted by the Garos had evoked a lot of interest among the scholars and academicians, some even thought that in Meghalaya the ladies rule the roost; which is not true. Unlike other fellow ethnic groups of the North East India; the Garos take a different approach to lineage and inheritance. Their birth rights and lineage are considered through their mother, that is, they take the mother's surname and the parental or ancestral landed property is passed on to the daughter; preferably the youngest one in most cases but the parents can have their choice. Whether it is the eldest or the youngest, the daughter who stays with the parents and look after them in their old age are the *nokna* and *nokkrom* or inheritors.

The practice of this system is further strengthened by the unique systems of *a·kim* and *on·songa*; a very unique, complex and very complicated practice aimed at ensuring perpetual continuity of relation between two clans at all costs. Marriage is strictly exogamous; it is considered a great social sacrilege or taboo to marry within the same clan or cognate defying which may invite extreme social action against the couple to the point of social ostracism or exile from the society. Nevertheless, no such thing as honour killing is ever practiced.

A·kim and on·songa system: -Another peculiar unique custom is the system of lineage through *a·kim songa* or the pledge of bondage; the system by which two families remain forever indebted to each other. Apparently, this was not the age-old tradition they followed from the beginning but adopted much later on after their settlement in the Garo Hills region to rectify or ameliorate certain social issues. It appears that in the very beginning they too followed the same patriarchal/patrilineal system like the rest of the world. However, during the course of their migration from Tibet, on many occasions they had to fight their way through, many of their brave warriors lost their lives leaving their young wives and children on the mercy of the society. If the widow remarried it posed the problem of continuity of the lineage of the father should the new spouse belong to another *chatchi mahari* or clan. This created a great social lacuna when from one family; there were offspring that belong to two different clans. So, in order to solve this irritating social ill, one day the clan leaders assembled in the courtyard of the *Nokma Bonepa's Nokpante* and reached an unanimous decision that from that day onwards they would adopt a different strategy; by which the daughter should

inherit the parental property and the lineage would be considered from the mother's side. That was how the matrilineal system of inheritance evolved and is still prevalent till today.

Secondly, in order to secure perpetual lineage and allegiance to one another and in order to maintain the permanent continuity of the lineage they took the resolution that the person chosen by the parents to be the heiress or *nokna* should marry the father's own nephew, who by virtue of being a blood relation is expected to have closer affinity and loyalty to his uncle father-in-law. That way he becomes the *nokkrom* and literally runs the family affairs on his uncle father in law's behalf. It was from that time only that the Garos strictly adhered to the *a·kim* system by which in the event of death of one spouse the surviving spouse is given another person from within the *a·kim* as the succeeding spouse. Naturally in the long run this system inevitably evolved into another peculiar system called the *on·songa*. As discussed above, when one spouse dies, the *chra maharis* or the relatives of the deceased are duty bound to find a suitable mate for the survivor. On no account the surviving spouse is allowed to marry outside the *a·kim*; it has to be someone within the clan circle from the deceased side, and arranged for by the *chra maharis* of the deceased. Many had misunderstood this concept; especially in the courts of law where the Learned Advocates themselves advocated them as substitute wife or husband. This is pure misconception for the remarriage of the widow or the widower into the deceased spouse clan is not a substitute spouse but arranged for by the deceased relatives to succeed or continue the lineage. It is not substitute in all its essence but a succeeding one to the deceased's position in the society. Therefore, you

will find that in many cases a much younger stepmother is instantly elevated to a higher social ranking and wield superior social power than the much older relatives.

In some stray cases if the surviving spouse refuses to accept the arrangement, *a·kim* bondage can be annulled by mutual agreement after payment of certain fees; or if by chance for some personal reasons the surviving spouse wants to remarry outside the *a·kim*; he or she will have to pay a certain amount of *dai* or fine to the deceased person's clan to get absolved of all liabilities and be free from that bondage. This peculiar *on·songa* system is not without its serious flaws. The surviving spouse is expected to remarry within the *a·kim*; but he or she cannot simply pick any from the deceased clan. On many occasions the young girls, especially the younger sisters are coerced into marriage with the brother in law. In such matters the willingness of the girl is never considered important; what is important to the society is that the *a·kim* should continue at all costs. There were many incidences when the daughter was given along with the elderly wife as the second wife when the surviving wife is far advanced in age and the new groom is much younger. Such a system is called *on·chapa* or *dokchapa*. However, this practice is slowly dying which is a good thing. Otherwise, it was not uncommon to see an old aged senile with the young wife, young enough to be his granddaughter or an old woman with the young male.

Salgrua ba wachi tata: - If in a certain year the rain has been delayed longer than usual, the *kamal* or priest performs this ceremony to plead to the rain god/ goddess called *ai rokrak wachi tottak* to send rain fast. This is owing to the belief that the rain god must have been angry or displeased for some reason and delaying the onset of rains. In almost all the

village there is a place or a big rock where this *wachi tata* ritual is performed. For this ritual all male members carry water in the gourd and assemble together where the ritual is to be performed. After the priest invoked upon the rain god, blood sacrifice is offered and then all members present would pour out the water on the priest till he was totally drenched.

When reverse happens, that is when there is prolonged incessant rain, they perform another ritual to invoke on the gods to stop the continuing rains and bring forth sunshine.

Amua ba mite krita :- *Amua* or *mitekrita* is an invocation to the *mite* or deity for help. Blood sacrifice is often made to cajole the offending *mite* to release the victim. The Garos generally believe that all *mites* attack humans for one reason or the other; and at such times a substitute should be offered so that it would leave the victim alone. Basically, the animist Garos believe that *mites* are everywhere; hence wherever the spirits live it becomes place of reverence. *Amua ba mite krita* or invocation to the gods can be done at any time and any place according to the exigencies of the matter. If a person drowns in the river, and his body cannot be found; it is generally believed that the spirits of the deep; be it *na nil* or *buga* is not willing to release the body then *amua* or *mite krita* is called for. First the *kamal* or priest prepares a temporary rough shrine known as *kimindam*; called *sambasia*. After a short discourse with the guardian deity the *kamal* decides if it would be necessary to give any live sacrifice. Usually, it is a red cock or a piglet. When the blood of the sacrificed animal in a gourd receptacle is floated down the stream; magically it would stop and hover over the area where the body lies. Incredibly the body is always retrieved right under the spot where the gourd hovered. *Amua* and *krita*

ceremony is performed to cure ailments and to drive out evil spirits from the surroundings.

Similarly, *amua* and *mite krita* are performed if there is sickness in the family and if regular herbal medicines have failed to cure the sickness, or if there is epidemic or calamity of any sort. Then the sickness or epidemic is attributed to the anger of the gods and proper divination is called for. Under such circumstances blood sacrifice of certain domestic animals like a red fowl or a piglet or a dog may be required according to the preferences of the *mite* responsible for the underlying cause.

Herein I would like to elaborate this way; the Garo practice of offering blood sacrifice is not necessarily to worship the corresponding deity. One scholar explained it thus: that when a person is sick or dying of disease or some other cause the *kamal* may perform *amua* but it is to plead with the gods to partake of the offering and let the affected person go. The Garos acknowledge that the gods and goddesses have powers over men and men being inferior to them cannot fight back therefore it is necessary to please them with offerings so that the spirits would set the man free. The pleadings to the gods or spirits are not to heal the sick but to release them from their bondage.

Chapter III

Belief in psycho-physical existence: - The Garos have the ages old belief in psycho-physical existence which is generally speaking living a dual life as a human and living as an animal while asleep. Such people are normal in all respects except for the fact that they become something else in their subconscious state. One renowned Garo writer Shri Dewansing Rongmuthu called such phenomenon *Jadoreng*. In his book *Jadoreng* (the psycho culture of the Garos) he elaborated that *jadoreng* literally means the culture of conscious voluntary projection of one's own *jachri* or *jabirong* (conscious psyche) in order to get itself consciously engrafted in the body of any sentient being while one's body lies undisturbed in a trance state. In fine, it is the psycho-physical culture of perfect use of sub-conscious mind in accordance to the hitherto undefined bio-rhythmic laws of human organism. In this culture there is something extra-wonderful that is beyond our ordinary mortal reach or comprehension. By its very nature, *jadorengism* is connected with the possibility or exigency of a vision which goes beyond its boundaries. In reality it could perhaps be somewhat akin to the practice of shamanism in other cultures. In essence this is a unique cultural riddle of the Garos in which a person whose soul is intricately engrafted with the soul of another animal. This cannot be explained away in any form or style as the very culture itself is inexplicable in any form or language.

There are countless numbers of cases where many people right from their birth itself found their soul or *jabirong*

engrafted with that of animals. Not all of them engrafted from birth for there are numerous cases where they were said to get possessed when they had reached adulthood. Such cases of late engraftment are usually reversible by potent herbs or by simply making it an open secret. The more common animals with which the human soul or *jabirong* gets engrafted are the tigers, the pythons, *sangkni* - the river serpents, *buga* the mermaids. Such cases we call them as *matcha pil·a* or the intermingled soul with tiger, *chipu pil·a* - with that of pythons, *sangkni pil·a* with the river serpent and *buga pil·a* or the soul with the mermaids according to the animal they got entangled with. These are just a few examples of what the culture believes. There are stories galore of some people turning into other smaller, even insignificant animals like rats or other rodents, domesticated animals like pigs and dogs and the like. Such people live perfectly normal dual lives without any visible outward effects except for the fact that when they sleep their soul or *jabirong* roams around the world not as humans but as the animal they are engrafted to. They say they not only see and observe the human relatives but recognize them perfectly and are very protective of their human dear and near ones. They have the ability to see and observe humans in their other entity and can tell happenings in other places as if they have been there themselves. One curious fact is that in case the animal with which his *jabirong* is engrafted dies or gets killed, the person dies suddenly under mysterious circumstances. If, however, it is the other way round or the person dies of natural causes, the animal continues to live and oftentimes come to bid farewell to its other entity

People who have the related spirit with the tigers have the end of their backbone jutting out an inch or so like tail.

Not everyone has it though. Another peculiar habit with them is that they like to doze off at all times, any place any time. During that brief interval of one or two minutes they doze off their spirits roam the length and breadth of the land and within that short span of time could cover long distances, patrolling their territory. The people whose lives are intertwined with that of *buga* can foresee when heavy rains would come and often warn people ahead. It is the general belief that the *bugas* occasionally abduct humans as groom to a prospective young *buga*. Hence, if anyone goes missing in the water it is almost always attributed as the abduction by this water creature. In case the young man they capture for the groom does not meet the approval of the bride to be he is sent back to the upper world unharmed.

Beliefs and superstitions

It is amazing how the illiterate, uncultured Garo ancestors could correctly and accurately predict certain everyday events by just looking at the sun and the moon and its position. Is it pure speculation or do they really had the insight we shall never know but in almost all cases whatever they believe do turn out to be true.

If the crescent moon is upside down especially during rainy season, it foretells dry spell for that month; if it is the other way round it is believed that the crescent will be filled to its capacity and there will be abundance of rainfall.

If during the monsoon season the domestic chicken are seen to huddle themselves in the coop than it means it is going to be short shower; if, however, they come out to feed in the rain, it means the rain would continue incessantly for

a few days longer, for the chicken cannot wait for the rains to stop, but perforce to brave the rain to feed.

By the beginning of the year the forefathers observe the mango and lychee blossoms and predict cyclones and thunderstorms if they bloom profusely.

In a similar manner if the crows make their nests high up on the tree it means normal and usual spring; but if they nest much lower in the tree it means severe cyclones and hail storms. The crows know in advance what weather to expect to keep their nests and young ones safe.

Before the onset of spring as soon as they hear the cicadas singing, they know that the time has come to start their cultivation; to burn their prepared jhum area and start cultivation.

While on the way for hunting or fishing or any other business, if they come by a snake, be it small or large, they would abandon the whole plan for they believe, that snake brings bad luck and that it would be futile to proceed further.

Again, when on any business trip or any important visit if soon after leaving the house, he trips or stumble, it is a bad omen. Proceeding further will yield no results.

Similarly, when on a mission to collect medicinal herbs for the sick tripping or not finding the right ingredients means the patient is not going to survive despite efforts.

When a *do·amek*- messenger bird flies overhead the house or perch nearby and coo, he is giving the news that guests are arriving shortly.

When a *do·uang*- the messenger bird of death gives out its eerier, bone chilling shriek near the house, if there is any

sick person in the vicinity, it means a forewarning to the family that the death is imminent. Often the death comes within a week.

If the domestic dog lets out a long pitiful wail for no apparent reason, it has foreseen and warning the inmates in advance that some calamity or tragedy is likely to occur in the family.

It is inauspicious to see crowd gathering, or cutting down trees or the tooth coming loose in the dream, for it forebodes death or some other calamity within the family or clan circle.

When you misplace something like wallet or purse or keys and cannot locate it even after a thorough search turning everything upside down and clearly remember exactly where you put it, then it means that the *te-tengs* (small humanoids with inverted feet) had either temporarily borrowed it or playing a mischievous prank. No need to panic, just make an appeal to those mischievous sprites to return and lo and behold, before long it will miraculously appear right in front of you in the place you have made futile search before. How it happens nobody can elaborate, but *te-tengs* do really understand the desperation in your heart.

The little children are always encouraged to leave a little bit of food or crumbs on the plate and not to drink their tea or juice bottom up just in case there are some invisible spirits hovering nearby. This little gesture of leaving bits and pieces will appease the demons or spirits or whatever and avert any effects of the evil eye.

During the months when maize and other crops start ripening, if monkeys come marauding, never shoo them with harsh words, rather plead with them to leave some for

the owners or better keep quiet. The animals can sense the anger and unwelcome attitude and would wreck more havoc.

When a pig or the cow is slaughtered for feast the spirits of the dead of the family merrily participate in the revelry as the unseen guests. Therefore, it is advisable to throw out a piece of meat cooked or raw calling out the dead person's name, otherwise, if the unseen guest touches the food with his ghostly hands the food might go bad. Usually, the next morning if any of the left overs is found to go sour it is attributed to the spirits partaking of the food.

It is customary to carry *rongjanggi* -a basketful of rice, a live pig and some live chicken when they go to the prospective groom's parents and relatives for marriage negotiation. If the pig is unusually quiet and does not grunt and chicken do not squawk; then it augurs bad omen. The party will not be welcomed and the negotiation would fall through.

When the couple get united by the traditional practice of *do·sia*; the *kamal* (priest) can correctly predict their future by the process of *do·biknia* or reading the entrails. If the entrails are full and close together the couple will have a good prosperous and happy life together. If on the other hand the entrails are not full and is separated, then poverty and marital discords are predicted.

Right after the child's delivery the mother is given a swig of the rice beer, this is not only to whet her thirst and give strength but mainly to prevent *an·dime*- the post- natal complications that could turn out to be fatal. It is strongly believed that locally brewed rice beer is a strong anti-dote and has the potential to prevent diseases.

Taboos

Asi malja, da-dak- this is a very strong term synonymous with taboo. This originates from a tragic incident where two cheeky youngsters, *Asi* and *Malja* lost their lives as a result of their disobedience and failure to keep the social rules-*salnima*. (restricted day) *Salnima* is observed when there is death or birth in the village or any other calamity when leaving the village or doing any physical works other than necessary for observing the restricted day is strictly forbidden. The legend says that when *Susimema Sangkildoma*, the great benefactor died, seven days *salnima* was announced to complete the funeral rites. *Asi* and *Malja* the two cousins, dared to dishonour the social taboo and went out only to lose their lives tragically. *Asi* was killed by a tigress and *Malja* was taken down by a *buga* in a shallow pool.

Some of the taboos, observed by the Garos in their day to day lives are listed below: -

It is not only taboo but also unwarranted and uncalled for to laugh and sneer at other's misfortune, for the same ill luck might boomerang back on him.

It is taboo to utter the name of ferocious animals like, tiger, elephants and bear whilst in the jungle, for the animals have sharp ears and might take offence at people's indiscretion. If at all necessary, they should be referred to indirectly by their alias.

Young girls and women in their child bearing age are forbidden to eat conjoined bananas for it will entail not only having twins but might deliver conjoined babies.

It is strictly forbidden by the unwritten law of society for any man or woman to marry within his/her clan. Breaking this social taboo may entail in not only ostracism from the community but in extreme cases may even be disowned and driven out of the village altogether

It is taboo for a man to marry his younger sibling's widow, but the younger brother is allowed to marry his older brother's widow not only to take care of her but to keep up the lineage of his deceased brother's.

In the same manner, it is taboo for a woman to marry her younger sister's husband. However, it is fairly common for younger sisters to succeed her older sister's place and marry her brother-in-law. More often this is imposed upon the younger sibling by family, relatives and the society in general.

It is *asi-malja* or sacrilege to destroy or even touch the *kimindam* unauthorized. *Kimindam* is the temporary and crude shrine erected by the *kamal* for the purpose of invocation to the gods. This could be erected anywhere depending on the exigencies of the matter. Destroying or even just touching it without the permission of the priest is considered an open provocation that might invite the wrath of the gods.

It is strictly prohibited to eat jhum products before *rongchu gala* ceremony or libation and the first fruits of the jhum are offered to the goddess of cultivation, lest calamity befalls.

It is sacrilegious for young girls and women to enter into the *nokpante* or the dormitory of the boys. Even in emergency they are not allowed to enter.

PART - II

Mysterious, magical beings on land and water.

There are many rare and exotic land and water animals in Garo Hills area hitherto unknown and unseen in other parts of the country which because of their rarity and elusive nature till date had been considered by many scholars only as myths. Their presence had not yet been thoroughly researched by eminent scientists of the world but which to the Garos are as real as any living animals and beings that use to roam the dense jungles of Garo Hills. Many of them are now extinct except for some legends that survived. As discussed in the preceding chapter, there are among the Garos who claim to have their lives intertwined with that of animals who can give vivid narrations of the life and experiences in the other life that we could not discard as mere myths. They are mysterious no doubt, absolutely mystical and magical but they are in no way mythical. It appears it is a different world altogether beside this earth, probably more advanced technologically and more developed in all respects. From the narrations gathered it is utterly astounding to hear about the life of those who live a dual life the wonderful world in the animal kingdom as well as the water world below. It appears that they too have their own distinct culture and tradition; their own code of conduct and a complete set of administrative orders like us. This just proves that we are not the only intelligent beings on earth.

There is worlds within worlds of which we know nothing about as yet.

Mysterious strange beings on land

It is recorded that centuries ago when the Garos came wandering from up north and occupied the impenetrable dense jungles they encountered many gargantuan strange animals and beasts that could possibly belong to some ancient era. Surprisingly those enigmatic animals and strange unusual beings that still inhabit the forests of Garo Hills have never been officially discovered. Due to obstructions by dense impenetrable forests, and some other constraints the continued presence of those creatures in Garo Hills are yet to be researched and properly documented. In the absence of proper research and official authentication they had been relegated to figs of imagination to some or some kind of fictional characters or strange mythical beasts at best. But they are not the creations of fertile minds, they are real, alive and existing; and evidence of their continued presence can be produced by those who had had actual encounters with them purely by chance or had a fleeting glimpse at one point or the other but because of their elusive nature no scientist or wild life researcher had actually come face to face with them and prefer to attribute the mythical term to them. The presence of those mysterious creatures since long time ago had been preserved in the sing song oral tales that survive till today.

Mande burung:- Literally it means the jungle man or man beast. Some people who had the opportunity to see the *mande burung* face to face or up-close say that they are the hairy ape like animals. The *mande burungs* are much bigger than any other primate found in Garo Hills and they walk

erect on their hind legs like the humans. However, the presence of the *mande burung* or the man beast of Garo Hills remain controversial till today. Many tend to brush it aside saying it is only imaginary and not real; just concocted by some hyper imaginative minds. Their habitat is the dense forests of *Nokrek Biosphere* and *Balpakram Hill* ranges. They keep constantly changing their habitat. However, there are a few people who have been lucky or unlucky enough to see the creatures up close. Some years ago, some Forest Officials came across a huge footprint about one foot and half long in size and concluded that it could have belonged to the beast man *mande burung*. Also judging by the tree branches that were pulled down from a height of more than 15 ft they judged the size and height of that animal to be of gargantuan proportions. Some fossilised giant footprints are folklored as the footprints of *Gonga* and *Gongja* brothers who were supposed to be of gargantuan frames found here and there most probably belong to these giant primates.

During 1988-89, several of those species were spotted in the vicinity of the *Samanda Block Headquarters* in the East Garo Hills District. It was reported that one *mande burung* couple actually stayed in the village church building for a few nights. They tore up papers and generally made a mess of the church building but left the Holy Bible untouched. The then acting Deputy Commissioner of East Garo Hills District C. Changsan and a few Officers along with Forest officials reportedly went to see the creatures but by then the creatures had moved elsewhere leaving behind a huge mess in the area as proof of their temporary sojourn.

Te·teng:- Small in stature not taller than two and half ft to three ft or as big as a three year old child it is said to be packed with inhuman strength. It could easily pick a grown

man with one hand and overthrow him if messed around with. They have their feet twisted backwards so that when they walk, they leave footprints backwards. They dwell in small caves in high cliffs where no man or humans normally go. There are numerous *te·teng kol* or *te·teng* caves, found almost everywhere in the entire Garo Hills believed to be inhabited by the creatures at some time past.

In earlier days they used to be seen in isolated patches of jungles even in and around the Tura town but now with the expansion of the township in all directions as also the rampant cutting of trees even these *te·tengs* have been driven deep into the woods. In some small caves and caverns where those dwarf *te·tengs* reside, certain unusual earthen miniature furniture or household utensils are often found believed to be their personal belongings. They say that if *te·tengs* are captured they are wonderfully docile and are willing to do anything that their master commands. They could effortlessly lift huge boulders but cannot shift the yam leaves. There are many stories of how the *te·tengs* play the benefactor for those who are good to them or render help in any way.

Wak mangganchi aragondi

In the ancient days, once there lived a seven headed wild boar of humongous size known as *wakmangganchi aragondi* or *wakskal* that struck terror among the human inhabitants. Shri Helsing A. Marak in his brochure titled *Balpakram*; under heading *Wakso Chiring* gave a graphic description of the animal and described it as follows: *In the olden days, there roamed a gigantic wild boar called wakmangganchi aragondi. This seven headed monster was ravenously devouring every edible thing from the jhum cultivation*

of the Garos. It was of such an awesome bulk and size that on its back there were seven plots of *am·pang* (thatch grass), seven clumps of *wa.ge* (*bambusa tulda*) and seven clusters of *re·ru* (bulrush plants) growing like a jungle. Two perennial streams flowed through its back and a pair of *huro* (gibbons) found their permanent abode there. The animal was so huge that when it stood up, its nose touched the *Durama* (*Tura peak*) while its tail lay immersed in the *Songdu* (*Brahmaputra*) river.

Dr. Julius L R.Marak, Museologist, Directorate of Arts & Culture, Meghalaya, also in his book *Balpakram the Land of Spirits* wrote that the monster known to the Garos as *Wakmangganchi Aragondi* was said to possess seven heads. That *wakmangganchi aragondi* or *wakskal* was so large that when he stood his snout touched *Dura* (*Tura*) peak and his tail touched *Songdu* (*Brahmaputra*) river. On his back there grew seven acres of elephant grass, seven thickets of cane and seven clumps of bulrushes. His hairs were like spike or arrow. No man could fight and kill this monster. The monster used to destroy standing crops and swallow people alive.

That *wakmangganchi aragondi* was finally killed by *Goera* the god of lightning after a prolonged battle. From his childhood, *Goera*, the god of thunder and lightning was an extra-ordinary child and possessed strength and skill beyond normal human capabilities.

On second thoughts it is highly improbable that such a monstrous beast existed in the days of yore, it was probably an allegory, created as a science fiction by some fertile imaginative mind.

***Matchadu matchabet*:** They are the half human and half tigers or the humans who live a double life as man and tiger. It is said that during the day time, they are humans and live a normal life in all respects like any other people but as the

sun goes down the animal nature takes over and they become like tigers and go out hunting like animals. They are the were-tigers; half human and half animal and are not confined to Garo belief only for there are several stories and references to the were tigers in folk tales of other tribes as well. The Mizos call them *keimis* and the Garos call them *matchadu matchabet*. In the dense jungles of the *Chitmang* and *Balpakram* Hills where generally no man goes they make their homestead. According to the Garo legend *matchadu matchabet* or half human half tiger monster was born to *Durama Imbama*, a powerful deity, the matriarch of Tura peak. During his childhood he was known as *Oktom Jada*, *Wakki Waknel*. As he grew up he became a monster with double lifestyle. During the day time he was a harmless human but soon after sunset as it got dark, he turned into tiger and started roaming the jungle and killing other animals.

The existence of the *matchadu matchabet* had been a topic of doubt and disbelief. The stories that we read about them were of long gone past that we had put them at the back of our minds. That is till recently when out of the blue their presence in deep jungles came to be known owing to some stray incidents. People say that in some pockets of the deep impenetrable jungles in the south some *matchadu matchabet* families still exists.

Jaha malua Matchru

This is a very rare animal of the civet family found in the deep jungles of Garo Hills. The specialty of this animal is that it emanates sweet lingering odour that smells like the sweet scented *joha* (jaha in Garo) rice; hence the name *jaha malua matchru*. This animal found its place in the folklores of

the Garos too; as the animal whose farts found favour with the blacksmith *Kamal Ajepa* because of its sweet lingering smell. The folklore says that *Kamal Ajepa* was so enamoured by his sweet-smelling fart that he asked him to come and fart for him every day; then one day rewarded him with the exquisite double-edged sword that became the envy of all other animals.

Thankfully this animal is not extinct yet, although it is already in the list of endangered species. In deep jungles of Garo Hills this *jaha malua matchru* still roam free but it is feared their numbers might be dwindling fast. This exotic animal cannot hide for it always give out his presence in the vicinity by the sweet lingering smell they emit thus endangering his own life. Occasionally while in deep jungles the hunters got the whiff of that sweet scent and knew that the animal was somewhere near.

Ajaju

This was a tree swinging carnivorous ape monster said to reside in the Tura and *Nokrek* Peaks. This animal is no longer sighted anywhere in the deep jungles of Garo Hills, at least in the nearby *Tura* and *Nokrek* peaks, perhaps it is already extinct in the area just like in the case of the peacocks. Very little is known about this carnivorous ape; therefore, from what little tales we could garner it had long legs and hands like any other primate but unlike them it had no knees and it could not walk. Since it cannot bend its knees, it is said that *ajajus* sleep standing, leaning on tree trunks. There are a few mentions about this strange animal in some of the folk tales of the Garos; especially relating to the era whilst the Garos were still unsettled.

Amazingly, some hunters in the deep jungles claimed that they felt the presence of the *ajaju* when their yelling and yodelling were promptly responded to and every response seem to be coming nearer in their direction. Nobody had the guts to wait and see for as soon as they realize that it was approaching towards them, they would immediately stopped making noise and ran the opposite downhill to safety. One prominent person of a certain village who had a fair knowledge of this creature said that when the *ajaju* responds and come swinging from tree to tree the whole jungle seems to be moving and so no mortal would have the nerve to wait and see even from a safe distance in the open.

Do·ouang

The Garos call it *nawang*, the demon messenger bird of death; for every time it is heard shrieking somewhere near death inevitably follows within a week's time. This mysterious nocturnal bird belongs to the family of certain big raven species; and those who had seen it say they are black as crows. It has a very peculiar chilling eerie *oouang*, *oouang* shriek that chills the very bones of the spine. They live deep in the dense jungles and only occasionally venture into the residential areas and give its bone chilling message of death when there is going to be a tragedy somewhere.

We hardly hear them nowadays but half a century ago, their eerie calling *oouang*, *ooouang* was often heard in the Tura peak regions; and then we know beforehand that there will be a tragedy somewhere near. It is said that this *do·uang* is the spirit demon that dwells at the boundary gates of the spirit land and was entrusted with the task of alerting the family members of the imminent tragedy in the family circle. It is generally accepted that the spirit of men proceeds ahead

several days before his actual death. Only when the spirit of the man enters the virtual land of the spirits the physical death occurs. Hence it is usually a week or so after the message is delivered that the tragedy occurs. It is said that *do-ouang* or *nawang* was known as *Ebang Gamagri* who originally hailed from the village called *Bangdo A·bagri*. A very lazy fellow, he did not want to eke out his livelihood by making cultivation like others but at *Balpakram*; the mythical abode of the spirits he constructed his *nokpante* at a very strategic junction of seven lanes known as *Miteni Cholramasni Bibrasni*. The *do-ouang's* house was strategically located in such a way that whoever passes by cannot escape going under the low eaves of his thatched house alerting the demon with the *tchak, tchak* sounds of dry thatched roof. He would call out who was passing by and glean out all the information of the spirit going away to spirit land. Then he would fly out to the world to alert the family of the impending doom.

Believe it or not, this is no ordinary old wife's tale. If the *do-uang* comes shrieking any time at night, if there is any sick person in the radius of five to six families around, death was inevitable. Death usually occurs within a week of the message delivered by that messenger bird.

Do·memang and matme·mang - spirit bird & the spirit animal: - As mentioned before the Garos believe in the endless cycles of life and the continuance of life in spirit form. They think that the spirits hover around and above us unseen to human eyes trying to help us or warn us but since they are invisible to naked human eye they are greatly feared. In like manner the spirits of the birds and animals too continue to exist they say. Normally those spirit birds and spirit animals take their abode in *Balpakram* region revered

by the Garos as the abode of the spirits; but occasionally they may venture out to other parts of the land too. Many hunters in the *Balpakram* area had come across such hologram spirits of the birds or animals and were thoroughly baffled when the bird or the animal they shot mysteriously disappeared in the wink of an eye. Even a direct hit would not kill the animal, nor did they shed blood for they were not birds or animals in flesh. For what we see of them were mere 3D holograms and not the real flesh and blood.

Dancing cicadas of *Daribokgre*

Up in one hilltop village that is situated near the peak of the *Nokrek* Hill which happens to be the highest peak in Garo Hills there is a small village called *Daribokgre*. There in the hill top are certain kinds of performing insects akin to the cicadas locally known as *gol·dat* that like to perform literally. When spring comes round different species of the cicadas of various sizes and colours would come out of their hibernation and the whole jungle in Garo Hills reverberates with the echoing sweet singing. Somehow the singing and dancing cicadas of *Daribokgre* do not belong to any type of that genus except for their appearance. Unlike other cicadas they reportedly live in clusters or sort of colony and rest high atop the green canopy. Any time before sunset if the village children stand around and sing out to them, they would merrily descend from high tree tops in droves and joined in the merry making along with the children. They seem to be particularly responsive to little children only. However, under any other ordinary circumstances they would not be coaxed and after the sun goes down no amount of coaxing would tempt them to come down the trees to sing and dance. Truly enigmatic, wouldn't you agree?

Do·rerap

They are the remnants of the peacock family also called the cackling pheasants for when they are in group and start cackling, it sounds like some people having a good fun and laughing loudly. The male bird is extremely beautiful; it looks exactly like the peacock but minus its crest and long showy fan tail. The female *do·rerap* is dowdy in its looks like their bigger relative the peahen. In the olden days there were peacocks in Garo Hills too, but sadly their numbers slowly dwindled and ultimately, they are now extinct. There is a place in *Balpakram* plateau called *Do·de mesaram* or the dancing ground of peacocks. In the earlier days when peacocks abound in Garo Hills hundreds of peacocks used to assemble at the dancing ground and twirl around showing off their exquisite plumes. *Do·rerap* is believed to be a descendant of that peafowl family.

Magical & mythical creatures of the deep

Just as there are mysterious and strange beings on land there are many of those enigmatic denizens in the deep waters too. The two biggest rivers of Garo Hills *Simsang* and *Ganol* have many deep waters in their course and they have the most numbers of mysterious water denizens in their channels. It doesn't mean that those water denizens are abound in these two rivers only; they abound in other big rivers too. But these two rivers being closest to the main town Tura; we tend to get more stories from these rivers. It is said that *Simsang* River and *Ganol* River were sisters; born from the same womb, the *Nokrek* Hills. They were very close to one another and flowed alongside each other; till one day they had a bitter disagreement and could no longer see eye

to eye with one another. Finally, they decided to part ways for good. Hence, *Simsang* River took the eastward route flowing through *Rombagiri*, *Williamnagar*, *Siju* and *Baghmara* before entering the plains of Bangladesh. Her sister *Ganol* took the opposite route and flowed westward through *Rongram*, outskirts of Tura town *Edenbari*, then passing through *Damalgre* and *Garobadha* to join the mighty Brahmaputra River just before entering Bangladesh. Even now they had not resolved their differences they say for their enmity is manifested in a strange bizarre way; for if you fill half of bamboo tube or a bottle with *Simsang* River water and fill the other half with *Ganol* River water, the recipient would break into smithereens shortly thereafter, their bitter enmity manifested; their anger still not dissipated yet till today.

However, the mysterious denizens of the deep seem to enjoy their privileges in both the rivers. It appears that they are still competing with one another for during the spate of monsoon these two rivers wreck more havoc than the other rivers of Garo Hills damaging roads and bridges. Till recently before the concrete RCC bridges were built, the wooden bridges were constructed and every year during the spate of monsoon at least two of the wooden bridges were washed away by the flash floods.

Besides them there are ten more big rivers that irrigate the land. Each of them has their own fair share of the mysterious denizens of the deep. Some of the more enigmatic animals of the deep are listed below: -

Sangkni

Among the mysterious denizens of the deep the *sangkni* or the river serpent is the biggest and most formidable and

yet may be the gentlest. In size and shape it is a very big, humongous, very long serpent like denizen of the deep they say. They are a sort of a phenomenon to Garo society. Generally, it is believed to be a huge sea serpent with the crest like coxcomb on its head. But we could never be certain of their formidable size and form for no one had seen the *sangkni* in all its pomp and glory. Some say that an adult *sangkni* can grow up to enormous sizes unimaginable. The stories about their enormous size and beautiful crest on the head like coxcomb were conjectures arrived at by people who had a glimpse of what they thought should be none other than *sangkni*. It is bad omen to see *sangkni* for it spells doom, many believed. One man living in a small village on the bank of *Simsang* River do really appears to know a lot about the *sangkns*. He told us that *sangkns* are water serpents no doubt but they hibernate seven layers of the earth below at the bottom of deep seas. They could take different forms according to the exigencies of the time. They appear to be benevolent in nature for so many stories about them depict them as angels in disguise who came to the aid of mankind especially during floods. They would appear like huge floating logs on the river and assisted people to ford across deep waters. They like to dam the water channel with their enormous bodies and make the waters swell but at certain times shallow enough to ford across; depending on the mood of the *sangkni* who according to the swings of his mood would suddenly dam up the river to make it very deep and impossible to cross but sometimes allow the natural flow of water undisturbed. Therefore, the spate of water is usually attributed to the presence of the *sangkni* and his frame of mind.

In October 1990 when the East Garo Hills District was hit by one of the worst flash floods unprecedented in the annals of that area several villages lying on the steep hillside of *Nokrek* Hills were badly affected. In many places the whole hill sides came sliding down carrying huge boulders, trees, mud and debris and houses along its path. The entire roadway from *Asanang* to *Bansamgre* was blocked for several weeks despite the Gov't machineries swift action to clear huge masses of debris. Several bridges and culverts were damaged beyond repair. In the ensuing chaos of such disaster one man claimed to have been saved by a *sangkni*. According to him, he suddenly woke up from his sleep on hearing the thunderous rush of water heading towards his home. He barely managed to open his door before the onrushing flood of waters carried him downstream. Then he was caught in what he thought was a huge log; he clung unto it for dear life and slowly crawled out of the fast-flowing flood waters to safety tightly clinging to the log. Next morning he surveyed the damage of the previous night's catastrophe and was amazed that he was not crushed to death by the massive boulders that chocked the normally dry channel. He scouted far and wide to see where the log that saved his life had floated down to but to his astonishment it was nowhere to be seen. Wonder of wonders nobody from that area had even a glimpse of such a log being carried away or otherwise. Ultimately it was concluded that it must have been the *sangkni* that came to his rescue and not any ordinary log as he initially thought.

There are many people who claim to have the psycho-physical relation with the *sangkni* and other animals like tiger or a python which are more common than other animals. However, they are not willing to divulge the full

story of their lives in the animal form as they too are reportedly bound by the strict codes of rules and defying those rules may land them in serious disciplinary action. They are however allowed to disclose certain clairvoyant and pre-cognitive events that are likely to happen in the near future. Often those people can share some of their experiences in their animal form and generally caution close associates and relatives to be careful when in big waters especially when the *bugas* are looking for some suitable grooms or any event going to take place in their water world kingdom.

Surengreng

Surengrengs are reportedly another specie of the water serpent family. In the water world they are known as *Gingdoreng*; also *gingchokdeng*, because of their longish snout. They too are serpents in all respects except for the fact that they are so mysteriously conjoined. They have heads at both ends of their bodies and as told to us; they eat and work with one end for six months and take rest for another six months when the other end takes over. Those great sea serpents undertake the task of cutting land and bulldozing them for the purpose of road constructions underground. Several people have vouched for the existence of such a water denizen for they have seen them with their own eyes. During March /April when one particular tree *agatchi* gives out yellow coloured slightly sweet and sour flower buds they like to come out to feed on the flower buds. They would stand either on the ground or keeping their lower bodies still immersed in water would reach up to high trees and feed. Just imagine, reaching up to tall trees with their lower torso in the water; they must be of unimaginable length and of

gigantic body proportions. In fact from what some people who had seen them said, they are more or less like overgrown gigantic earthworms. Another fruit they relish is the ripe banyan tree fruits.

Buga rani

Buga rani or mermaid queens; half human and half fish creatures do not need any introduction. Everyone knows what they are; even little children for that matter for there are so many stories about them. They are considered to be mythical beings of ancient times. But here in Garo Hills, they are neither mythical nor created by figs of imagination; they are real; as real as any other water denizens. They do exist and still exist in the deep waters of Garo Hills. There are stories galore about *buga ranis* or mermaids. In the Garo folklore, in the legend of *Dombe Wari*, the king of mermaids figure as a love sick besotted king who had fallen in love with the beautiful woman and abducted her to the water world below to make her his queen. As generally believed mermaids are very beautiful creatures with long lustrous hair. Sometimes they entice men and take them to their water world below. If the captured man does not meet the requirements of the mermaid they are often sent back above. When this happens, a man lost in the deep waters and thought to have drowned would surface again sometime later. Every year many young adults and even grown men get lost in the river. Technically their death in water may be due to drowning but to the Garos, it is not as simple as that. Those supposed to be drowned victims are often attributed to abduction by mermaid and in some cases killed by *na·nil* or the electric eel. There had been many reports of seeing the half human and half fish creatures during the spate of

monsoon. Some of them even got caught in fish nets or traps. When heavy monsoon rains come, they are said to be travelling down to the seas and come up again at the close of monsoons occasionally kidnapping some people on their way. The beautiful mermaids do not enjoy going down to the seas because their long lustrous hair got in the way and might even get entangled and entrap them in the nets or debris. If they cannot extricate themselves from the tangled-up hair they usually die; but they enjoy swimming upstream as the hair does not present any problem they say.

On 12th December 2019, several womenfolk of Samanda Rongkem village while collecting mustard leaves and cleaning them in the *Simsang* River were suddenly taken aback to see something humanlike creature come swimming by downstream towards *Gongge Wari* at *Samanda Rongkem*. It came swimming close to the river bank but the womenfolk were so frightened at such an unusual sight that they ran up the river bank and watched it from a safe distance. One man and another woman tending to the cows on the opposite side with a young ten year old girl also claim to see the spectacle which lasted for about 15 minutes they said.

***Na·nil* or the electric eel:-** The Garo Hills river eels are different from the eels found in the deep seas. The eels generally live in deep pools but even in shallow knee-deep waters there are reports of eels being spotted there.

This is one of the species of river water fish but what set it apart is not its looks, it is its ability to drag down man and drown them. It is believed that they sucked the blood through the navel. If two tiny punctured holes are found at the navel region it must be none other than *na·nil* victim they say. In looks the *na·nil* resembles water snakes long and slender but they pack enough electricity to drown a man.

Even a small eel of one year is said to be capable of taking a man down. The electric fish that are found in the deep oceans can generate enough electricity to stun a human being. But the river water eels of Garo Hills are notorious for drowning humans even in shallow, just knee- deep waters. How they do it no one had survived to tell the tale. These eels are amazingly strong in water but powerless on land, so, fishermen while angling for eels would tie the other end of the line to a stout pole or tree stumps nearby, so that they themselves do not get dragged in to the water. Once they are out of the water they can be easily overpowered. The locals consider them a delicacy and often angle for them.

Na·masu :-Literally it means the fish- cow. This *na·masu* is different from other fish species in the sense that it grows to gargantuan size weighing more than one quintal. It has no scales like other fish species and can be found only in very deep- water pools of big rivers like *Simsang* and *Ganol* Rivers. In size and looks it resembles the sea lion to a certain extent.

Botanical wonders or curses?

Garo Hills is very well endowed by nature; as a result, it becomes the home of many rare and exotic plants mostly endemic to the soil of the land. Influenced by its geographical location; climatic conditions and the soil of its terrain, Garo Hills is one of the richest areas in bio-diversity. The eminent Scientists and Botanists have reportedly found many of the rarest and most exotic species of plant life in the land. Just some of them are discussed below:-

Rare and exotic wonder plants and medicinal herbs.

Me·mang narang:- Citrus Indica or the *me·mang narang* as the locals call it literally translated it means the orange of the spirits. It is called so because it was believed by the ancient forefathers that the very rare genus of the citrus family was brought to *Nokrek* region from the land of the spirits by the first man who died and who wanted to come back to earth. The folklore says that *Maopa Chong·dopa, Me·gam Gairipa Dikil Singgiripa* when he reached the abode of the dead, he became extremely nostalgic since he was the first and only spirit in that land. So, when he came to meet his wife and kids he brought a basket of oranges along from the spirit land.

Me·mang narang is an extremely rare and very valuable plant. It is endemic to *Nokrek* Biosphere only. Formerly it was not available in any part of the Garo Hills region either but now, with propagation, people have started successfully growing them in their back yard gardens. It is said to be the progenitor of all citrus genus. For the purpose of preservation, propagation and promotion of this rare plant the State Government of Meghalaya had now declared the entire *Nokrek* region reserved as wild life sanctuary. The fruit of the tree resembles orange fruit but much smaller. It is a very useful plant widely used by the local herbal medicine practitioners to cure a wide variety of ailments including common cold and influenza.

Chambil :- In addition to the wonder citrus above, there are several more species of the same genus which are not commonly available in other parts of the region. Chambil or citrus mycroptera is of medium size, much bigger than oranges and bears thick layer of whites under the skin. This

fruit is no less acidic than citrus indica, perhaps it might even surpass it in its acidity. Mostly preserved as pickles this fruit have been known to cure a wide range of ailments.

Atol:- Larger than common nimbu or lime this roundish fruit also bears the same acidity of the *chambil* fruit above and is very popular for making pickles. Its sour juice has been known to instantly cure headaches and control blood pressure and sugar.

Te-matchi:- its scientific name being citrus medica var lemonum is another wild citrus genus more similar to common lemon but with much thicker skin and more potency in acidity.

Narang jakskil:- Similar to *atol* above with thick skin has the similar potency and quality as its sister species above. Sadly, this endemic on the brink of extinction specie had dwindled in its existence over the past many decades. It is now rarely seen even in the interiors of Garo Hills regions.

Me·mang koksi or Pitcher plants:- Scientifically known as Khasiana nepenthes the pitcher plants are called *me·mang koksi* by the local inhabitants. Amazed by the plant's insectivorous nature many had referred to it as the wonder plant of Meghalaya. In the days of yore there were plants that were known to be carnivorous; but they are probably extinct by now. This wonder plant, grow wild and abundant in the wet shallow areas and are more abundantly found in the southern hills especially in *Baghmara* regions. There are two different types of the plant found in Garo Hills. One has the elongated pitcher and grow tall seeking support of tall

trees as it climbs like creepers. The other specie has a reddish tinge and has a shorter, more rounded pitcher body and do not grow tall.

There is one village called *Simkalanggre*, that lies between the district boundaries of South Garo Hills and West Garo Hills Districts. It is located on the way to *Chokpot* village just above the *Deku Bazaar*. There one can see the lush vegetation of this wonder plant abundantly growing wild stretching over a vast plot of land. The plants are growing so profusely with so many countless pitcher blooms that it is a great delight just to look at them.

The State Government too had created a sanctuary for this wonder plant at *Baghmara Dilsa A·bri* below the Tourist Lodge Building. It is just above the *Baghmara* market area. The Garos call it *me·mang koksi* meaning the fish basket of the spirits. It derives its name from the way it looks: like the oblong basket the Garo people use as fish basket.

Du·kon:- This is a rare wild plant that grows in dense jungles and is said to have the power to disorient the person's mind. Many hunters who lost their way in the thick jungles at night and end up going round in circles in the same area had often attributed their night's ordeal to the mysterious power of the *du·kon* plant. The people were mere victims of the plants power and play.

Surprisingly however this plant has no potency to disorient the person during the day time. It works its magic on people only at night; completely losing its power during the day time. There are many true stories how the hunters became unwitting victims of the plant while hunting in the jungles when they unknowingly stepped on *du·kon* plant

and had to endure a very harrowing experience throughout the night.

Many hunters and travellers at night fall victim to the pranks of this mischievous evil plant. It really is unbelievable that an ordinary plant by day could get possessed at night and haunt or play tricks on unsuspecting humans.

Samjanggi:- This is one very precious and rare plant that has the potency to bring the dead back to life. One renowned writer Dr. Julius L. R. Marak former Museologist of Directorate of Art & Culture, Gov't of Meghalaya who travelled widely and wrote several books on the customs/culture of the Garos and Myths & Legends etc. wrote that at one time he killed a fly and to experiment the legend behind the plant put it on the leaf of this very *samjanggi* and was shell shocked to find it come back to life and limp away.

This plant is used to cure a lot of ailments considered incurable by ordinary traditional method of treatment. Many people who had used the plant for medicinal purposes swear by its potency. One lady said that some years ago they had a pet dog that was always getting sick. They called the vet, gave him shots, fed him vitamins but to no avail. Then one day a well-wisher told her about the potent *samjanggi* plant and urged her to try it. She grounded a handful of the *samjanggi* leaves into paste, squeezed out the juice and forced it down the pet dog's throat. Soon they noticed a change in their pet. It started getting stronger and healthier and lived several years more.

Dike Muni :- This is a very rare and very exotic plant probably endemic to Garo Hills alone. It is not known if this

particular, very rare and exotic plant grows elsewhere too. The peculiarity of this plant lies in its potency or ability to make anyone who gets near the plant immediately go off to sleep. Such a plant had been reported to be found only in some isolated pockets. It is widely speculated that the Garos during their sojourn in Tibet must have used those plants for medicinal, therapeutically or perhaps even for witchcraft purposes of which they are said to be very adept.

This rare and exotic plant is reportedly found in the deep canyon of *Balpakram* plateau and in some humanly inaccessible deep clefts. It is also reported that there is such a plant at *Koasi A·bri* range at *Sogin Sa·ram*.

Many herbal practitioners from all over Garo Hills had reportedly tried various methods to get hold of that plant to no success. It is widely rumoured that several greedy persons at one time made a bamboo basket and lowered one of them to the point where this precious plant grows. But as soon as he neared the spot suddenly, he would fall into a deep slumber. They tried several other methods, even applying chilli paste on the eyes but to no effect for as soon as they neared the plant, he could not keep his eyes open despite the excruciatingly painful stinging eyes. Their mission was a total fiasco. Many other practitioners too had tried to get the *muni* with no success whatsoever.

Later on, an eagle stole it and was flying away with it when it accidentally dropped it on the high cliffs of the *Koasi hill* at a place called *sogin sa·ram* or the place where eagles nest; and could not retrieve it. It had fallen deep into the crevice of the rocky cliff; where it lies till today coiled round by a huge serpent. Over ground the eagles are always hovering, to guard it lest some unscrupulous persons get hold of it. It was for those very reasons why there are so

many eagles abound in that hill. They are still guarding the *muni* faithfully they say.

Donggam:- This is a very well-known plant sought after for its potency to instantly lower the high blood pressure and high cholesterol. It is a plant of medium height with big heart shaped leaves that is bitter to the taste. Its leaves and young tender stems are widely used for cooking by the hill tribesmen. Its leaves and stems boiled and orally taken as medicine can immediately bring down the high level of cholesterol and high blood pressure. It is however not advisable to take it often as it could lead to dangerously low pressure of the blood. Many people suffering from hypertension had greatly benefitted by taking a cup or two of the tea made from its leaves. This plant grows abundantly almost everywhere.

Chi·rota:- This is a small plant with small minuscule leaves and has very bitter taste. In Garo Hills regions where malaria is rampant; this plant is effectively used to control the disease. Its bitter taste is an anti-dote to a lot of other illnesses too it is said.

Dike

There are countless varieties of this plant found all over Garo Hills region. It is said that the plants can be induced to harm or maim or cure various kinds of ailments. The Garo ancestors while residing in Tibet centuries ago found the use of those dikes and brought them along when they migrated. Dr. Julius L. R. Marak in his book *Balpakram, the Land of Spirits* made attempts to identify some of them giving details of their usage. But there are so many different kinds of the plant that till now no one actually knows how many

different species are there and for what different purpose they are used individually.

Samskal:- A small herb with elongated spiky leaves and pungent smell and taste is widely used by the tribals as a delicacy for chutney. Apart from that it is used to ward off evil eye. It is said that people with the inter-related spirit with witches and demons cannot stand the smell of this plant and would stay away.

Kilkra:- *Kilkra aka ramie* is known to have the toughest fibres in their barks that are used to make ropes. It is widely cultivated in China and some developed countries mainly for commercial purposes. Here in Garo Hills, there are several kinds of this species growing wild in the jungles; but hardly put to any use purely due to ignorance. For so long nobody knew about its multi-faceted utility for it seems only recently the Agriculture Department of Meghalaya had woken up to its multi-purpose utility and started encouraging villagers to cultivate them on a large scale as possible sustainable cash crop. Its barks stripped and beaten into pulp once woven into ropes is said to be the toughest fibre ever known to man.

The ancient Garo forefathers were more knowledgeable than the present generation regarding the use of this plant. There are stories galore how our forefathers made use of this valuable plant. In the olden days they obtained tough fibres from this plant by stripping its bark from the young branches, beat them to a pulp and took out the fibres which dried in the sun gave them a very tough rope; which they used to make traps for big wild animals like big deer, barking deer, wild boars and mountain goats. On a smaller scale they used its fibres to design stringed musical

instruments like *sarenda* and *dotdrong*. They were also used as fishing lines for angling.

Pakkram:- One of the more commonly found trees in Garo Hills is the *pakkram*. Long before weaving became a household industry this tree provided warm bedding and clothed the primitive peoples' nakedness. The mats made from the fibres were light enough to tightly roll into a bundle that the travellers found it a convenient bedding to carry around with them. Till the mid-1950s our forefathers living in the interiors with no modern facilities and amenities available, were still widely using such primitive bedding. Not only the bedding mats but also clothes were fashioned out of it.

Do·kime:- The tree with somewhat pungent leaves is a natural remedy for bird louse. The Garo forefathers use the leaves and branches of the tree to stick them around the chicken coops to get rid of chicken lice. It is known to be a powerful insecticide and pesticide for it works equally well on bed bugs and other troublesome pests and insects.

Moreover, the juice of the tree is a strong astringent for burns. Many herbal medicine practitioners of the land use it for not only to treat burns but for other ailments as well. All that is needed is to pound the bark of the tree and squeeze the juice into the burn sores. Soon the burn sores dry up and heal completely.

Do·jagipi :- A small plant with long slender leaves that resemble crotons is a very useful herb for treatment of sprains, strains, fractures and broken bones both for humans and animals. The leaves are ground to a paste, warm baked paste applied to fractures and broken bones heal much faster than regular sling and plaster method use by the medical

practitioners. For mild sprains and strains of the muscle, the leaves lightly warmed in the fire and rubbed against the sore parts can give relief and cure within 24 hours. That is how potent is the healing power of this herb.

Sambangguri:- Also known as eupatorium scientifically is a common wild shrub found almost everywhere in the hilly areas. Widely used as emergency aid for severe cuts and wounds, its leaves when crushed and applied to bleeding wounds have been known to instantly stop heavy bleeding as it also aids in faster speedier cure of the wounds. This plant is an absolute first aid option for common man when they are far from immediate medical help.

Me-mang ambare:- Also known as phyllanthus fraternus sometimes called seed underneath or egg woman in some parts of the country for its peculiar characteristic feature bearing tiny fruits on the underside of leaf stems is a common weed that profusely grow among weeds. This plant is a powerful antidote to jaundice in early stage, strengthens body metabolism and had been renowned for effectively expelling gall stones if infused together with *kimpret* or common clover.

Kering:- *Oroxylum indicum* is commonly found in the jungles and is used to effectively cure jaundice and other diseases.

Do-grik mi:- Known as *rawolfia serpentina* is a small insignificant plant that grows wild is widely used to cure a wide range of ailments.

Me·cheng:- Xythoxylum budranga *aka* xythoxylum oxyphylum is used as for cooking in Garo dishes but is also used for medicinal purposes for a wide variety of ailments.

PART - III

Dark, deep subterranean wonders:

(The Caves & Caverns)

The archaeological and geological studies of the topography of the land of Garo Hills as studied and reported by the team of Speleologists from abroad after their excavation exploration in the *Balpakram* Plateau areas transpired that south eastern fringes was a landmass until the early Eocene period and experienced down sinking during the deposition of coal bearing sandstones. The Tura range of Garo Hills represented horsts, which had been uplifted since the Lower Cretaceous era. The meticulous study led to the discovery that during the Upper Cretaceous era the sea transgressed northwards inundating the southern block consisting of the Archaean rocks. It was also found that the marine transgression continued through the Tertiary Era for in the western part of South Garo Hills areas they found gneiss boulders occurring in parts of the cave stream ways representing erosion from the Archaean basement rocks which lie directly below the Eocene limestone. Sedimentation must have continued until the end of Oligocene period because evidence of oscillating marine transgression and regressions with variable time lags were discovered which must have resulted in the formation of a single limestone unit; a thick sequence of sandstones and shales; supposedly to be of Oligocene age.

According to the study the topographic contour chart shows the limestone areas in the southern regions as characterised by the rugged topography dissected by north to south flowing streams cutting through deep ravines and gorges. Geologically Garo Hills lime stone is of high-grade cavernous type which consists of fossiliferous beds of marls, limestone silts and shales that can be categorised as bilith. The southern portion of Garo Hills is exceedingly rich in mineral deposits. Coal and limestone make up the bulk of the deposits though some other minerals like kaolin, mica, quartz, etc are found. As a result of that there are innumerable limestone caves and caverns dotted across the entire southern region making it an underground labyrinth of tunnels. Some of those are mere potholes, some sinkholes but many of them are several kilometres long and hold dark secrets of their own. Generally, the Garos are in awe of the dark subterranean labyrinths as they consider them not as mere underground channels but to be the dwelling places of the spirits and *te·tengs* and hence would never venture inside for fear of reprisals from the supra-natural beings dwelling therein.

True to their belief most of those caves turn out to be the dwelling places of the small human like creatures with inverted feet called *te·tengs*; and many of the caves are the habitat of several species of fruit bats found in abundance in the whole district. This is the reason why most of the caves in Garo Hills are called *Do·bakkol* or bat caves; and *Te·tengkol* or *te·teng's* abode. Such abodes of the *te·teng* spirits and the bats can be found almost everywhere dotted all over the land.

The presence of several big caves along the southern areas was discovered long before the history of the Garos

began. Long before India got independence from the British Colonial Rule; as far back as 1859 itself, the Geological Survey of India noted several locations of speleological interest in the area. Some British Regime Officers had shown keen interest in some of the caves along the southern fringes of Garo Hills.

In 1875 Sir. Sanderson recorded the existence of a bat cave near the village *Siju* along the River *Simsang* valley. This was later on verified and recorded by T.D. La Touché in 1881. However, the first ever official exploration in a comprehensive scientific way was carried out only years later in 1922 by Dr. Stanley W. Kemp of Zoological Survey of India, Sir Vandyke Gregory Geologist, Sir Vincent Physicist and Dr B. Chopra of the Indian Museum, Kolkata. In February 1922 they started their extensive study of the cave with the help of petrol lamps and electric torches. In course of their exploration, they collected large numbers of samples of rocks and all kinds of troglaphiles or water insects and creatures for research. They also prepared the detail map of the cave and its water courses. Altogether they discovered 102 different species of flora and fauna of *Siju* cave alone. That was the first official exploration carried out and its findings became the first official document released for the information of the public. At that time as per the records *Siju Do-bakkol* was the longest and the most researched Indian cave and held the record till 1981.

Thereafter from 1922 onwards till the year 1947; it was mostly informal caving and exploration by inquisitive British Army Officers and enthusiastic adventurers in the company of local enthusiasts. It was when, in November 1992 a group of four British Cavers namely Simon Brooks from Orpheus Caving Club; Rob, Helen Harper and Chris

Smart from the Bristol Exploration Club visited Meghalaya, general interest in caves and caving and enthusiasm among local elites was created. In collaboration with the Meghalaya Adventurers Association Shillong; headed by *Bah Bryan Kharpran*; together they explored not only *Siju Do·bakkol* but several others both in Garo Hills and Khasi-Jaintia Hills regions and charted out over nine kilometres. Due to certain constraints the party could not stay on longer to carry out more explorations. They returned in 1994 accompanied by more experts including an expert from Germany. They were a party of eight (seven British and one German) then. They carried on the exploration works for two months and declared that *Siju Do·bakkol* has one of the finest water channels in the world. Apart from *Siju Do·bakkol* the foreign Speleologists explored many other caves and caverns all along the southern Garo Hills and other caves in other parts of the state and released their findings.

Siju Do·bakkol:- *Siju Do·bakkol* or the Bat Cave is so called because millions of bats had made it their habitat inside. The Zoological experts say that the bats that colonised therein are of two different species. The larger bats colonising nearer the entrance belonged to *Cynopterus sphinx gangeticus* and the smaller species that colonise deeper in the cave belong to *Hipposiderous lankadiva*.

Siju Do·bakkol became not only one of the most well-known of all the caves but also one of the most popular among expert cavers and amateur ordinary laymen adventurers. This *Siju Do·bakkol* is located just above the *Siju* market on the banks of *Simsang* River. It is approximately 156 kms from Tura and about 30 kms from *Baghmara*, the District Headquarter of South Garo Hills. The cave is accessible from multiple points, but the main entrance is

below the village, above the *Siju* market on the bank of *Simsang* River. This famous cave is an intricate network of series of interconnecting passageways making it a huge complex of underground maze where one can get lost easily in its labyrinth.

It is said that in the beginning the cave had a big overhang at the entrance that served as the covering roof but during the great earthquake in 1930 that rock broke off, leaving the entrance exposed as it is now. From the entrance itself the inside of the cave was so beautifully decorated with glittering and glistening stalagmites and stalactites of various unimaginable shapes and sizes. However, unfortunately most of them within reach had been broken off and carried away by unscrupulous and unprincipled greedy adventurers leaving the cave bereft of them. Not only that, many uncivilised visitors use bamboo torches to light their way inside that the roof of the cave and spectacular formations have been blackened with soot that left permanent scars on its ceilings.

As per the report the cave consists of a single major North West trending river passage containing a sizeable stream joined by smaller streams and inlets at various points. A little deeper inside along the vast boulder chambers there are huge colonies of bats that had made their habitat therein which gave the name *Do-bakkol* or Bat Cave. All around there are exquisite breath -taking spectacular formations of stalagmites and stalactites that literally blow one's mind away. One large chamber that is high up in the cave which is reportedly not easily reachable to ordinary cavers but accessible only by a long bamboo stairs made the cavers gasp with wonder at the sight of the exquisite limestone formations; that awestruck by its ethereal beauty

they named it "*The Princess Diana's Chamber*" in honour of late Princess Diana who was at the peak of her fame and glory at that time.

The large chamber of The Upper *Siju* cave which is also the 2nd entrance to *Siju Do·bakkol* is situated behind the village *Siju*. It lies at a depth of 26 metres and roughly 518 metres long. The entrance is along the path to the village for some 50 metres to a point where the path crosses the end of an obvious trench. Entering the trench, one goes under an arch and then down a series of short rift climbs to reach the floor of the main cleft or fissure. From the south west end the passage gradually reduces in height to become a very low crawl emitting very strong draught and into a large chamber which is roughly (35m x25m x20m) in size. There is yet another shit pot at Upper *Siju* which is at a depth of 19 metres and roughly about 162 metres long.

Ordinarily the Garo people avoided going inside any cave considering them to be the abode of wild ferocious animals and also that of evil spirits. As per the records available the first man to venture inside was a brave military officer. Despite local beliefs and superstition, he made a brave solo attempt to explore it in 1874 and actually covered a distance of 3,900 ft. It was found out much later when later explorers found a bottle in one of the channels wedged between the rocks; the evidence that he reached up to that point.

Over the years many different groups of experts and amateur cavers too made exploratory attempts to find out how deep and how far the underground channels extended but could not complete the whole exploration works to reach any definitive conclusion. Countless numbers of local people and youngsters too had entered the cave just for the fun and

thrill of being underground; some had pleasant discoveries, whilst some encountered unforeseen problems. Some of them even had a harrowing experience of losing their way in the maze of tunnels.

In 1919 the then Deputy Commissioner of Garo Hills Mr R. Friel accompanied by some British Government Officers and Mr. Harrison W. Momin ventured deep into the cave. There they were literally awestruck by the magnificence of the interior. Exquisite stalagmite and stalactite formations of various shapes and sizes, numerous waterfalls cascading down from narrow channels astounded and mesmerised them. Moreover, they were ecstatic to find so many strange and unusual creatures like different species of fishes, crustaceans and insects thriving inside the cave. At one time they were startled by a loud splash ahead of them possibly by a large creature diving into the deep pool but since it was beyond the range of their light, they could not ascertain what animal that was. They could identify a lot of different species of plant and animal life which were hitherto unknown to ordinary laymen like us. After exploring the cave for the most part of the day they came out of the cave to find it was still early afternoon, so determined to see and explore some more they once again entered the cave. They had not gone far yet when they noticed fresh gigantic footprints. The water was still dripping out from the footprints on the rocks indicating whatever animal or beast it was must be of gargantuan size and judging by the fresh footprints just a few feet ahead of them. Thrilled at what they found, they came out of the cave and re-entered with experts to determine what kind of creature that footprints belonged to. After careful examination of the footprints, they came to the conclusion that it could probably belong to a giant

amphibian. Ecstatic with their find, fired up once more with enthusiasm they searched everywhere to locate that strange unknown creature but was met with failure; for by that time they did not see any more new footprint and the creature was nowhere to be seen. They were at a loss where to search; probably that creature disappeared into some crevice to hide. Bitterly disappointed they had to abandon their search.

Dr E. S. Downs who was Medical Superintendent of Tura Christian Hospital, from 1927 to 1962, once during his tenure undertook an exploratory expedition to *Siju* Cave along with a group of enthusiastic elders and several visiting sahibs (foreigners) accompanied by the then Pastor Tura Baptist Church. Reportedly after exploring around the cave labyrinth for most part of the day marvelling at the wonderful creations of nature, they slowly retraced their steps when suddenly they were shocked to find a big rock had blocked their way at one point. They were absolutely certain that that blocking rock was not there when they went past that way earlier. They tried to move that rock away but to no avail; it was too big and too heavy. It was tightly wedged at the entrance that their combined efforts could not shift it. For a moment they were at a loss what to do; for they did not know how to find another channel for exit. Therefore, they all knelt down on the dirt and began to pray, then, after nearly an hour miraculously the rock dislodged and rolled itself away wide enough for them to negotiate their way through to safety. Towards sundown they came out of the cave harrowed and subdued with the frightening ordeal but thankful to God for His wonderful deliverance. They rejoiced at the knowledge that prayers can unlock blocked pathways and that there is no greater power on earth than the powers of the Heavenly God. Thank God, in

this particular case the power of the prayer made the *te·teng* relent and released them unharmed

Once outside they told the people of their frightful experience inside the cave and the locals immediately came to the conclusion that it must have been the *te·teng* who blocked the exit. There are countless numerous tales about the *te·tengs* involved in such unpleasant incidents. Sometimes when they feel that their privacy had been unnecessarily intruded or felt threatened in some way or in some cases when they like the person they block the entrance so that the inmates cannot escape unless they decide to release them again. In this case too it must have one of the reasons the *te·teng* wanted to keep them a prisoner.

Te·tengkol-Balwakol of Nengkong or the Wind cave: - During 1994; the exploration team consisting of four renowned Speleologists from U.K and Germany, namely Simon, Jenny, Daniel and Brian made a meticulous study of this cave and some more in and around *Nengkong* village. *Nengkong* village where this cave is located is a few kms inside from the *Baghmara Nongal- Bibra* Road. Besides *Te·tengkol -Balwakol* there are several smaller and bigger some very impressive caves and caverns within the periphery of the village. From the reports they submitted it was found that they were greatly astounded and impressed by the magnificence of those caves; and that too despite their immense knowledge and experience in exploring the subterranean beauty in many parts of the world. It is said that the interior portion of the cave is so refreshingly cool and breezy. Even when it is sweltering hot outside, the inside of this cave registers a cool low degree of temperature that rarely fluctuates. It is not known where the cool rejuvenating breeze comes from but because of its cool air

inside it is called *Balwakol* literally meaning the wind passage. It is a common belief that it was inhabited by the *te·tengs* that is why the name *te·tengkol -balwakol* or the airy cave of the *te·tengs*.

The entrance to the cave is a low stooping height passage that gradually enlarges till it reaches a small stream. The channel runs into a T shape junction. The right-hand passage leads to an exquisitely well decorated passage, which they appropriately named *Jenny's Jewel Box*. This was owing to its unsurpassed beauty of stone formations.

This *Te·tengkol- Balwakol* cave lies above the ledge in the west wall of the limestone gorge on *Chibe Nala River*. It is located roughly four kms north of *Nengkong* village. Another entrance lies 120 metres further up. Altogether there are six entrances to the system in the cliff face between the two entrances. This fine cave system consisted of a wide variety of passages ranging from large to small streams, river passage, inlets and large chambers. At the time of exploration, they completed roughly 5 kms in length and suspected that there is a possibility of linking it to the *Do·bakkol* cave which will lengthen its underground passage to 10 kms or more. If that is so, it will be one of the longest caves ever explored in Garo Hills. Over a period of five days the experts from abroad explored and mapped *Te·tengkol-Balwakol*; *Bokbak Te·tengkol*, *Do·bakkol*, *Matchakol- Matrongkol* and some smaller less significant caves and caverns.

Chibe nala caves :- Near the vicinity of *Nengkong* along the river channel of *Chibe nala River* and *Rongdik River* along the river banks there are several more caves; some are quite big and long and some not so big and some small. The *Do·bakkol Chibe nala* cave is approximately 1,700 meters and is 15 meters deep. However, this fine dendritic cave had only

been partially explored; it is speculated that this cave joins *Te·tengkol* as one of its conjoined channels.

One cave known as *Bokbak Do·bakkol* was explored by expert cavers Tony, Rob, Helen and Chris from U.K during their exploration studies of the caves of Meghalaya. They mapped and photographed the cave approximately up to one and half km in length as the cavers could not proceed further due to obstructions by choked boulders. The entrance led to three-way channels but all of them were blocked with debris that they were compelled to abandon further survey. This cave is mainly consisted of a complex series of connected small caverns.

Another cave known as *Matchakol/ Matrongkol* or the Tiger and Mountain Goat cave so called because it was suspected to be the cave where wild animals used to take shelter is a small cavern located some 300 metres downstream of *Te·tengkol*. It is not of any impressive depth or length as per the record since the cavers could survey only up to a depth of 60 metres only, however, they felt that there is a possibility that all those smaller caverns and channels probably are interconnected and are connected to the main *Te·tengkol Balwakol* cave. They realized that there is a need to study the *Nengkong* caves along the *Chibe Nala* and *Rongdik* Rivers but that time due to the limited time frame given to them they had to leave it half way. Let us hope that someday they may come again or some other group may complete the survey and exploration of the entire network.

Besides the above caves already explored and mapped by expert speleologists there are several more astounding caves in the vicinity of *Nengkong* village. Just 5 kms or so in the northerly direction recently two very impressive caves have been located called *A·sak* and *Dikka* caves respectively

and by the accounts given, they are as big and as magnificent as the ones already explored.

Balpakram Caves

The cave explorers visited the rugged forest of *Balpakram* plateau also and recorded that the area exhibits some spectacular karst scenery well within the *Balpakram* National Park. The National Park is essentially a plateau that is dissected by north to south flowing rivers that have in places cut down through the rock strata to form impressive valleys, cliffs and canyons.

Mahadeo Do·bakkol (Bat cave) appears to have been dissected from *Mahadeo* River cave or *Chiringkol* also known as Grand Canyon. *Chiringkol* is an impressive river cave running parallel with the river. It has some distinctive channels which the cavers gave the name as Tiger's entrance; The Railway Tunnel that has four-way junctions with passages leading off left and right almost at right angles to the main passage. There is also an impressive chamber the Speleologists called the Blue Arch.

Mahadeo stal kol is an obvious large cave in the foot of a cliff in the right-hand wall of *Mahadeo* gorge. This is a very beautiful cave well decorated by stalactite and stalagmite formations; said to be one of the best calcite formations and deposits found in all Meghalaya.

The *Mingsing* cave lies in the *Rongra* river valley. It is a small resurgence cave named after the person named *Mingsing* who was said to be the first man to have explored the cave.

Penda Cave:- *Penda* cave is situated in an area of obvious *karst* scenery (limestone pinnacles) that lies to either side of the track connecting Forester's Office at *Hattisil*. During their visit to Meghalaya from 1992-94 some world famous speleologists explored this cave and reported that it consists mainly of one single chamber some 6 metres wide, 10 metres long and 3 metres high with a sloping floor. The chamber is decorated with old calcite formations and has no dark zone. A low bedding crawl leading off from the base of the left wall enters a sloping boulder filled bedding passage which becomes low after only a few metres. This is an excellent cave to take shelter from wind and storms and for night camps for travellers.

As mentioned before there are numerous other caves and caverns of smaller sizes and shapes but nonetheless very impressive found dotted all across the land. However, the caves in the central and upper northern regions are not of limestone formations; they are mostly sandstone caves as such bereft of stalactites and stalagmites.

Menggo kol :- This cave is situated at the lower region of *Balpakram* Hill in the *Maheskola* River. The belief that this cave is an abode of a certain benevolent white cat deity hence the name *menggo kol*. The locals claim that there have been numerous sightings of a mysterious white cat in or around the cave's vicinity but the astounding part is that it is no ordinary white cat. Several adventurers when they got lost in the maze of the cave and could not find their way out recounted how a certain white cat used to appear from nowhere and lead the lost cavers out. It is strongly suspected to be the benevolent resident cat deity of the cave.

Nokatgre caves:- A few kms from *Emangre* village in the South Garo Hills District in the *Nokatgre* village there are

several large and small caves most of them still undiscovered and unexplored except for the few handful local adventurers who had ventured into them just for fun and out of curiosity.

Chiabol grim cave:- This cave is located at *Nokatgre*, near *Tolegre* in South Garo Hills District. Deftly hidden among the rock crops, this very alluring cave remains largely unexplored. Entrance is through the small obscure gap right from the entrance itself mesmerising magnificent stalagmites and stalactites greets the adventurers. There are even some rocks that produce ringing tones like that of gongs. Inside it is like an arch gate magnificently decorated.

Chipu Chi ram-Songbar Rong·brak:- Near *Tapa* village in the North Garo Hills Region there is an underground channel which could be five kilometres long more or less. The calculation of its length had been arrived at considering the distance from *Rong·miram A·bri* to *Mereng A·bri* which is roughly 5 kms in distance; for this underground channel starts from *Rong·miram Hill* range and came out in *Mereng A·bri*.

However, this cave is different from other caves for this does not belong to the limestone cave category but a sedimentary rock cave. Many people had reportedly entered the cave only to turn back in fright after some distance when they hear the frightening hissing sound from deep underground. Proceeding deeper into the channel, after some distance the explorers would get the suffocating revolting strong odour of serpents and a little beyond came across a mound of rocks among which countless numbers of snake egg shells abound. That was the breeding ground of all kinds of snakes. The live snakes probably hibernate in the cracks of the mound of rocks for the cavers rarely saw any

snake inside, they said. That was as far as any adventurer could go; for beyond that mound of rocks nobody had ever ventured inside except one person *Pa Silbang Cheran Momin* of *Kantolguri* village. *Pa Silbang Cheran Momin* also was repelled the first time but persistency paid off in the end. He was the lone *Songsarek*, a Non-Christian in the village who remained true to his traditional roots of worshipping and serving the deities. In turn he was blessed by them immensely and if anyone was in any sort of trouble, he was able to cajole the *mites* to come to their aid whatever the problem or situation was. He declared himself a good friend of the *mites* and wielded great powers over them. Reportedly till now he was the only one who could explore the entire channel with the permission of the serpent deities. As mentioned before, the first time he tried he was also repelled by the frightening hiss. Passage beyond that part was forbidden for ordinary mortals. An enormous serpent coiled up lying in the middle of the channel eyeing him suspiciously and hissing out menacingly refused to allow him to pass. He begged and pleaded with the deities to let him proceed further and explore but the serpent would not give him side hissing more menacingly. The permission for him to enter was denied. Disappointed *Pa Silbang* had to turn back. Then one night he was told in his dream that if he sacrifices a red cock he would be allowed to go in. *Pa Silbang* was jubilant. This was a too good opportunity to miss. The next day itself he took a red cock, sacrificed it at the mouth of the cave poured out its blood in offering to them and once more pleaded with the gods. *"I have brought you a red cock as you desired, now please allow me to enter your abode. I promise I do not mean any harm; I just want to see the inside of your dwellings."*

After that when he went in, though he saw several big serpents inside they simply watched him passed by. The inside of the cave was awesome and beautiful beyond description. In some places the channel narrowed down just big enough to crawl through, some places were wide, higher than any normal human height. He was awestruck by some of the spectacular breath-taking beauty of the insides of the cave. As he continued on marvelling at the awesomeness of the dwellings of the serpents, suddenly he came to the end of the cave and found himself outside in bright light. Looking around he realized that he was on the other side of *Mereng* Hill and that he had traversed underground for roughly five kilometres.

PART - IV

Legendary deep pools:

Dombe Wari

Perhaps, among the legends, *Dombe wari* tops the list. Of late some research had been carried out by several people trying to get the veracity of the stories revolving around this legendary deep pool in the middle of nowhere. The legend is about the beautiful maiden *Dombe* and how she was abducted by the besotted mermaid king. This pool is located a few kms from *Eman-A·sakgre*, right in the middle of nowhere, deep inside the Reserved Forest of *Emangre*. How that pool came to be there is a mystery steeped in tradition, legend and superstitious belief. In the midst of dense forest there is no spring water or any streamlet from where the water could come. In all certainty it looks like and was probably created as the hill top caved in probably during the earthquake; but the locals have a very interesting different version as to how the pool was created. They claim that the deep pool at the top of the hill came into being when a lovelorn mermaid king abducted his beloved by digging a water channel underneath.

According to the Garo folklore and legend, once upon a time, in the village *Rampatgre* on the banks of *Dareng* River there was one girl of exceptional beauty; called *Dombe Rani*. She was the most beautiful woman in the whole region. As she grew older she became even more bewitching. When she came to marriageable age, as per the Garo customary law,

she was married off to her father's nephew from another village known as *Joreng*. The husband became so besotted with her beauty that wherever he was or whatever he was doing he was forever bragging of his wife's beauty. One fine morning it so happened that while by the riverside he was thinking loudly about his wife's ethereal beauty; a mermaid king soaking up the sun near by the deep pool overheard what *Joreng*, *Dombe's* husband was saying. He felt so amused at his braggadocio and so curious that he decided to take a peek at the lady and judge for himself. Not many days later the mermaid king disguised himself as a pedlar selling knick knacks and visited the village where *Dombe* lived. However, as soon as he laid his eyes on the lady he fell headlong in love with her. She was so ethereally beautiful that he was completely mesmerised. It was the proverbial love at first sight come to the fore. He could not take his eyes off her and there and then decided to abduct her and make her his queen. He began to secretly lurk at the village bathing ground, at *Wari Dilwang*, *Rong-kusmang* just below the confluence of *Dareng* River and *Damet* rivulet and watched out for an opportune moment to take her away to his water world kingdom. When she came to the water, he quickly abducted her to be his queen. The aggrieved husband managed to get her back and tried to shield her by making a small *bo-rang* in the middle of the jungle but the besotted mermaid king found her and took her away again. One night as they lay asleep in their *bo-rang*, the mermaid king caused the whole hill top to cave in and took away *Dombe* and her kids. *Joreng* was left dead on the spot. In the morning the people were astounded to find that the tree where *Dombe* and her family settled for the past several months was gone and the whole hill top caved in and became a wide crater, filled with clear deep water. Only the top branches of the

banyan tree remained above the deep waters. *Joreng* was dead but *Dombe* and her kids were never found again. That place came to be known as *Dombe wari* or *Dombe's* pool as a commemoration to the tragic end of the beautiful wife who became a victim of her own beauty.

***Na·ka Chikong*:** One pool of *Ildek* River known as *Na·ka chikong* is another pool which not only connected with the spirits of the dead but also is steeped in mystery. The *Ildek* River in the Northern Garo Hills, flows northwards to *Jinjiram* River, which joins the great Brahmaputra River. The *Na·ka Chikong* pool is located at *Badakka* village; just a few kms inside in the hills from *Duphdhara* market place on the *Paikan Guwahati* Road. *Badaka* is considered a sacred place not only by the locals but by the Assamese people as well. Every year the Hindus from the neighbouring villages in Assam throng to the place to pay homage.

In the middle of the pool there is an enormous rock in the belly of which thousands upon thousands of fishes thrive. It is said that under that enormous rock there is *na·mitim na·sok* or the special life sustaining fish milk, fats and vitamins; that makes the fishes grow faster stronger and healthier and give them longevity. Precisely for this very reason fishes from all over flock to *Na·ka chikong* to partake of that *na·sok na·mitim*.

It is also considered sacred by the spirits of the dead or *me·mang* they say. The spirits of the dead, consider the *Na·ka Chikong* of *Ildek* river pure and clean; while all other pools of all other rivers of Garo Hills are not considered so. According to the spirits of the dead all the rivers and rivulets including the deep pools in them have become polluted and unclean; except for *Na·ka Chikong* which remains pure and unpolluted. So, when a person dies and the lamentation

dirges sung for him, there were mentions of this *Na·ka Chikong* for the spirits to clean their clothes in that pool.

Tusin Wari:- Near *Gondenggre* village in the *Arbella* Hill range at the source of the *Ringgi* river, there is one small pool which is highly revered believing that a powerful *chisak mite* that controls the source of river water had made his dwelling place therein. The small pool is teeming with small river fishes like *na·chi*, *na·bat*, *na·katok*, *ironggi* etc besides shrimps' crabs and river mussels. But it is strictly forbidden to catch fish from there lest the *chisak mite* gets provoked and rain calamity on the whole village. Anyone who wilfully disobeys was to face dire consequences for breaking the restrictions of taboo.

Several years ago, one man named *Tusin T. Sangma* went fishing with his wife from that *Ringgi* River. They were slowly coming upstream, collecting shrimps and small river fishes; starting from some distance downstream and reached a small deep pool. There they saw one big cat fish, tried to catch it and when he failed, he injured it with his weapon. Unfortunately, that huge cat fish was no ordinary fish; what *Tusin T. Sangma* and his wife thought was the big cat fish was in fact the *chisak mite*, the guardian deity of the river source. Unknowingly *Tusin Sangma* tried to kill it and was avenged. He had to pay the extreme penalty with his own life for harming the deity.

Thereafter the village chief issued a decree forbidding anyone from catching fish from that pool and in remembrance of the man who got avenged by the gods they called it *Tusin wari*. Till now the people of the area never catch any fish from there. They revere the pool as the abode of the powerful *chisak mite* and allow the fishes to thrive.

Bisak Wari :- This deep pool is located a little further down from *Jengjal* market in the *Ringgi* River. *Bisak Wari* is located wedged between high rocky cliffs that it is almost hidden from view. The water is dark and deep and teeming with fishes but villagers from the surrounding areas do not venture into the river nor catch fishes from there for fear of the formidable spirit residing there. There is a big rock jutting out from the depths of the *wari* under which a channel runs through connected to some other big pool somewhere. The surroundings are overgrown with big sturdy trees but it is still next to impossible to scale up those high cliffs to get a good glimpse of the *wari*. However, it became better known as the abode of a powerful deity.

Mesak dare and pool:- About 2 kms upstream from *Rongram* market area; roughly 15 kms from Tura on Tura Guwahati Road; near the village *Rongchigre* amidst the serene pristine surroundings there is a beautiful waterfall cascading down from between the rock cliffs on either side. It is the beautiful *Mesak dare* of *Rongram* River. It was called *Mesak Dare* because there used to be one rock in the periphery of the falls that caused intense itching. Within minutes of sitting down on that particular rock one would get itchy scratchy so badly that no matter how much he scratched the itch never goes away but increases in its intensity. Because of the presence of the irritating itchy rock (radio- active rock or uranium) it came to be known as *Mesak dare* (*mesak* means itching).

That rock was in fact the uranium rock lying exposed to the elements of nature on the surface of the earth. The local people in their ignorance did not know the dangers of having such highly hazardous minerals around them and simply accepted it as a wonder itchy rock. Thankfully not

many years ago, in 2012, Geological Department of India reportedly had carted away several truckloads of such itchy rocks from around those areas; most probably that particular itchy rock also was taken away; otherwise, the ignorant people around would have been severely affected by the exposure to such dangers of nature. For this reason, Garo Hills region needs to be thoroughly investigated by all sections of science and create awareness in matters where necessary.

In the same area there is a dark pool between the rocks; said to be the *kaldik* or the urinal of the *mites* (supernatural spirits). Ordinarily it looks like the big puddle of dirty water collected in the hollow of the rocks. The water in that pool is dark like black soot and gives out the overpowering obnoxious stench; exactly like the foul smell of dirty pool of urine. The story in this connection is that spirits use that particular dark pool as their urinal. In the earlier days if any one happened to be near about the place or simply passing by just before dawn, they would hear the sound of spirits micturating (urinating) into that pool. Even now, some people say that if you are around the place towards dawn and quietly listen, sounds of someone urinating into the pool can still be heard distinctly; even when nobody was around. It is because the spirits or *mites* are invisible to naked human eye although their activities are not entirely inaudible to men.

Jolding Wari:- This big pool is located near *Gajingpara* in the North Garo Hills District. *Jolding Wari* was created as an aftermath of the great earthquake that shook Garo Hills on the 12th of June in 1897. At that time it was a hillock and one man by the name of *Sokman Koksi*_alias *Jolding* and his wife had made their jhum cultivation in that hill. On that

fateful night the couple were in their *jamadal* (jhum hut) sleeping when the earthquake struck and the whole hillock caved in taking the night vigil keeping couple with them. The cave in was not sudden; from what the locals and those who witnessed it narrated that initially only a small lake was formed but during the period of seven days the land began slowly sinking around till it became a big lake and that was why it came to be known as *Jolding Wari*. Close by the *Jolding* lake another smaller lake also was created called *Jolding Dena*. The mystery behind this lake is not how it is formed but because it is suspected to be the abode of some very formidable spirits.

Catching fishes from that lake depends on the mood of the deities residing therein. If they bless the fishermen, they would have a good catch but if somehow, they were not in the mood even if he throws the net whole day through not even a single fish would be caught. Another very intriguing factor about this lake is its transparent clear waters at all times of the year. Despite the presence of so many trees all around there are no fallen leaves or any other debris floating around. It always remains crystal clear devoid of fallen leaves.

This mysterious, magical lake is roughly eight kms from Mendipather town. In order to reach that place, one has to pass through *Dilma Wa-genang*; *Dilma Soksan*, *Mongpangro*, *Kera Galram* and *Okbima* villages and then cross the *Chidrang* River and trek for about one km on foot.

Dachi lake:- On the way to *Bajengdoba*, we come across a group of beautiful lakes on both sides of the road. at the village *Anogre*, just 45 kms from Tura. Not long ago the State tourism Department had taken it over for tourism promotional activities. Way side inn was constructed with a

view to attract tourists. For some time people were attracted and thronged to the area on Saturdays and Sundays teeming with pleasure seekers taking their kids for family picnic and joy ride in the boat. However, that scenario suddenly changed as reportedly rumours started regarding the existence of huge *sangkni*s in the lakes that are well connected through underground channels.

Tasek wari:- A little beyond *Songsak* in the east Garo Hills District on the *Songsak-Rongjeng* road there is a cluster of several deep pools close to each other the bigger ones being *Tasek*, *Dambong wari*, *Ruandik*, etc. Reportedly those deep pools were created by the implosion and damming of the upstream river during the severe earthquake in 1897. Fishes are there plenty but catching them is next to impossible for all five deep pools are connected; so, when nets are thrown in one the fishes would escape to other pools.

Na·minja wari :- Near *Rombagre* village on the way to Williamnagar, there is one very deep pool in the *Simsang* River known as *Na·minja Wari*. This deep *wari* is the home for many giant size fishes and other species of water denizens. The story goes that many years ago the locals found a very strange huge fish whose head resembled the head of the tiger. Hence, they called it *na·matcha na·skal* or the monster tiger fish. It used to come up from the deep occasionally and dragged any unattended babies, small children and animals to the deep and devoured them. After such several incidents the locals began to wonder what was going on and decided to keep vigil. They were shocked to see an enormous strange fish came up from the deep. Such a type of fish had never been seen before in that pool. Incensed with grief and anger at the loss of lives due to that

strange fish they killed it. That fish was so huge that they had to cut up its flesh to bring it up to the bank. Then they decided to have a feast of the strange fish on the bank of the river itself. They cut up the meat into small portions and cooked but to their utter shock and surprise the fish refused to be cooked. After cooking more than three hours they took out one piece to taste only to find to their utter consternation that it was still raw. As they cut a small bite size, the blood oozed out still fresh. Puzzled they piled up more fire wood and cooked several hours more and yet when they checked it was still raw; the meat did not cook at all.

So, some men stayed overnight tending the fire and cooked for three days and three nights; yet, the fish remained as before, refusing to get cooked. The people got frightened; what kind of fish was that that refused to be cooked for three long days and nights? Normally it should have been reduced to thick broth. Gripped with uncontrollable fear that it might not be any ordinary strange fish but the water deity itself, they quickly tipped out all the meat into the water; gathered up their utensils and ran back to the village in haste.

Till now they did not know what kind of a fish was it that refused to be cooked and where it came from. Apparently, they never saw such strange fish ever again in the whole area. How could it remain fresh after such prolonged cooking, nobody knew; it was truly a big mystery. Since then that deep pool came to be known as *Na-minja Wari* or the pool where the fish did not cook.

Mahadeo Deo-ban:- It is one of the most beautiful deep pools of Mahadeo River in the South East of Garo Hills District. This is also known as *Dikkini nagil* or *Dikki's* fish conservatory. This is one of the most popular haunts in all of

Balpakram National Park. It extends for more than one km in length surrounded by spectacular rock formations amidst lush greenery. One can easily trek through some rough terrain, just six km off road on the right-hand side beyond the Balpakram National Park gate.

Mrik Wari :- *Mrik Wari* is one of the many deep pools of *Simsang* River. It is located a little beyond Williamnagar town. This is one of the deepest *waris* of *Simsang* for the legend says that long, long, ago when Garo Hills experienced severe drought lasting several years, when all the river waters dwindled and gradually dried *Mrik Wari* remained as if the drought had no effect on it. During those days *Abong Noga* was the great Garo chief who exercised immense powers over his subjects. It is said that only two places in the whole area, *Mrik Wari* of *Simsang* River and *Wari Dilwang* of *Jadi* rivulet at *Jadi Dare* contained water. People made makeshift bamboo ladders and lowered it down to the bottom to fetch water from the *Wari Dilwang* and managed to survive the drought.

The subjects of *Abong Noga* were not so lucky. He made his people do forced labour for the whole day in exchange for a bucket of water. The tyrant *Abong Noga* did not stop there. He kept the pool covered so that no one would be able to take water without his knowledge and permission.

Redingsi Wari

There is a sort of mystery attached to this particular *wari* or the deep pool. The story that went around and is still prevailing to some extent till today is that there must be a powerful *mite* or deity in the deep pool for whenever people tried to take pictures of the pool it always came out blank. It

must be true because one prolific photographer and wanderlust *Shri F. R. Marak*, vouched for the veracity of the local gossip saying that the photo shoot either came out blank or the whole role mysteriously got spoiled. That was several years ago before the turn of the millennium when digital photography was still out of reach for people of Tura. However, he went out to say that even with the digital cameras they could not get the picture; as if some invisible screen was in front. It appears that the *mite* therein does not allow the humans to get a good picture of the pool, up close. However, if the picture was taken from a far distance, the *mite* could not prevent it.

Bugakol:- In the *Rongku* rivulet, a tributary of *Bugi* river that flows to the south and into Bangladesh, there is one deep pool called the *Bugakol*. As the name suggests which means the mermaids hole or pool it is believed to be the main city of the water world kingdom. One man by the name *Pearson Marak* of that area who has the affinity with the python one day explored the *Bugakol*. Later on, he narrated how the deep pool bifurcated into two channels and how going by the right-hand channel he came to a very big, brightly lit beautiful city supposedly to be the palace of the *buga* king. He could see the bright lights even from afar. He had to resist the urge to go further and exploring the city for fear of armed guards at the city gates. He therefore quietly sneaked out by a side tunnel; and by chance came upon a colony of *sangkni* abode where there could be at least one hundred or more *sangkni* families residing there; he said.

Wari chora :- Located near Emangre in the South Garo Hills District had suddenly became a hub of tourist activity for its easy accessibility and serene picturesque surroundings. The deep blue crystal-clear waters beckon

local and inbound tourists from outside. The local authorities have put boats for those more adventurous tourist who would like to row right to the heart and base of the waterfall.

Matrong malbat dare and wari :-This is another place near *Rongsu* village. The literal meaning of the name is the *matrong* or serow the mountain goat crossing. It is so called because the mountain goats known as *matrong* or *marong* in local dialect like to cross the river just above the spectacular waterfall that cascade down to a deep pool below.

Aginma wari :- Located just above the *Emangre* market place this legendary spectacular pool is very easily accessible for tourists. There is a beautiful story behind how it got its name. This long elongated deep pool is teeming with all kinds of fish. According to legend, once a man went to fish in that pool. Putting his fish traps at the strategic point of the pool he waited for the fish to swim downstream but unfortunately for him, not a single fish was caught. Bored and tired he dozed off on the banks when suddenly a woman came by carrying a basket of firewood, for a moment the woman looked askance at the sleeping man and asked him whether he caught any fish to which the man replied in negative moaning that his children will have to go hungry that night. Taking pity on the man, the woman said, alright let me reach home I shall give you a basketful of rice, nobody deserves to go hungry she added sympathetically. Moved by her kindness the man thank her profusely and wanted to know who she was. I am *Aginma* and I am the sole custodian of this pool she said and suddenly disappeared. The man woke up with a start and looked around to see which way she went but she was nowhere to be found anymore. Soon, he noticed a big fish came swimming downstream followed

by another and another. Streams of fishes were suddenly coming to his traps. He made a big catch that day as much as he could carry and went home a very happy man. Since that day that spectacular pool is known as *Aginma wari*.

PART - VI

Places of Historical, mythical and Legendary significance

It is an accepted fact that Garos were not the aboriginals of the land; they emigrated from Tibet several centuries ago. Some scholars say that they took centuries to reach the present settlement; yet there are others who are of the opinion that they settled in Tibet for unknown number of years or centuries and moved down to the present settlement less than five centuries ago and took four decades (forty years) to reach. Again, there is another version who believes that they settled in Cooch Behar for four hundred years long. If this version is to be accepted then it must be some other group; entirely separate from those who migrated from Tibet en-masse much later on. Is it possible then that the Garos were made up of larger group than originally accepted? Then it must be accepted that the group or groups who had migrated from Tibet and those who settled in Cooch Behar were two separate groups; for if the *matgriks* like *Jappa Jalimpa*, *Sukpa Bongepa* leading one group; *Auk Raja Asilik Gitel*, *Durka Buia* and *Rengwa* leading the 2nd group and *matgriks* like *Raja Sirampa*, *Kotta Nangrepa* and *Muga Dingchepa* leaders of the third group were alive and still strong when they reached Garo Hills proved beyond reasonable doubt that the whole journey took less than fifty years. This version is more acceptable and more credible from all angles.

In their forty years of wandering through hills and vales, through the territory of other established kingdoms, their journey was wrought with much hardships, persecutions and constant battle. Not much is known about the details except some bits and pieces that too mingled and tangled with the tales from one group with the others.

It was inevitable or rather expected that they faced numerous surmountable and insurmountable problems and difficulties and took over the land against all odds of nature. There are stories galore how they overcame those hurdles, some mind boggling, some spine-chilling acts of bravery and courage. Hence, there are many places connected to their historical and legendary importance. Unfortunately owing to the ill planned division of land and mindless stupidity of some of the ancestors many of those important historical places are now within the territory of Assam state and some in Bangladesh.

A·dokgre :- Some scholars have accepted the version that when the Garos finally reached Garo Hills, the promised land, they last camped at *A·dokgre*, on the fringe borderland to Assam. It was here that the *tilta wa·dang* gave out new shoot early the next morning, indicating that their journey was over and that the emigrants had finally reached their destination. It therefore became historically important as the last camp and the first village set up in the Promised Land.

Rongrenggre Chisobibra- Rongrenggre Chisobibra a small obscure place, roughly 12 kms before reaching Williamnagar town the District Headquarter of East Garo Hills District, earned the distinction in the annals of Garo history as the last historic battleground where *Togan Nengminja* with a handful of brave warriors unsuccessfully tried to defend their land. The place is located a little beyond the *Samanda* Block

Headquarter, right in the middle of the Rongrenggre Reserve Forest, close to the bank of Simsang River. A monument has been erected at the very spot where Togan Sangma reportedly fell to the bullets, to commemorate the feats of valour of the matgriks; Pa Togan Nengminja Sangma and his brave compatriots.

Father Pianazzi reportedly wrote a very interesting report about that desperate last battle for survival. He elucidated thus *“By the time the British soldiers reached the area there were still a few strongholds of some Garo chiefs who had staunchly refused to give in and were ready to fight back to defend their land at all costs. He narrated how as soon as the rumour had reached independent Garo chiefs that Gov’t soldiers had come to subdue them with hollow spears that spat fire at a great distance, most chiefs were greatly agitated not knowing how to defend themselves and their land; but Gwal, the bravest of them was busy experimenting how to counter the fire emitting weapon. Thrusting his heated red-hot spears into banana trunks he was well pleased that the red-hot iron cooled down at once. He was jubilant; he had found a perfect solution to their worries. This gave him the much-needed confidence to instil his band of warriors.*

The Garo warriors had decided to take the soldiers by surprise by ambush and attack method. Early in the morning, in high spirits and full of confidence armed with two layers of succulent banana trunks they stealthily crawled through the thick jungle and rushed at the enemy when they were stopped short by a roar of volley of blazing guns. Deafened and disconcerted they halted and wavered; a second volley thundered and there on the ground Gwal and two of his bravest friends lay dead. Immediately confidence melted away; the remaining warriors realized the futility of fighting on and meekly surrendered. The natives were so terrified that complete subjugation of the last remaining resisting independent

Garos lands were so easily affected and the entire Garo Hills came under British regime."

According to Shri Dhawaram K. Marak, the heroes of the last battle at *Rongrenggre Chisobibra* were *Gilsang Dalbot Sangma* and *Togan Nengminza*. The present-day generation laugh at the utter stupidity of the whole episode but we must not forget the fact that till that time they were never before exposed to outside civilized world. They were safely cocooned in their own territory totally isolated and protected by hills and dense jungles that outsiders were wary of. They had never seen a gun before and never knew how it worked; for their uneducated primitive minds it was a spear that emitted fire which they thought succulent trunks of banana could contain. The very thought of counter fighting the well organised army with sophisticated weapons with banana trunks was no doubt stupidity at its lowest and laughable; but in the process they exhibited their raw courage and fearlessness to take on the whole army in their own primitive guerrilla way.

Consequently, that last battle at *Rongrenggre Chisobibra* ushered in a new era; it scripted a new chapter in the history of Garo Hills. It heralded the beginning of their transition from utter ethnicity to modernism. Considering all the pros and cons of that subjugations the Garos should be thankful for the British Empire for ushering in the primitive people to light; opening up avenues for education and development all round. If it was not for that complete subjugation in 1872, the Garos in all probability would have remained primitive a lot longer and who knows where and how would they be now?

Do-renggo Wa dachong

Do-renggo Wa dachong in the South Garo Hills District near *Siju Rewak* deserves mention in the history books of the Garos, for, it was the place where the Garo explorers first came face to face with the perils of the deep jungles. It is said that at the time of their entry they found the jungle creepers and the spider webs as thick and strong as the human bicep, the pestering mosquitoes gigantic and the frog so huge that it totally blocked the pathway. In addition, numerous ferocious predators were everywhere. The jungles were so dense and impenetrable that it was spooky; it was equivalent to entering a dark cave; that even during the day time the fireflies were flickering around like twinkling stars. Venturing into the jungles was like entering a dark cave with no clue whether it was day or night.

The history tells us that after decades of wandering through Burma (now Myanmar) one team led by *Auk Raja Asilik Gitel* and his *matgriks* crossed the plains of present Bangladesh and reached the fringes of the densely forested land. Beckoned by the dense jungles the leader sent out an advance party to survey the land for the possibility of occupying it. Undeterred by those insurmountable problems they decided to invade. It was during those times they were shocked to spite a gigantic hawk carrying off a baby deer. That giant hawk was so huge that it could carry off grown cattle effortlessly. As days go by that giant hawk regularly carried off their cattle and even small children if left unattended. Fear gripped their minds and they sought to find a way to kill that hawk by all means. In those days the strongest and the bravest warrior was

Matgrik Buga Changsan

Dikka Rengrap

Mikil Gitchak

Gingting Gingchok

Rangsa Gitchak Marak of *Rangsa Gitchak Marak Chatchi* well renowned for his prowess as a man of herculean strength. His real name was *Changsan Rangsa Gitchak Marak* but after he exhibited his strength and stamina by easily lifting a huge wine jar with his left hand which required three persons to lift the people amazed at his prowess gave him the title

Buga Changsan, Dikka Rengrap. His eyes were always red and had a somewhat pointy nose those ones also were jocularly incorporated in his title. So, his full name became

Buga Changsan Dikka rengrap

Mikil Gitchak Gingting Gingchok

Rangsa Gitchak Marak.

As the oldest warrior *Buga Changsan* was leading the expedition party at the front when they spied the giant hawk sitting on a branch of a huge banyan tree. As the leader of the expedition team, it was his duty to clear the path of all dangers, but he had one problem; his eyesight was no longer sharp. So, his young son who was carried on his back helped him to take aim. Before releasing the arrow he told his son,

"Son, watch carefully, if the giant bird is hit and start falling off its perch, as soon as you notice the tree branches and bamboos waving down you give a victory shout."

Verily as soon as the giant hawk was hit and it started plummeting down breaking tree branches on impact and

when he noticed the bamboo bending down under its weight, young *Daora Snal Rombra Sangma*, gave a mighty victory yell,

“Ka Sangma, Ka raka.

Everyone in the camp acknowledged that the oldest warrior had done it again, that he had killed the giant hawk. However, as it was the son a *Sangma* boy who gave the victory shout; the glory and credit for killing the giant hawk was taken by the son. The place where the giant hawk fell dead came to be known as *Do-renggo Wa-dachong*. It is located in the southern side near *Siju* village.

Do-rengkigre

Do-rengkigre literally translated means (hawk's excreta) is located nine kms North West of Williamnagar town; the headquarters of East Garo Hills District. It was in this small village that the British soldiers after subduing the whole Garo hills region they were intrigued to find the children playing with the long oblong drums chiselled out of the giant hawk's legs and the flutes fashioned from the hollow of the quills.

Long ago, *Do-rengkigre* hilltop was the abode of a giant hawk. It was so huge that when it was sitting on its nest viewed from afar it looked like the huge dome perched atop a hill. Its wing span was about ten metres wingtip to wingtip that when it was in the air it could easily block the heat and light of the sun. That monster bird used to carry away babies, domestic animals and sometimes unwary unattended young children to feast on. After each feast when it expels its dropping became a small mound of dung. It had created so much havoc that one day the residents decided enough was

enough and wanted to get rid of it. They held a *dorbar*, a village community meeting and resolved to kill the *do·skal* the giant bird by any means. They cut down a full clump of the bamboos *wa·ge* and the warriors proceeded cutting them into strips and chiselled out bows and arrows from them. For seven days long the warriors tried to kill it but were unsuccessful. They chased it for seven days and seven nights over seven hills, seven streams and rivulets and then when one day they spied it sitting atop the hill. The moment they had been waiting for so long had come. They took careful aim and took a pot-shot at it. But it was easier said than done. The bird was so huge that the arrows could not penetrate deep enough to kill it but ultimately the awesome job was done.

This was the 2nd killing of the giant hawk ever narrated; the legend of which was passed down through the generations by word of mouth. Probably it must have been the only surviving giant hawk at that time. Many years later when Garo Hills was finally subjugated and the British soldiers reached the area; they were astounded to find kids playing with the strange looking drum and flutes reportedly fashioned out of the leg bones and quills of the slain giant hawk respectively.

There is a cave in the *Jadi Dare Mite Park* in the vicinity of the village itself called *Rori Salnap* (*rori* or non-local dragged inside) where during the operation of subjugation and annexation by the British soldiers one of them was killed by the tiger and dragged into that cave to feast on. The soldiers along with the locals went after it but as they neared the cave the menacing roar of the tiger from deep inside the cave terrified them so much that they abandoned the search.

Jajong Kadoram

This place is located at *Chutiapara* at the Assam Garo Hills border just a little distance from the National Highway Road. Ad verbatim translation of the name stands for stairways to the moon. The name stemmed from the belief that at one time some idiotic persons tried to erect a stairway to heaven to bring down the moon from its perch high on the sky to their dwellings down below. They somehow managed to convince the whole village that one day they all agreed to bring it down. Accordingly, they collected all raw materials they considered necessary and then they proceeded with their plans. They piled up rocks and boulders till it touched the clouds beyond the range of human eye sight. One person was standing at the pinnacle with long bamboo poles to poke and push it out of its perch. The moon was still out of his reach but he thought probably one more bamboo pole would reach it so he shouted down to send up one more bamboo pole. Unfortunately, people down below could not hear him properly audibly and thought that he already had the moon in his hand and was asking to cut the ladder down. Excitedly they shouted the news to one another that he had got the moon and was asking to cut the ladder down. Some people actually cut the ladder as a result of which the whole stone and boulder construction came crashing down along with the man. It crashed down on the men below killing a great many numbers. The rocks lay scattered on the ground although a few of them still remain perched atop one another. As the legend says the remnants of those rocks used for erecting the stairway remains till today as a stark reminder of their stupidity and pursuit of their impossible dreams.

Misi kokdok, gara petchok:- This place is in Songsak area in the East Garo Hills region. *Bonepa Ja·sku* the small statured man whose height reached only up to the knee of an adult man was the first man to settle in that area. One year he had his jhum cultivation around one legendary rock and from around the rock alone he harvested six baskets of millet and hence that place came to be known as *Misi Kokdok A·bri* or the hill of six baskets of millet. While *Bone's* wife while weeding in that cultivation one lizard chameleon kept disturbing her darting from one place to another never going far; she shooed it away gently by pelting pebbles at it but it refused to budge. Perhaps it was trying to protect its burrow or something, nobody knew but its constant proximity bothered her so much that she killed it and impaled it on a stick. The *Gara petchok* name come from the stick she impaled the chameleon on and stuck it to the ground.

That area is believed to be the abode of some formidable deity. It is said that during winter the cold does not affect it or does not shake even when a strong earthquake hits.

Palwang bri patal me·mang song gitcam:- Located around Songsak area, this place was used to a thriving market place in the days of yore where man and spirits and animals did their business side by side. Here everything imaginable from ornamental knick knacks to household items even the items of certain unmentionables. In those days markets were not a regular affair like today. Markets were organised once in a blue moon according to the exigency or the need of the people. So, market days used to be the great social meeting ground. Not only people but also all kinds of animals and even spirits of the dead from far and near would throng to the market to barter their wares.

Dikil rong·song:- In the South Garo Hills District in *Wa·tregittim* village near the bridge on *Nongal-Baghmara* road there is one erected stone pillar known as the *Dikil Rong·song*. That stone was erected as a truce between two parties: the *Dikils* and the Garos. Long ago, when the Garos were still living the life of savagery, taking pride in killing and displaying the human skulls as trophies those were the days when head hunting and decapitating the enemy's head was glorified. Until the young man had taken at least one head, he was not considered a man. Killing and collecting human skulls was the ultimate glory of machismo and the young girls clamoured to get their love and affection.

During one such times one day a brave and daring Garo *matgrik* went to the *Dikil* people's village and killed several men over some petty dispute. Fully aware that the relatives of the slain warriors would certainly seek revenge and pursue him hot on his heels he quickly hurried home and sent out two of his bravest and strongest nephews to wait for the enemy at the footpath junction. The two young men were big and exceptionally strong. As they were waiting for the enemy to turn up, they started playfully pulling down big branches of the banyan tree. At that very moment the pursuing enemy reached the path junction. Briefly hesitating which direction to follow they decided to stop and ask the young boys. Looking at the way those two young men, they were much impressed by the prowess and stamina they exhibited.

Seeing the strangers hesitating at the cross road the boys asked them if they were lost and looking for something or somebody. The strangers told them that they were actually on a mission to take revenge that they were hot on

the heels of one murderer who had come fleeing that way after taking the lives of their relatives in cold blood.

"Oh, if that be the case the person you are after must be our own uncle, yes, he went that way, the coward, they spat out the words. You will find him in that village; he is not that strong and brave, you can easily defeat him but of course if you kill him, you will have to deal with us later on. We shall not allow the deed go unpunished."

Hearing their daring challenge the enemy was suddenly gripped with fear. Those two youngsters seemed to be exceptionally muscular and strong. Even if they could easily take on the murderer, as they hoped to do, they would not be able to deal with the wrath of those two youngsters. They would certainly be no match to their strength. It would be far better to return home safe and sound in one piece than getting hacked to death in the enemy land.

Therefore, they deliberated among themselves and quickly turned back. They told the young men that they had changed their mind; they were no longer willing to advance and would like a truce. In exchange for their lives they swore not carry on the avenging act anymore but return home in peace. Then in order to seal the pact of their treaty they erected a big oblong stone pillar on the banks of *Rompa* River then swearing allegiance pushed the sword on the ground to the hilt next to the stone. The two youngsters accepted their peace offering and allowed them to leave in peace. The intended war was called off and by this the warrior by his cunning strategy saved not only his own head and that of others and secured peace without any bloodshed.

That oblong stone still stands on the banks of the *Rompa* River. The sword however is no more in the vicinity of the

pillar; probably it was stolen or washed away by the torrents of flood.

Mir Jumla's Tomb near Mankachar:- Many people cannot believe that the great General of Aurangzeb could have been buried unknown, unsung and unmerited with no great monument over his tomb. Yet, it is true for here in the obscure small place near Mankachar at the Assam Garo Hills border in the west there stands an unassuming tomb of none other than Mir Jumla; one of the great warriors and Governor General of the great Mughal kingdom.

During the reign of Aurangzeb, the great Mughal Emperor, his kingdom extensively covered almost all parts of present Indian sub-continent. Still, he wanted to conquer Assam and take control of the great Brahmaputra valleys. Prof Satish Chandra in his History Book titled **Medieval India from Sultanate to the Mughals Part II- Mughal Empire (1526-1748)** elaborated that during the reign of Aurangzeb there was a long drawn-out war between the Mughals and the Ahoms reigning over the North Eastern region. The war began when the Ahom Rulers attempted to expel the Mughals from Guwahati and the neighbouring areas so that they could take complete control over Brahmaputra valley. In response to their provocation, Mir Jumla, who was the appointed Governor of Bengal at that time, with headquarters at Calcutta, was directed to take control of the situation. He invaded with a strong army and easily defeated the weak Ahom king forcing him to make a humiliating treaty. Mir Jumla returned victorious but unfortunately, he did not live long after that brilliant victory. He died that same year in 1663; while returning back to Calcutta he was suddenly taken ill and died; his mortal remains were interred at the site where he died; in an

obscure place near Mankachar; where it stands till today. As of now the local Muslim community is doing a good job of maintaining the tomb otherwise, it would have been relegated to oblivion.

What a sad end to the great General!

Wa·dagokgre: Relics of Ancient Kingdom:- Who could have thought that a sleepy little village *Wa·dagokgre*, near *Rajabala* could one day draw attraction and curiosity of both casual viewers and scholars from all over the globe? For, several years ago some relics of the ancient occupation of the land was unearthed. Geographically that site is located at old *Baitbari*, a small village situated along the southern bank of the River *Jinjiram* that flows along the northern border of Garo Hills. During the years 1991 and 1992, the Archaeologists discovered the ruins of an ancient kingdom measuring approximately 15 sq kms in area and supposedly dating back to the 7th - 8th century. During the course of their excavation, they discovered mud cum brick fortification running for a considerable five kms in north-south direction in a horse shoe fashion with moats running round it and ending on the banks of *Jinjiram* River; a tributary of the Brahmaputra River.

In course of excavation, they also discovered a beautifully planned burnt brick temple within the enclave of the horse-shoe. From within the temple area 28 terracotta tiles depicting the Hindu gods and goddesses like four armed Ganesh, Parvati, Kubera, Yaksha and dancing figures were unearthed. The temple had three components, the Garbagriha, the Anterale and the Mandapa or the entrance; the prayer hall and the sancto-sanctorum. From that discovery it could be safely concluded that it must have belonged to a certain Hindu kingdom and dynasty.

Unfortunately, since further excavations were not carried out, anymore, detail information as to who constructed those and whose period and dynasty those ruins belonged to were never ascertained.

The third and most impressive find was the discovery of the site of an octagonal temple with eight miniature Octoones, each octoone having a Shiva linga. The structure appeared to have been of magnificent architecture; with eight subsidiary shrines radiating from the eight arms of the octagon. The excavators also made a surprising discovery of the existence of a stupa associated with Buddhism side by side the Hindu temple complex within the periphery of the enclave. It was not known whether it was a part of some shrine or something else.

Further excavations in the near future may reveal more about those ruins. Until then, we may just sit, wait and watch.

Jugi gopa:-According to the legend, the Garo ancestors migrated from *Torua* or Tibet after centuries of occupying that place presumably due to intense famine and moved downwards in the south easterly direction. In course of their mass migration at one time they settled in Dhubri where King Dhobani was reigning. Initially the king received them well but did not allow them to settle permanently. So, the Garos were once more compelled to leave and came to the banks of River Brahmaputra. There the immigrants faced with misfortunes. The king ruling over the land was cruel and not kindly disposed towards the wandering nomads. However he was enamoured by one Garo beauty by the name of *Jugi Silche*, the daughter of *Kangre-Jingre* and made attempts to marry her by force. To defeat his purpose the emigrants hid the girl in a cave on the banks of River

Brahmaputra and a fierce battle ensued. The cave where *Jugi Silche* was kept hidden came to be known as *Jugigopa*. It lies on the right-hand side bank of Brahmaputra near Goalpara town.

Garomari:- In course of their wandering in search of greener pastures when the Garos came to the banks of River Brahmaputra; they were at a loss how to cross it to the other side. The river was big and deep and impossible to ford on foot. Luckily they met one friendly *Nokma Chigatpa*, who promised to give them 300 (three hundred) numbers of plantain trees in exchange for one Garo maiden. Accordingly, as per their barter agreement a young maiden by the name of *Dimre* was left behind. After crossing the river on makeshift rafts of plantain trunks while they were having their midday meal they were suddenly attacked by Raja Dhobani and his allies. Thus the Garos were compelled to take arms where even the womenfolk bravely defended themselves leaving everything they were doing at that moment. That was the last and the fiercest battle that they fought where the Garos emerged victorious. That battle field bears the name *Garomari* till today.

PART - VII

Places of mythical and mystical interest.

Throughout the ages men had believed that there was a time when men and gods lived together on earth in perfect harmony. They not only co-existed peacefully they even co-habited with one another; in the process they were imparted the knowledge and art of use of ordinary things to their advantage in some supernatural way. That was one reason why the Garo folklore and legends are full of the tales of the mythical half god half humans performing impossible daring acts and stories of incredible exploits.

The belief in the unseen spirits and their supernatural powers are not confined to the Garos alone. While all other tribes, creeds and nations too do not deny their existence, the Garos carry it out farther putting their implicit trust in them. Some may think that in this world of advanced science and technology such interdependence between men and spirits no longer exists but that is not true as far as the Garos are concerned. You may observe that of late the eminent Ancient History Researchers and Advocators of Ancient Aliens theory have been strongly advocating not only the existence of those superior supernatural beings they call Ancient Aliens but also their regular visitations to our planet earth in the ancient past. In this, the exponents had found some strong evidences all over the planet of their superior knowledge in art, science and technology. So, will you believe that those supernatural beings we the Garos call

mites or spirit entities (but ancient aliens to the Historians and Academicians) used to visit, co-existed and co-habited with our forefathers working side by side helping humankind till as late as one and half century ago? Here is one proof; read on:

Alikki-Wari

Before the advent of Christianity which came as recent as just around one and a half century ago the Garos were known as barbaric savages notorious for their head hunting and decapitation of the body. In those days they collected human skulls as trophies and took great pride in displaying them in their houses.

In North Garo Hills District, near the village *Songmegap*; a few kms from the District Headquarter *Resu-belpara*, there used to be one spring of water that gushes out of the side of a huge rock. Unfortunately, that spring water had now dried up. It was located atop a pristine picturesque hill surrounded by dense bamboo groves. The surroundings were as picturesque as it was alluring. That place was known as *Alikki Wari* or *Alikki's pool*. How that *Allikki Wari* came into being is steeped in legend and mysticism.

The history tells us that the Garos were notorious for their savage ways of head hunting. The early British Commissioners recorded in their official records that the hill men were savage barbarians who ventured into the plains for head hunting. In those days the Garos were feared as formidable barbaric savages. They regularly went down to the plains for marketing but very frequently their visits to the plains markets ended in fights and random killings. It is said that whenever they went down to the plains for

bartering and trade they used to get blatantly cheated out of their bargains; hence the violent re-actions. Occasional skirmishes and verbal duels were inevitable; but on many occasions those minor tiffs and arguments would get out of hand and resulted in fights, many people losing their lives and heads in the process. I say losing heads because the Garo savages would literally cut off the heads of their enemies and carry the decapitated heads back to their village as trophies. In this modern age it is gruesome to think of such savagery but that was the way of life then.

The Garos did not go to the plains on a daily basis. Their visits were dictated by the cumulative needs and desires of the whole clan group under the *Nokma*. Therefore, whenever they decided to visit the markets in the plains, they would first offer prayers to their chief deity *Patigipa Ra rongipa* and sought his protection and blessings. Then armed to the teeth, taking sufficient food supplies for a few days, they would leave all prepared for any eventuality.

It so happened that one day as they were preparing to go to the plains and were invoking the *mites* for their protection and for blessing; one total stranger arrived at the courtyard of village *Nokpante* and expressed his eagerness to join them. In their warring state the villagers were sceptic. They simply could not trust any stranger; therefore, the appearance of a total stranger within the periphery of the village initially unnerved them. Suspiciously they plied him with many questions as to his parental lineage, place he came from and all other necessary details. The stranger gave his name was *Alikki* but apart from that he gave only vague answers to their queries. The young man had muscular arms and legs and looked strong. Not only that they could sense his eagerness to fight alongside them. At last, satisfied that

he meant no harm and that he was raring to accompany them; they allowed him to tag along.

Alikki could have been in his late teens or just past for he appeared to be a young man still hot headed and hot blooded, strong and robust physically and appeared to be raring to go to fight. That day too, the inevitable fight broke out between the savage Garos and the Roris. The stranger new comer too fought bravely alongside the warriors; in fact, he killed more people single handed than many seasoned warriors. But unfortunately, as he was tackling the bravest and strongest foe, the enemy got the better of him. The spear pierced him deep on his side and blood gushed out. The young man was grievously injured and yet he continued fighting and managed to kill that rori. The stranger knew that he would not survive after such a fatal wound, so he went back to the village slowly. From the sandy beaches of Brahmaputra he managed to reach the peaks of *Songmegap* but there he fell never to rise again.

That day the Garos were victorious. The triumphant Garo warriors returned home shouting their war cries of victory. As they reached the spot where *Alikki* died they were shocked and filled with sorrow to see their unknown hero fallen dead. They noticed that he had a grievous injury to his side and that the blood was still continuing to ooze out of the wound. The heads of the slain roris were beside him. So the warriors took the decapitated heads and went home planning to come back for him later on to perform befitting funeral rites.

The next day when they came to take his body for the funeral rites, they were in for a huge shock. They became greatly agitated when they could not find his body where he lay the day before. In the exact spot where he died, they

found a huge rock which was not there before; and from its underside belly clear stream of water was gushing out but the body was nowhere near the vicinity. The body of that unknown hero turned into stone and the blood that oozed out of his side became a clear spring of water. Totally mystified and unable to find the body they took the water from that spring and went back to the village to perform the last funeral rites for him.

Back home the puzzled warriors and villagers wanted to know who that man was and where his body disappeared without a trace. They went to the priest and asked him to explain. After conducting certain rites, the priest informed them that they would never find his body for he had no body in the first place. The stranger was no ordinary mortal; he was in fact the *mite* (spirit being) himself, who took the form of a young man and came to help them fight the roris. He told them that he came to help them in answer to their prayers.

The Garos believe that in the olden days the *mite* or spirit beings used to live and help humans working side by side. This is one fine example how spirits or deities come to the aid of humans in their times of need. Now, how do you rate it? Was it a myth or legend?

Grapsiram A·bri - Just before reaching Rajasimla, one comes across a hill known as *Grapsiram* Hill. The mystery of this hill is that the whole hill is dotted with small bamboo groves which are said to be accursed. Those small bamboos which are good for fishing rods and bamboo flutes are not allowed to be cut. The reason behind it is that, whoever cuts those bamboos would soon find themselves entangled in some sort of social scandal. It is said that long time ago *Aje* and *Gilje* sisters whilst on pursuit of their uncles *Radingga*

and *Sadingga* camped in that area and used those bamboos to make bamboo flutes.

Mareng Adil Sikram

A little to the north of *Chotcholja* village in North Garo Hills District on the top of a hill near village *Jalkim* there is one huge menhir like standing rock known as *Mareng adil Sikram* or the *rock where Mareng blew horn*. It was so called because one bold and daring young man by the name of *Mareng Konchikol*, used to blow buffalo horn known as *adil* in local dialect standing tall on the pinnacle of that rock. The rock stands like a living sentinel high above the hill overlooking the village *Jalkim*. It is clearly visible from a far distance; jutting out like a tower above the surrounding rock outcrop. This rock is of huge dimensions and great height. Below the rock they had found a big cave suspected to be inhabited by the pygmy dwarfs with twisted feet called *te-tengs* for they had found many signs of their dwellings. Some adventurers who had entered that cave say that is very narrow at the entrance and have to go in almost crawling on all fours but once inside it is spacious and awesome.

It so happened that many years ago the young man *Mareng* from *Konchikol* village with his two friends named *Baljong Megam* and *Seng ja Megam* secretly enticed a girl from Goalpara market and ran away with her. As soon as the news of the kidnap reached others, the relatives of the girl came after the perpetrators of the offence. *Mareng* and his friends nonchalantly went to the *Jalkim* village, climbed up the huge rock by means of the creepers that wound round the rock; then standing at the pinnacle of the rock *Mareng* sounded his *adil* (the buffalo) horn to challenge the enemy coming after them.

The enemy heard the challenging horn and as they looked in the direction of the sound saw them safely perched high atop the huge rock. That lone standing rock was so high that it was impossible to scale bare handed and clearly out of range for any weapon, even for the arrows. They looked around for means of climbing up the rock but finding it impossible to scale left the place fuming with rage and vowing revenge. Before leaving they slashed down the creepers by means of which those crooks climbed up saying, *"Now let's see how you scoundrels come down; die up there for all we care."*

Mareng and his friends watched the enemy retreat with glee. They spent the whole afternoon on the top of the rock and by evening when they wanted to go home, to their consternation found that the enemy had slashed down the creepers that wound round the rock and that it would be totally impossible to scale down the rock. Unable to communicate their plight to their parents and relatives they were forced to remain on the top exposed to the fury of nature. A few days later they all died from hunger and thirst and exposure to the elements of nature. It was a very tragic end to a brave and daring man.

It is not known if no one was aware of their plight to come to their rescue, or whether they were deliberately left to die a horrendous death through starvation and exposure for fear of the enemies we shall never know now. But the legend he created still lives on for his spirit or perhaps the guarding spirits of his soul would re-act immediately should anyone dares challenge them. Till very recently photography of the rock and scaling of the rock was not allowed for the locals are of the firm belief that the rock is jinxed. Reportedly the villagers of *Jalkim* village had on

many occasions been at the receiving end. The male folk of the village especially the *Areng* clan consider it a taboo just to mention their names. Should anyone from the *Areng* clan talk of the cursed rock there used to be severe repercussions till today. In order to prove their point, they told us about several unpleasant incidents that were inflicted on them whenever somebody or some people broke the taboo. Around the year 2000, some boys scaled up to the first rock and playfully threw down small rocks from there. Then that evening itself the whole village was gutted by fire. How the fire started and spread the whole village so quickly was not ascertained but attributed to the retribution of the malevolent spirit or spirits residing or guarding that rock. On another occasion too, even before mischievous brats scaled up the rock and scattered stones from atop probably to see what the spirits would do; but before they reached the village, strong wind arose and damaged all the houses. That strong wind did not affect any nearby villages, but *Jalkim* village was destroyed. Thereafter scaling the rock by any party was forbidden to save themselves from the wrath of the spirits.

This imposing erect rock is situated near the village *Jalkim* and can be easily accessed. It is roughly 15 kms from the road head at, a little beyond *Doranggri* market area. Two kms inside is the *Kharkutta* village where the Sub-Divisional offices of several Gov't Departments and Development Block Headquarters are located. *Kharkutta* holds market twice a week, on Thursdays and Saturdays. From *Kharkutta* market follow the good motorable road via *Chotcholja*, that will take you past several interesting places like huge standing rocks, a massive rock that almost covered the whole hilltop known as *Rong·ma gitil* or fallen rock, *Aje*

Gilje's pond, at the bottom of that rock which is a small but clean spring lake from where the girls of legendary tales used to take water, and beyond on another hill lies the *Ro·ong mukut* or the stone crown that is in the shape of a crown. Yet on another hill range there are rocks standing close together called the two sisters rocks. All these places and rocks are said to be the abode of some spirits and are revered as such. Recently all those legendary places in one cluster had been taken up by government for developmental works.

Rong·ma Gitil:-As narrated above, on the way to *Mareng Areng* or *Mareng Adil Sikram Rock* at *Jalkim*, not far from the village, there is a huge dome shaped rock known as *Rong·ma Gitil*. It is situated just above the road leading to *Mareng Adil Sikram*. According to legend once two sister princesses had a big fight probably over the crown. There was such a strong tug of war betwixt them; the older sister had her foothold on a clump of broomstick plants whilst the younger sister took her foothold on a big clump of plantain trees. As they tugged and pulled with all their might the older sister's clump of broomstick plants got dislodged and she lost her footing. It must have been such a great fall for the crown she was wearing was flung out so far, beyond another hillock. That crown still remains and had turned to stone. The body of the fallen sister too eventually turned to stone. After her great victory the younger sister left the place for good and is reportedly living somewhere near the Assam border at *Mring A·bri*.

Very recently the local enthusiasts had taken up the site for possible tourist spot development. Nearby among the rock outcrop there is one particular rock supposedly accursed where *Aje* and *Gilje* used to sit in the evenings. The

locals say that anyone sitting on that rock can find himself or herself in a sticky situation getting involved exogenously. With the crystal-clear pool used by *Aje* and *Gilje*, the legendary sister's duo, just below the rock, if properly developed it could turn out to be a tourist spot of great interest. However, in their zeal and enthusiasm the locals had spoilt a portion by drilling the hole into it whereupon the resident spirit had strongly reacted demanding recompense.

Do·gring A·bri

Should anyone tell you that the rock can grow, would you believe? I suppose not! No one would believe, would they? But what if I tell you this is no joke, that there is a rock that actually grows and is still growing bigger and bigger. This very enigmatic rock is located at *Do·gring A·bri* near *Daranggri* market place on the northern side of Garo Hills near *Kharkutta* just bordering Assam. According to Garo legend once upon a time in a certain village there was a family. They had three daughters the younger two just on the threshold of their teens. The two orphaned young brothers of the wife also lived with them. The two young boys loved to play their *gongbina*, sort of a small crude mouth organ made from bamboo; and the younger girls often watched them with great fascination and envy.

The uncles however would not allow their young nieces to play with the *gongbina* and often hide it from their sight. This riled the young mischievous imps that one day when the uncles went out to catch fish, they secretly sneaked into the *nokpante* and took it away. Normally as per traditional custom, girl's entry into the *nokpante* is a strict taboo, but on that day their covetousness for that simple *gongbina* made

them break the strict social moral code. To their shock and surprise on their return from their fishing, they could not find their *gongbina*; searched everywhere but could not find it. They asked the girls but they flatly refused to divulge the truth feigning ignorance. No matter how they asked the two imps did not divulge the truth. They tried cajoling; softly requesting and when that failed threatening to beat them up; yet the girls remained adamant. They did not want to return their precious object. The two young uncles were filled with sorrow and shame at what happened. In order to avoid social ostracism, the young uncles decided to leave their sister's place and eke out their living elsewhere. The family members objected to their rash decision but they were determined.

Despite strong entreaties from the family members, they picked up their meagre belongings and started off when the two young nieces realizing their own folly begged them to stay. *Radingga* and *Sadingga* however refused to turn back; whereupon the two precocious girls followed them at a distance pleading with them to return even promising to return the stolen item. The fugitive brothers never turned back; instead, they went on from one place to another all over Garo Hills territory camping here and there. The two pursuing girls too on their part relentlessly followed them from camp to camp never losing sight of them but not actually overtaking them.

Do·gring A·bri near *Kharkutta* was one such camp. Apparently *Aje* and *Gilje* camped there for quite a long time, making their own cultivation and keeping their own poultry. That was how it came to be known as *Do·gring A·bri*; or chicken cage hill. Over the years the chicken coop and the

mortar and pestle they used in that camp turned into stones. They are still seen in that hill, beyond *Cheng A·ding* hillock.

In 2016; when we visited the place, one local person informed us that the stone pestle which was slender is now growing bigger and bigger by the year; that it no longer maintains its old shape and pattern. Indeed, it looks like an oblong size long stone; does not resemble the pestle but that was the original pestle growing out of proportions he claimed.

Koena Kosi A·bri:- This hill standing by itself is now outside the Garo Hills border, located to the north of *Daranggre* market area. The surrounding areas are occupied by Rabhas and Garos. The Garos having been converted to Christianity do not worship there anymore; all the same they too consider it as the abode of a very powerful *Ambi* mite which the Rabhas continue to worship till today. Once a year the *Rabhas* make an annual sacrifice to the goddess *Ambi* for her protection and blessing. The hill had been kept pristine; reserved as *kosi*, from which no trees or bamboos and even grasses are not allowed to be cut at any time without prior permission from the village chief; that too only after making proper divinations to the deity first. The Rabhas hold that *kosi* hill with such reverence that nobody goes there without any valid reason for fear of retribution from the goddess. In 2012 in protest against the construction of railroad through its foothills; when it was made operational, she stood in the middle of the railroad blocking its passage for three consecutive days until she was appropriately appeased. The engine of the train stalled for no reason and could not be started. Only when after three days the puja was performed seeking her forgiveness did she step aside allowing the train to pass. The stalled engines too started without any effort.

The Hindus especially the Rabhas who worship here were in awe of her formidable power. Till now locals swear that all through that period they vaguely saw a huge figure of the woman standing at the railroad.

Those who had visited the *kosi* say that in the middle of the dense forest there is a flat rock measuring roughly five ft in length and fifteen ft in height which is said to be the reclining chair of the *Ambi* goddess.

Koasi A·bri

Koasi A·bri lies in the eastern side of North Garo Hills along the Assam Garo Hills border. Legend says that originally three spirit sisters resided in that hill; they were, *Koasi Mindira*, *Durama Imbama* and *A·ritcha Rong·bare*. *Durama Imbama* kept a pet dog named *Ja·banda Ja·tongrak*, which was actually a tiger. As mentioned earlier the spirits do not consider things like the humans. For them the tiger was a dog; a monitor lizard a pig and locusts and grasshoppers the deer and barking deer. So, the pet dog that *Durama Imbama* kept as a pet was actually a tiger; and as tigers are wont to do, it used to devour chicken, piglets and other domestic animals.

The other two sisters greatly disproved of the fact that their sister could not keep a strict control over her pet and thus a serious discord broke out among them. Ultimately *Durama Imbama* decided to leave her sisters and look for a place for herself. She left with her pet dog and came southwards but wherever she settled down her pet became a source of embarrassment for her as it would kill and eat anything. Finally she moved to *Dura Hills* (Tura peak) and settled there. *Koasi Mindira* and *A·ritcha Rong·bare* continued

to live together for some time but in the end they too decided to part ways. *A·ritcha Rong·bare* moved out and settled in the northern side of *Chotcholja* village. So, left alone *Koasi Mindira* built a separate house for herself which came to be known as *Koasi Nokmong* or the main house. It is also referred to as *Matcha Melaram*.

Ja·banda Ja·tongrak became the father head of the tigers and once a year he visited his old homestead and held regular annual meeting at *Koasi A·bri* where *Ja·banda Ja·tongrak* himself presided. Thereafter the place came to be known as *Matcha Melaram* or the meeting place of the tigers. It is strongly believed that even now the tigers still have their annual conference in that place. Many people who claim themselves to have the alter ego with the tigers confirm to this belief. They say that all tigers were expected to report to the annual conference and give full account of their activities to their patriarch head *Ja·banda Ja·tongrak*. If somehow, they could not make it to the annual meeting they were required to meet their patriarch at a later date and give his report.

Another important site at *Koasi Hill* is *Koasi Ronggitchak*, considered to be a holy shrine by the Hindus. Once a year the Hindus from Assam come in thousands to pay their yearly respectful homage to the *Koasi* deity and release hundreds of pigeons in the area. It is the place where the climate controlling spirit resided; they believe. If the rains do not come in time, they used to perform *salgrua* or *salak tata* ceremony to invoke the rain god for timely release of rains. It is an ancient art by which the priest controls nature and weather by rituals and sacrifice

Yet the most important site in the hill is known as *Koasi nokpante* where the precious *muni* lies in the high precipice of the hill where the eagles accidentally dropped it. It is

believed that till now the eagles are faithfully guarding the *muni* lest it falls into some unscrupulous hands for you will find hundreds of eagles hovering over the hill at all times of the day. Dr. Julius L. R. Marak in his book *Atchu Ambin Ku-bisring* stated that till 1970, the entire *Koasi Hill* remained pristine teeming with all kinds of birds and animals. Somehow, for some unknown reasons or most probably due to wanton clearing of the jungles with no thought for posterity most of those rare and exotic animals are found to have suddenly disappeared. Where and how they go? Nobody knows!

Oh, what a disaster, a sad future for the coming generations.

Rong miram A-bri

Not far from *Kantolguri* village in the *A-kingland* of *Tapa Nokmaship* in the North Garo Hills District there is a hill that must have been the place of worship for the ancient Garos at one time or the other for the entire hill is dotted with relics of pagan shrines. Alternatively, it could have been the shrine of the Hindus in the long past. Many people think they are natural creations; maybe they are; maybe not. Some of the enigmatic sites and relics are: *Abisa sakgittam* or the three sisters, *Matchu Rong ma* or the stone cow, *Matchu Nol* or the cowshed, *Ro-ong Buchuma/ Ambi Buchuma* or old woman, *Do bipa Gitchak* or the red cock and several more.

Abisa sakgittam

The story tells us that once upon a time there were three sisters named *Gaimoni*, *Toe* and *Sinche*. They were kept as *rakkuals* or the caretakers of the cattle of the *mites*. The three

sisters took turns feeding, finding fodder and cleaning the shed generally taking care of the cow. One night the cow failed to come home, so in deep anguish all three of them went out searching for the cow that had strayed far. Whole night through they searched here and there without success, then as they were returning home dejected, they heard the cocks crow and startled stood rooted to the ground where they turned to stone and remained till today. The three stones standing close to each other found at the *Rong·miram A·bri* were said to be none other than the three sisters *Gaimoni*, *Toe* and *Sinche* who later turned to stone.

Matchu Rong·ma

On the way to *Bolpuma* village there is one rock that is in the shape of a cow. It is highly speculated that it could be the cow the three sister *rakkuals Gaimoni*, *Toe* and *Sinche* were searching for the whole night through. Unfortunately, they could not find it and while returning home turned to stone. This stone cow is located on the right-hand side of the pathway leading to *Songbar Rong·brak*, a huge rock that covers a wide area; and to the left of the path are the stone sisters of *rakkuals*.

Matchu Nol

On the hill top of *Rong·miram a·bri* there is a stone wall with openings for entry and exit which is said to be the cowshed of the *mites*. The *mites* too keep domesticated animals and kept them in proper sheds. That stone wall was said to have been built for the cow that the three sisters took care of. It is not an ordinary cowshed, for it was built of stone by the *mites*.

Ambi Buchuma

Perhaps the one place that wields powerful influence was the stone they called *Ambi buchuma* meaning the old *grandma*. The stone is only knee high with the head that resembles an old woman. It even had two small slits for the eyes; some people say that it had two protruding ears too but damaged by some mischievous pranksters. Till 1989 there was one person by the name of *Pa Silbang Cheran Momin*, who worshipped it and made regular blood sacrifices. He was the only man in the whole of *Kantolguri* village who did not accept Christianity but remained steadfast in his worship of stone god till he died. In turn the old woman deity he served blessed him and gave him power over other supernatural spirits or *mites*. *Pa Silbang Ch. Momin* passed away in 1989 and after that nobody in the village worshipped or served any deity

Kantolguri Do·bakkol

There is one big *Do·bakkol* or bat cave in the village called *Kantolguri Do·bakkol*, not far from the district headquarter of North Garo Hills district, *Resubelpara*. The cave is quite spacious and may be more than one km in length. Hundreds and thousands of bats reside deep in the recesses of the cave; that was why it is called the *Do·bakkol* or the bat cave. If anyone burns some dry wood or grasses and pushed it deep inside the cave, thousands upon thousands of bats come out and hover above the cave that could block the sun shine for miles around covering the whole village and the hills nearby. For nearly one km inside the cave floor is littered with guano (bat excreta) that give out exceedingly overpowering stench of excreta. Beyond the bat colony the

cave is said to be spacious and very beautiful. Occasionally if anyone enters the cave quietly without making any sound, they could spot the white jungle cat inside; but since they are exceedingly elusive at the smallest sound they would quickly scuttle into the holes on the walls of the cave and hide.

Till some decades ago, the *Do·bakkol* was feared as haunted, as the dwelling place of some powerful spirit beings or *mites*. The local people strictly forbade children and strangers to go near the cave lest they inadvertently invoke the wrath of the resident *mite* and some calamity befalls them. The whole village except one *Silbang Cheran Momin* had embraced Christianity and no longer worshipped the *mites* but their fear of the avenging supernatural spirits was still inherent.

The legend says that one day three young men decided to enter the cave to disprove that their fears were unwarranted as the *mites* cannot have power over the Christians who believe in God. They entered deep into the cave; made merry, eating and drinking and dared the resident *mites* to show their power. As if in answer to their challenge, suddenly the big rock overhead at the entrance to the cave broke off and completely blocked their exit. The three youngsters were agog with fear, shocked to find that they were now trapped inside the cave with the angry *mite* within. They could not believe that the spirits would actually accept their challenge and trap them inside. Desperately they tried to pry the blocking boulder open with no success; it would not budge even an inch. The rock was too heavy and too big for three strapping lads. In any case when the spirits close the door it is practically impossible for human

strength alone to combat the powers of the supernaturals, they say.

The sun had set and night came but the pranksters unable to escape from their imprisoned state remained inside cursing themselves. Whole night passed and when the youngsters did not come home, the worried parents alerted the village *nokma* and together the whole village went in search of them in the whole neighbourhood to no avail. Finally, when they came to the *Do·bakkol*, they found the entrance to the cave mysteriously blocked by a huge boulder. Full of concern they peered through the cracks and shouted the names of the missing lads. From deep within the cave, they heard the responding voices pleading with their parents to rescue them. They tried to remove the boulder but even then, the boulder did not move an inch. The combined strength of the villagers was not enough to move the offending boulder.

Not knowing what else to do, ultimately, they decided to approach the only *songsarek* (non-Christian) in the village, *Pa Silbang Cheran Momin* who still served and worshipped the resident *mites* of the area, and who by virtue of serving the spirit deities was in turn blessed with certain supernatural powers over the spirits. *Pa Silbang* never turned down any request from his fellow Christian villagers to intercede with the spirits on their behalf. So, before any sacrificial rites are performed, he had to ask the spirits of their desire by a ritual called *sima nia*, when he asked the spirits what they wanted, he was advised to sacrifice a red cock and call upon the spirits to open the door. He relayed the desires of the spirit to the parents who quickly procured a red cock and gave it to him. By sundown *Pa Silbang*, erected a rough bamboo shrine called *sambasia*, then killed the red

cock, collected its blood in a vessel and poured it out as blood offering to the spirits. He pleaded with the spirits to accept the offering and in exchange forgive the reckless rashness of the youths and remove the blocking boulder and returned home without a glance at his back.

In the meantime, the three trapped youngsters had been without food and water for nearly 30 hours and were hungry and thirsty. By that time, they had become dehydrated from lack of food and fluid in the body and were drained out both physically and spiritually. Unaware of the entire ruckus they had created by their youthful exuberance they went back to sleep accepting the inevitable fate if no help comes soon, they were fated to die in the cave. They had become weak and emaciated for want of food and water but nonetheless their mental alertness was still acute. By around midnight, one of them woke up to find the sliver of light coming through the entrance and realized that the entrance to the cave had miraculously opened. He woke up the others and together they helped each other to slowly crawl out of the cave and tottered home.

Their ordeal taught them the harsh lesson that mere belief in Christianity is no shield against the principalities of the dark and that supernatural spirits although unseen by the naked eye wield strong power over the humans and are capable of inflicting harm. Spirits too are the creations of God and should be respected as such.

Napak: Old abode of the spirits

According to the primitive *songsarek* belief the soul or spirit of men never dies. It comes back to earth again and again in endless cycle of birth and death and rebirths. This

cycle of birth and rebirths too have their level and degree of existence. It is said that when a person dies, he becomes *me·mang* (the spirit of the dead) and when the *me·mang* dies he turned into *me·te* (the spirit of the spirit of the dead) or the second level of *me·manghood*. Then, when the *me·te* also dies it first becomes *pre* and thereafter when that too dies it becomes the *mite*, ultimate level of existence as invisible spirit endowed with tremendous supernatural power and authority over events and lives of men. Therefore, in between two lives, after they are dead and before being born again, they were provided with the temporary abode at *Balpakram*; the land of the spirits of the dead for a brief respite. Hence, they believe that the spirits of the dead are never far away, visiting family and friends at will until they are ready to come back and be born once again.

There is a story in the folktales how long ago one *Kodarong Damchong*, the patriarch head of the spirits of the dead or *me·mang* as the Garos call it was very reluctant to leave the world. He felt so nostalgic to live apart from his loved ones, so he selected *Napak Slang A·bri Patal* as his homestead so he would always be near his dear and near ones. For the company for himself, to combat his loneliness he took all the spirits of the dead to live there with him. He even allotted suitable plots for the spirits of the people according to their nature of death. For those who died of natural causes they were to settle at *Dapa A·konggre*; or the valley of the buried; those who died a violent death as a result of fight, war or accidents, they were given *Sata Pang·sanggre* or the combatant's zone and those who killed themselves by hanging were to stay at *Bolgonggre*; the forest grove of the hanged. He used to send out his deputy *Korekpa*

Kopinpa to lead all the spirits of the dead to their respective allotted places.

There in *Napak Slang A·bri Patal* there are many places related to the spirit of the dead. Just like in *Balpakram* there is the *Chi-anggal* or black sooty pool, *me·mang gana ramram* or the place where the spirits dry their clothes, *me·mang mesal cha·ram*, the place where the spirits have their midday meal and so on. In fact, in terms of sites connected with the existence of the spirits are not less in *Napak* than *Balpakram*.

In the beginning humans and spirits lived side by side in perfect harmony; until one day an unfortunate accident took place. A spirit baby was accidentally hacked to death by one young woman. Soon all the spirits were alerted. They considered it as an act of cruelty on the part of the humans. They could not accept that it was an act of accident. The spirit baby was virtually unseen to naked human eyes but the spirits were not about to condone the gruesome act. Feeling threatened for their own survival the spirits there and then itself took a decision to flee en masse and seek another safe place to live. Ultimately, they relocated themselves to *Balpakram* hill which they inhabit till today. That was how the old abode *Napak Slang A·bri* was abandoned in one impulsive act and *Balpakram* hill became the new abode of the spirits of the dead.

However, *Napak Slang Bri patal* was not totally abandoned as was found out only several years ago. One old man, *Garey Nokma* flatly refused to join the other spirits in shifting their village. He continued to stay in that place along with a handful of his closest friends and relatives. This was discovered by chance by the father- in law of the village school teacher not so very long ago. By the turn of this new millennium, the father-in-law of a school teacher of *Napak*

village was on his death bed seriously ill. For some time, he lost consciousness and his soul wandered off. By a stroke of luck, he chanced upon the old abode of the spirits of the dead at *Napak Slang A·bri Patal*. There he met one spirit who welcomed him into his house. There were only six houses in the whole village. One house stood out, it was bigger and better built. On enquiry he was told that it belonged to the *Garey Nokma*. The person who died went to the *nokma's* house and found him cooking beef liver in two bamboo tubes. In the olden days if there was death in the village it was customary for the village chief to cook liver in bamboo tubes for the funeral feast.

Looking out towards the valley the visiting spirit saw several men dressed in white coming up the trail, so he shouted out to the *nokma* that a lot more people are coming and probably he would have to cook more since the cooked beef liver would not suffice to go round. The *nokma* came out of his house and seeing several people in white, exclaimed,

"Oh, you mean those? They are not our people and they are certainly not going to make a stop over here. They are only passing by. Those white robed people will go up the hill joyfully singing clapping their hands."

The sick man regained consciousness after sometime; and narrated the strange out of the body experience he just had. When he fully regained his strength, he told the local pastor all the uncanny experiences he had during the brief period his soul was out of his body. That was how the continued presence of some of the spirit of the dead at *Napak Slang A·bri Patal* came to light; otherwise, it had been the general belief that *Napak* had long been abandoned by the spirits.

Perhaps by this incident it proves that what the people believe do exist and that while the spirits of the dead of saved souls go up to heaven singing and clapping their hands joyfully the souls of the unsaved are condemned to remain in limbo.

Wak rong-te at Dura A-simgre

There are two identical rocks in the *Dura A-simgre* village about 20 kms south of Tura which have the striking resemblance to the body of the pigs. The story goes to tell that those twin rocks were two *sadus* (brother-in-laws) who were turned to pigs then into stones by the *mite* (spirit being). It is said that one day one of them wanted to change the thatch grass of his roof for which he needed a pig to slaughter for the community feast in exchange for the free service contributed by the whole village. In the olden days if anyone needs to repair the house, or build a new one or change the thatch which is usually done after several years, the whole village would pitch in their services for free. The womenfolk would get busy cooking and serving refreshments while the men attend to their man jobs. In reality it always turned out to be a village community feast, the feast provided for by the owner of the house in exchange for their free services. This noble action of community help was the strict social code followed by all villages. Nowadays such community services are not so common anymore. However, here and there many small villages in the interior still practice this noble gesture.

In order to give the required feast, the man of the house went with his *sadu* (brother-in law) to get a pig. Unfortunately for them, they picked a pig which was in reality a *mite* (spirit) in the body of the pig. They tied up the

legs of the pig and putting a stout pole across they carried it. The *mite* was livid at the way he was treated so dishonourably that he caused himself to get heavier by the minute.

Soon, to their utter consternation the two men felt the pig getting heavier and heavier by the minute. They could not understand how it had gotten so much heavier all of a sudden. After a short walk they were forced to put their load down and take a breather. They simply could not go on. They started debating how they would be able to carry it home. In the meantime, that *mite* or spirit untangled himself bolted away. In retribution he turned the two brothers in law into pigs and then into stones where they lay till today.

Sometimes the *mites* or the supernatural spirits like to roam around disguised in the body of animals they say. If during such times someone does any harm to them knowingly or even unknowingly, retribution always follows they say. The two brothers in laws too paid a heavy price for their indiscretion.

Hard to believe, right? But the stories are so plausible, sometimes we get carried away by its intricate weaving of the sequels that we are left spell bound half believing the folk's tales.

Josipara wakrongte

In *Josipara* village not far from *Dalu* in the southern area bordering Bangladesh there are three separate rocks that were said to be the body of the wild boar turned to stone. It so happened that one day a young adult *mite* (spirit being) while roaming in the jungle was suddenly attacked by the wild boar. The young *mite* was taken aback unawares and

somehow managed to quickly dodge and escape from getting impaled by the sharp tusks of the boar. Enraged at the boar for its audacity to attack him, he went home, took out a seven ft. long sword and chased the pig all around. After a long chase he cornered the boar in the vicinity of *Josipara* village and cut it into three parts. Those three separate parts of the boar later on turned to stones. Those rocks do indeed look like the body of the boar. Still fuming with anger that young spirit man swished his long sword on both sides of the path that all the grasses and plants were flattened to the ground. Trees and bamboos on either side of the path were all bent crooked. Till now, they say that it is almost impossible to find a straight bamboo in that area. It is said that the handiworks of the spirits remain forever.

Sangkni Nokpante :- In village *Badrigittim* some kms south of *Nongalbibra* there is one big deep pool known as *Sangkni Nokpante*. It lies right in the middle of the village which the locals had conveniently transformed into a community fishing pond. It appears that the pool was not there from the very beginning but mysteriously came into existence one night all of a sudden. The story goes that once a young *sangkni* (river serpent) fell in love with a young *sangkni* maiden and wanted to get married. However, there were oppositions from their parents on certain social issues. They therefore decided to elope and were on the run from their respective parents. When they reached *Badrigittim* village they decided to take rest for the night but there was a problem; there was however no big water nearby and the *sangkni*s being water denizens needed big water to lie submerged. Undaunted the young *sangkni* quickly dug a deep pool for his lover to rest. That pool the young *sangkni*

constructed for his lover for a night's stay came to be known as *Sangkni Nokpante* or the resting place of the *sangkni* lad.

Kramching A·bri :- Roughly 5 kms in the north-east of direction of Tura town, in the foothills of *Dura* (Tura) hill range, at the footpath junction leading to three villages, *Duragre*, *Kantragre* and *Boldorenggre* villages, there stands one big imposing rock known as *Kramching Rong·ma* with an intriguing story of its own. The whole hill range is called *Kramching A·bri*; and hence that rock too came to be known as *Kramching Rong·ma*. In the days gone by there used to be a hook like jutting rock from the side of the rock where a *kram* or long oblong drum was found hanging at all times. No one knew who that long oblong drum belonged to. Apparently, it belonged to the spirits or *mites* residing in the vicinity of the hill; for if it was removed, in no time at all it would be back in its place hanging as before. Intrigued by the whole episode some people actually experimented with their idea removing the drum from its socket and kept the drum on the ground nearby. After a short while they found it magically hanging back on its hook. Who put it there nobody knew. Because of that reason it came to be known as *Kramching Rock* or the Rock where the drum was kept hanging.

However, some years ago some mischief mongers deliberately broke off the jutting piece of rock and since then the drum was not seen anymore. Underneath the rock there is small crystal-clear spring water that comes in small droplets. The water is very cool and refreshing. Below the slowly dripping water droplets one can clearly see the *kram* or the drum suspected to be the drum that used to hang on the rock from the rock hook and which nobody could account for after it disappeared. Some people had tried to

take out that drum with no success; they could poke it with the stick but it would not budge. The *Kramching Rong·ma* is on an elevated hillock that from the rock one can see a wide panoramic view of the setting sun in the evenings.

The area people believe that the *Kramching Rong·ma* is no ordinary rock; that it is the abode of the spirits. In times of prolonged drought especially during the months of March and April, when sporadic rains are required to aid the planted crops to germinate and if prolonged incessant rains occur during the pre-monsoon seasons one *Wa·jang Rangsa Marak kamal* (priest) of *Kantragre* village used to perform rain invoking or rain stopping ceremony at the base of that rock as per the exigencies of the matter and always got good response from the gods.

Den·rima Gitok:- Just a few kms north east of Tura town where the footpaths leading to and from *Duragre* and *Kantragre* met, it was a very narrow strip of land notoriously called *Den·rima gitok* or the narrow strip of land where butchery took place. That was long ago, before roads were constructed. Now of course a wide motor able road had been constructed by cutting the sheer rock cliff and widening the road that it is no longer narrow or unsafe. On one side of the path was the high rock cliff and the other side sloped down dangerously steeply that it made it an ideal place for ambush and attack on the unwary travellers on foot. Because of its strategic location at the junction of two pathways and more because it was so narrow that the notorious dacoits took advantage of the situation and slaughtered countless numbers of travellers who passed by. If at any time the travellers happened to come across the dacoits unexpectedly, there was no escape for them but death. It was impossible for them to quickly scramble up the high cliff or

hide anywhere because the other side was equally perilous being steeply precipitated. Hundreds of unfortunate travellers lost their lives that way. It is not understood why the dacoits killed so many people there. Their main purpose could be robbing and looting but in the olden days when the savage Garos engaged themselves in head hunting their object in random killing and decapitation in order to collect human skulls as trophies cannot be ruled out either. Owing to that reason that place came to be known as *Den·rima gitok* or the narrow strip of butchery.

One day one couple coming that way met with the notorious dacoits. They tried to run but at both ends of the narrow strip the dacoits were waiting with drawn swords. While trying to flee the woman whose name was *Dote* fell down the precipice and managed to haul herself up to an overhang among the big boulders and hid herself. The husband was not so fortunate. The dacoits pounced upon the hapless husband and hacked him to death mercilessly. The wife heard his heart-rending screams but too petrified to move remained motionless in her hiding place. How long or for how many days she remained there motionless no one could guess but later on it was found that she had died curled up with her head between her knees and turned to stone. That stone came to be known as *Dote* stone and is probably still lying below the road.

Rong·ma: the Apologetic talking boulder: - One night towards dawn one old lady of *Boldorenggre* village had a very strange dream. In her dream a giant rock appeared before her and humbly begged for her forgiveness; saying that it was feeling so thirsty and came down from the hills to drink water but while rolling down it accidentally damaged four of her rice plants. It seemed it was remorseful and was

apologising with all sincerity. The woman woke with a start, feeling uneasy that the giant rock should talk to her that way. When it was bright enough, she got up and instinctively went to her cultivation adjacent to her house. There, to her shock and surprise she found a huge rock boulder standing at the edge of her cultivation close to the *Rongkhon* stream. Her own house was near the *Rongkhon* stream. That rock had never been there before. Where and how it came there overnight and lodged itself there nobody had a clue. A little bewildered she went to her cultivation and lo and behold, there she found four rice plants were broken and damaged exactly as the giant boulder said and apologised. She could not believe her own eyes and ears and told others about her extra-ordinary dream and the veracity of her dream.

Much later on they found out that one gigantic rock boulder that was at the hill top of *Kramching A·bri* had mysteriously disappeared from its perch. It was therefore wildly speculated that the talking rock near the house of the old woman had to be none other but that boulder itself. That apologetic boulder did not roll off anywhere anymore but found itself a home at the spot it landed, near the Baptist Church building of the village. The local people of *Boldorenggre* claim that the boulder continued to communicate with the old woman. Her daughter vouched for the veracity of that tale that became a legend. She said that till the end of 1958 that rock would occasionally talk to her mother. During the mango and jack fruit season if the children and youngsters eat the fruits on it and litter around the place leaving skins and seeds of the fruits lying around it used to plead to the old woman to convey its displeasure and request her to direct the kids to be more respectful and not throw around the garbage.

Kantra-wakso:- Kantragre village is just beyond *Den·rima Gitok*; a few kms north-east of Tura town. It lies at the foot of Tura hills and is ideal for cultivation of oranges and other different kinds of citrus genus. Kantragre village was named after its founder patriarch named Kantra. Originally Kantra hailed from the eastern side or *Salaram Mikgitchak*; but while dwelling thereat for some reason he could not get good yield from his jhum cultivation. Probably after many years of continuous cultivation the top soil had eroded so much that it could no longer support further cultivation in the same area. According to one *Glanson Bolwari Marak (Getmishpa)*; who narrated the story, after few years of such bad harvest he decided to move out in search of greener pastures. Wandering westward looking for fertile suitable grounds when he reached the foothills of Tura hill, he liked the place so much that he decided to settle down there permanently. The area was cool, good supply of water available from the numerous springs around and the land was fertile; ideal for jhumming. Along with him his nearest and dearest kith and kin and their relatives totalling several hundreds of households came along with all their belongings to settle with him. So, when they all settled down in one area and constructed their own dwelling houses it was more like a mini town; than a big village, all hustle and bustle. Over all it became a very busy, noisy and one happy community settling in one place. However, such a big community settlement was not without its flaws and social ills. With so many in one single community settlement there were sick people of all sorts of illness and diseases. Not less than hundred each of old and infirmed; the physically handicapped; the lame and the blind, the deaf and dumb, the crackpots and lunatics they were all there. But along them

there were herbal practitioners, witch mongers, soothsayers to deal with the everyday common problems.

During the annual thanksgiving *wangala* festival, the sounds of the reverberating drums, cymbals and other musical instruments echoed round the whole hill. They celebrated such festivals for a long period, eating, drinking and generally merry making and yet going round from one household to another by turns for eating and drinking they could not cover the whole village in one week's time.

Kantra had three sons, all of them married and settled. One year all three sons decided to give a combine big community feast in honour of their parents. In the olden days it was customary for sons who had settled with other families to give the feast for their parents called *debra-su·gala*, which literally translated meant washing off the baby carrying cloth. It is in essence a thanks giving and paying off their debt to their parents for their love, care and upbringing. Such noble gestures from the dutiful sons though prevalent in the interior areas are slowly dwindling now and, in the towns, practically pushed to oblivion. The present-day generation had totally forgotten the trials and travails of their parents in bringing them up and had become indifferent and ignorant of some of the beautiful practices of our traditional culture.

So, for the feast they killed the pig of seven years which have grown enormous in size. As they speared the pig, it rolled down the steep slope quaking wildly in its death throes and came to a halt at the gully. That pig was so huge to lift it and carry back to the feasting ground whole. So, one of the sons told the villagers,

“The pig is too big to carry back whole; so I will cut off one leg for the feast for my parents; the rest you cut up in smaller portions and cook for yourselves in any manner you like.”

So, saying that he told some youngsters cut off one leg only to prepare for the feast. In the meantime, everybody was eating and drinking and in their half stupor state forgot to cut up the pig down in the gully. Whole day the pig lay there unattended for. In fact, there was so much to eat at the feast, each family contributing something that the half sozzled merry makers totally forgot about that pig lying in the gully. The feast went on well into late night. Next day when someone enquired about the pig, they remembered that it was still lying where it lay. They went to check on it only to find that it had turned to stone. How it turned to stone overnight nobody had a clue; but in the process the meat of the enormous pig was wasted unnecessarily. Many years later when *Kantra* died they named the village he had founded *Kantragre* in his honour.

Much earlier, the three villages that lie adjacent to one another namely *Duragre*, *Kantragre* and *Darechikgre* were well known for the very good quality of their oranges. The sweetness of the oranges and their juice contents were not comparable with orange products from other parts of Garo Hills. Not only oranges but other mandarin fruits like *jambura* (pomello), *chambil*, a different variety of citrus that has thick skin and very sour juice used to cure a lot of common ailments like cough and cold; asthma, whooping cough, influenza and so on. This variety seems to be available only in certain pockets of Garo Hills. Other sour fruit trees of similar genus like *chinara*, the big lemon shape fruit but which has a very pleasant sweet taste; *atol* or lime like fruit but which is a little bigger, has thicker skin and

extremely acidic, used by the locals for medicinal purposes, *narang jakskil* is another similar kind are all endemic to Tura peak and its surroundings.

Godime Dare :- Till ten years ago, *Godime dare* just opposite the present bus terminal at *Dobasipara* was in existence though no longer in its former glory but after the year 2000, it had been completely wiped out of its existence. Earlier, while it was in its pristine glory, the water gushed out like through a pipe from a height of about 40-50 ft, down the sandstone rock. It was a beautiful sight right in the middle of township.

Long ago it was in the outskirts of the town but when the town expanded and people began looking for new places to construct their residential houses they wantonly started felling trees and levelling ground ultimately destroying the whole ambience of the fall. With no big trees to hold the ground together, the soft sandstone rock walls began to erode slowly and steadily until finally the whole upper portion of the fall collapsed under the impact of the heavy downpours. In a matter of moments, the once beautiful *Godime Dare* was gone.

Like many legendary places of Garo Hills. *Godime Dare* too has a long history behind it. In the days gone by *Godime dare* was not within the township area; it was in the outskirts of the town and in the midst of dense forest. In those days many ferocious carnivores like tiger, leopards and wolves and carrion eating eagles and vultures roam in the area freely. There was a reason for the presence of many ferocious predators, for during their warring age, they used to throw down the headless torsos down that fall; keeping the heads of the slain enemy for trophies. The predators had a field day feasting on those carcasses. Moreover, in the same area there

was a cremation ground of the Hindus too. Therefore, all kinds of flesh-eating animals and birds thronged to that place for free supply of meat.

As the town slowly expanded and the B.S.F. Camp established at Tura Dobasipara, little away from the town area, the road was constructed and many people having no homestead of their own began encroaching into the forest. That marked the beginning of the end of the beautiful *Godime dare*. Wanton clearing of the forest drove the wild animals deeper into Tura hill and the worst of it was the drying up of the water that fed the fall that it slowly began to lose its beauty. The surroundings became barren and ultimately spelt doom to the once glorious fall.

Matchakolgre song:- *Matchakol* means tiger cave, so a human settlement that was near the tiger cave is appropriately called *Matchakolgre*. *Matchakolgre* village has now become a part of Tura but once upon a time it was a small village in the neighbourhood of the township. Long before Tura became a big town *Matchakolgre* village was in the midst of a thick jungle teeming with ferocious tigers. A little distance away from the village adjacent to the *Rongkhon Dakkop chiring* (stream) there is a long natural underground tunnel connecting *Ringrey chiring*. That cave was the abode of tigers; as hundreds of those wild ferocious animals found safe refuge in that cave. It however spelt doom for the humans who resided nearby. Their domestic animals fell prey to the tigers regularly and on many occasions even humans lost their lives. Their lives were in constant danger but unless they could decimate the entire population of the tigers their lives continued to be in jeopardy. Yet, how to get them all killed in one go proved a challenge beyond their

capabilities. They knew they could cope with a few but there were hundreds of them.

They called an emergent meeting of all the nearby villages and thought of ways and means how to tackle such a herculean task. One of them suggested that they could smoke them to death. If they put several *jengges* (six to seven ft long loosely woven bamboo basket designed to carry cotton or oranges) stuffed with dry chillies and pushed them in deep inside the cave from both ends and set fire to them simultaneously from both sides the tigers would not be able to come out and would die wholesale. They all agreed it was perfect and decided to experiment with his idea. Accordingly, each village contributed several *jengges* of dry chillies and when they had collected a good pile one day began stuffing them into both ends of the cave and set fire to it. Soon alerted by the smoke and irritated by the burning dry chillies the tigers began to run hither thither trying to escape only to find both ends blocked by the burning fire. Their strategy worked wonderfully for all the tigers that were inside the cave died of suffocation; and the villagers rejoiced to be rid of their menacing enemies for good.

Now, after so long people wonder why the place was called *Matchakolgre* when there is not tiger in the area. The amazing tale of how the uneducated primitive villagers got rid of a huge number of menacing tigers has become an old wife's tale with no truth whatsoever, some people thought.

***Balpakram* : Land of the spirits**

Balpakram plateau in the south east corner of Garo Hills bordering Khasi Hills district is a National Park and Wild Life sanctuary. This sprawling tabletop hill stands at a height

of 2,831ft above sea level and lies in the south-eastern corner of Garo Hills, roughly 90 kms from *Baghmara*, the District Headquarter of South Garo Hills district. Those who camped and explored the plateau say that sunrise and sunset at *Balpakram* present some spectacular view. On the north there lies the *Rong·cheng* Hills and the *Chinaru* plateau; on the south there are small hills overlooking Bangladesh.

Not very long ago in the year 1987 *Balpakram* Hill had been declared a National Park and Wild Life Sanctuary. In 1987 the then Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi himself came by chopper to inaugurate its upgradation to national park. Ever since then it had shot into global prominence for its exceptional wealth in bio-diversity. The countless numbers of exotic, rare, very rare and on the brink of extinction endangered species of animals, birds, plants and herbs were discovered concentrated in one small tableland. The discovery of many extremely rare species of medicinal plants and valuable herbs presents enormous pharmaceutical potentials. Most of those rare and exotic plants are endemic, however sadly many of them are now in the endangered category; already on the brink of extinction. Undoubtedly it had attracted the attention of many eminent Scientists, Botanists and Naturalists etc. It has thus become a hot bed for research and study on many aspects. *Balpakram* for the Garos is not important for being declared a National Park and Wild Life Sanctuary, its importance to them lies stemmed from another angle; in their staunch traditional belief that *Balpakram* is the abode of the spirits of the dead, where spirits of the dead take temporary respite before being born again in the endless cycle of life and rebirth.

Interestingly *Balpakram* is considered a sacred place not by the Garos alone but by the Hindus as well though for

entirely different reasons. Suffice it to say that *Balpakram* has its place of honour in the Hindu mythology as well. Mr. H.A. Marak in his brochure titled *Balpakram* mentioned that according to the Hindus, *Rong·sobok Rong·kol*, one of the many mythological sites was the dwelling house of a powerful deity. They also believe that *Balpakram* was the holy mountain wherein grew *sanjivani*, the lifesaving plant. The Hindus believe that when Lakshman was grievously injured by Ravana, during the epic battle of Ramayana, Hanuman the Monkey god was sent out to get the life restoring plant. He was given strict instructions to return before sunset or it would not be possible to save his life. The legend says that Hanuman flew round the whole world looking for that precious plant with no success. Finally, he spotted the wonder plant growing wild at *Balpakram* plateau. By that time the sun was dipping down and he knew he had very little time left. Quickly he broke off the top of the hill and carried it back just in time to save the life of the dying prince. With the top of the hill broken off *Balpakram* hill became a flat top tableland or a plateau.

The construction of a Hindu temple at *Maheshkola*, at the tri-junction of Garo Hills, Khasi Hills and Bangladesh; where there are no Hindus in the whole area had raised many eyebrows questioning the logical necessity of its presence in the area. However, many argue that it is one proof that the Hindus at one time or the other in the past had either worshipped there or stayed there; and hence highly regard the land as sacred. Also, the fact that four of the five perennial rivers that flow out of *Balpakram* were given Hindu names is another undeniable ample proof. Those four rivers are named after the Hindu gods like: *Mahadeo* River, after god Mahadev; *Maheshkola* River, named after god Mohesh;

Goneshwari named after the god *Ganesh* the son of Shiva Thakur and Kanai River named after *Nag Kanya* the snake god. The only river that bears the local name is *Chimite* also known as *Na.wa* River meaning River god. The *Chitmang* or *Waimong* Hill that lies a little to the north west of *Balpakram* is also held with great reverence by the Hindus. They call it Mount Kailash by the name of lord Shiva Thakur. Mr. *Helsing A. Sangma* ascribes it to the historical and cultural influences of the Hindus of the East Bengal, (now Bangladesh) on the hill tribes of Garo Hills before the British era.

Shri Dewansing S. Rongmuthu expounding on the cultural, socio religious aspects of the Garos expressed his view that *Balpakram* and its surrounding areas were collectively known as *Maadi-Rong·kuchi* (source of the *Mahadeo* River) at one time and that the ancient Garo settlements in and around *Maadi Rong·kuchi* once reached a high stage of progress and prosperity. But it was during the pre-historic times in the era when heaven and earth were not separated and the earth was populated by demigods and not ordinary human beings.

One can reach *Balpakram* hill from Khasi Hills side via *Ranikor* and also from *Baghmara*, through *Mahadeo. Hattisia* is the entry point to the mystique place of *Balpakram* where the office of the Forest Ranger of *Balpakram* is located. There one can get all the information about the land and possibly a guide too if required. A large board just outside the periphery of the office is displayed showing all the important and interesting mythical sites and others well connected with legends of the Garos like *Dikki* and *Bandi* brothers, *Gitting Rani* and *So·re Dambe* their wives and many others. Actual hilltop is still about 12 (twelve) kms from the

entry point; but the mythical and mystical sites start from near the entrance itself.

As mentioned above *Balpakram* to the Garos is sacred for it is considered the temporary abode of the spirits of the dead before they are born again. There are more than forty different sites all over *Balpakram*, dotted here and there at regular intervals lying close to one another. Most of them are intricately connected with the traditional religious beliefs, deeply embedded in mystery and mysticism and again, some of them are mind blowing to say the least. In this modern age of advanced science and technology, wherein we get answers and solutions to almost anything mythical and mysterious; to find something which science or technology cannot give satisfactory explanation to, it is indeed mystifying. It is practically impossible to understand and accept except acknowledging that perhaps they could indeed be mythical mysteries of the place. It is also said that in the earlier days if anyone lingers round after dark, he would hear some spooky, chilling eerie sounds emanating from all around. Occasionally one would hear his own name being called out and if he/she responds involuntarily to the call, his/her death was imminent. After all, it is the land of the spirits, so it is bound to be haunted and spooky. Well, how far it is true; nobody can swear to it with absolute certainty, but of course everyone is entitled to his or her own belief and opinion.

Just a few of those mythical sites are discussed below:

1. *Bandini jal·ang* or the rock slab bridge of *Bandi* :- On entering into this mystical land, the so called abode of the spirits of the dead, the first place we came across is *Bandini jal·ang*. At the source of Kanai River there is a big natural

long slab of rock delicately perched above the stream. The legend says that the rock bridge was constructed by *Bandi*, the younger brother of *Dikki*; a man of legendary strength who was said to have the combined strength of twelve people and could pull out ivory tusks from the living elephants and kill big tigers bare handed. *Bandi* and his elder brother *Dikki* were no ordinary human beings; they were half man half god and were wise and strong beyond any normal human strength and stamina. The rock bridge is still standing strong even now and is used by the commuters to and from the plateau. Ordinarily it is of no particular interest except that it was of legendary importance to the local people.

2. ***Boldak Matchu karam*** : A little distance away from the rock bridge there stands a *boldak* tree scientific name of which is said to be *schimawallich* that has the mysterious clear markings of the jute rope deeply etched on its trunk. It is said to be the tree where the spirits on their way to the realm of the spirits of the dead would stop, tie up the cattle and take some rest. The constant tethering of the cattle on its trunk had eroded its bark and left deep scars as if by the rough jute ropes. According to age old tradition it is customary among the Garos to slaughter cattle for the dead which the spirit of the deceased take along with him as part of their domestic property to keep in their new abode of the dead and those were the cattle they tie up for rest at that tree.

Some years ago the big tree bearing the scars was felled by the strong winds during the cyclonic storm it is said that immediately afterwards the rock close by began to have those unmistakable etchings on its surface. No scientific explanation was found to such an incredible occurrence except to agree with the locals that perhaps their belief in the

activity of the spirits was not entirely unfounded. Interestingly another tree of the same specie grew in the same place and when it became quite big and strong enough the markings began showing on its trunks. It appeared as if the spirits had switched back to the *boldak* tree preferring it to the rock. It indeed is mind blowing to accept it so easily.

3. *Me·mang Gana Sikram* : Nearby the *Boldak Matchu Karam*, is a rock which is believed to be the place where the spirits use to sit and mend their clothes as they take rest. When a person dies, often the clothes they were using while alive are buried along with the dead or burnt to ashes. Those are meant for the spirits to use during their brief sojourn in the kingdom of the dead before they were sent back to earth to be born again. Generally, apart from his personal clothes the dead are usually clothed in new clothing as a mark of respect for the departed soul. However, the spirits do not like the new garments they were clothed in for the spirits consider everything in just the opposite way. They consider the new clothes as old and raggedy and would sit down on the rock to mend them all the while grumbling that the relatives had been too stingy to give such old and torn clothes. They like the old worn clothes and would praise the relatives for their kindness and generosity as to provide them with good clothes. The rock where it is said that the spirits use to sit down and mend came to be known as *me·mang gana sikram* or the rock where the spirits mend their clothes.

4. *Me·mang Anti cha·ram* : Ad verbatim translation of the phrase it means the market place of the spirits. It is also called *Matchruni anti* or the Civets (animal) market. *Matchru* or the civet was the undisputed owner of the market of the *me·mangs* or the spirits and regularly conducted the markets;

therefore it was known as *Matchruni anti* or the civet's market. *Matchru*, the man of no less personality and importance in the legend of the Garos was the maternal uncle of *Goera*, the god of thunder and lightning. Well, it is said that in the olden days, regular barter system market was conducted at that place where humans mingled with animals and spirits to trade and barter. The people of those days had no qualms dealing with animals and spirits for in many of the folktales of the Garos there are quite a few mentions of such marketing activities.

The place where such market took place was located at the rocky slope at the plateau. Hundreds of foot prints, hoof prints or paw prints of all kinds of birds and animals from the small rodents to the biggest animals like the elephants, tigers, bison etc. are found embedded in one small concentrated area. Those were the permanent prints of the feet of those who came for trade or marketing.

On close scrutiny it is astounding to find the prints of all kinds of animals and birds imaginable very unmistakably and undeniably etched over the hard rock face. What is baffling about the whole thing is that the surrounding areas except the plot marked as spirits' market are completely devoid of prints of any kind. How those prints came to be concentrated in one small area is indeed a mystery; it is beyond human conception and understanding.

5. *Chidimak- Chi-anggal* or the black pool: In the northern side of the plateau there is one isolated dark pool of water. It looks so dark and black like charcoal; and yet, there are no coal deposits in that particular spot. It is a wonder how that particular pool acquired such a black sooty colour. The water is dark and look black only in that pool but the entire stream is crystal clear otherwise.

According to the Garo legend and myth, that was the pool where the spirits of the dead wash and cleanse themselves before entering into the realm of the Land of the dead. In the olden days the ancient forefathers practised cremation to dispose of the dead body. Hence their bodies were charred black and scrapping off all those burnt black dirt and grime from cremation turned the water to sooty black colour. Furthermore, their dark worldly sins when washed off and cleansed in that pool must have added more dark colours making it murkier and black. Due to its dark sooty colour, it came to be known as *Chi-dimak*, or *Chi-anggal*; meaning black pool, *dimak* being the black soot and *anggal* means charcoal.

How the water from that pool only came to be dark and black, there is no plausible explanation. There may perhaps some scientific explanation to such a phenomenon, but in the absence of any research as to its brackish turbidity we are somewhat compelled to accept the local's mythical version.

6. **Mebit-mebang**:- In the centre of southern tableland there is a dome shaped mound of rock measuring about eighteen cubic ft in girth known as *mebit-mebang* perched on another flattish rock in the manner of grinding stones. The upper dome shaped rock is called *mebit* and the larger flat rock underneath is called *mebang*. The curious phenomenon of those rocks is that every year small pebbles like rice grains come out from underneath through the gaps between those two rocks, each year changing its direction, east or west or north or south; but never in the same direction. It is generally believed by the locals that those tiny pebbles are the rice grains blessed by the gods indicating which direction of the land there is going to have a bountiful harvest. For instance, if those tiny pebbles come out in the northerly direction the

people living in the northern regions will have a bumper crop and if it comes out in the western side in the next year, good bountiful harvest is predicted for the people residing in the west.

Some people seeing it for the first time found it incredible to believe the local tales attached to it and thought probably those grains were pushed out from beneath the rocks by some burrowing insects like cricket or some other insect. But it is not so, there is no semblance of the presence of any insect however small. And again, they are not the sand grains but tiny pebbles that resemble rice grains to some extent.

Shri H. A. Marak in his small booklet titled *Balpakram* narrated how long ago, during the British regime, one Deputy Commissioner of Garo Hills District, Sir David Walker, a very learned man and an eminent Scientist himself, simply could not agree with the local legend and wanted to test it. In a bid to disprove their version he swept off all the grains clean and camped close by. He did not allow anybody to go near the spot keeping a strict vigil himself. Early in the morning he found that those tiny pebbles were back in their place once again. He was thoroughly baffled.

According to the local belief the goddess of Agriculture lives underneath those rocks and those tiny pebbles are the rice grains blessed by that goddess. Yet, there are others who say that it is the granary of *Dikki*, a legendary figure. The flat rock below was the granary and the smaller dome shaped rock is the outlet through which paddy is taken out. It had baffled many how every year the direction of the appearance of those tiny grains changes and how it could accurately forecast the direction of the land which side the harvest was going to be bountiful.

7. *Me-mang Kera Onram* : Near the edge of the great awning canyon there is one rock which is somewhat flat at the top and said to be the rock where there are clear impressions that closely resembled the human buttock as well as the bottom side of the *kera*, carrying basket. The story goes that while returning from the market *Gitting Rani*, the wife of the mythological wise sage *Dikki* sat down to set her basket down to take little rest and take their midday meal. The spot where she sat and set her basket down were clearly etched on the hard surface of the rock leaving a permanent proof of her presence there for it is said, whenever the *mites* did something important, they always left behind some evidence of their presence as proof for posterity; although what importance it carried or signified by simply putting down basket on the rock is beyond anyone's guess.

8. *Muni Dapram*: Deep in the crevices of the sheer cliff of the deep gorge it is wildly speculated by the locals that there must be the *muni* growing in those crevices. *Muni* is a very strange, very mysterious magical plant known to have the potency or the magic to make one fall asleep instantly. No one knows exactly what kind of a plant it is except the fact that a mere proximity to that plant can induce the person into deep slumber. Some writers have interpreted it as sleeping drug, which is not entirely true, but perhaps it may not be entirely wrong to consider it the sleep-inducing soporific plant. In whichever way it is interpreted it is true that the plant has the potency to induce anyone to sleep when approached. It is still debatable whether this magic works only on humans or equally potent to animals too. In the whole plant kingdom, perhaps *muni* is one of those most magical and mysterious plants and one of the two rarest of the rare species of the plant. This plant does not grow

anywhere or everywhere; just like the *tilta wa·dang* a sacred and very rare bamboo specie believed to have been brought to Garo Hills by the migrant forefathers from Tibet. This is one of the very few places where *muni* is found and it would do well for the locals to endeavour to preserve it at all costs.

9. *Goncho dare*: The rock cliffs of the deep canyon is believed to be the abode of *gonchos* or mad spirits. The Garos call them *me·mang kore* or the spirit lunatics. They like to inhabit such steep inaccessible areas where no man or animal can easily approach. They are believed to possess certain inborn clairvoyant and clairaudient powers. Occasionally they used to take humans to their dwelling places and lead them up and down those sheer rock cliffs as if showing the place to their guests. Normally they do not cause death or any harm to their captives, except of course causing some anxieties. There are many steep sheer cliffs dotted across the land where those mad spirits are said to reside and play pranks on the humans.

10. *Mite rong·kol* : A little away from *Chimite* or the stream of the spirits there is a big rock cave known as *Mite Rong·kol* or the Cave of the spirits. The cave is quite big and can comfortably accommodate several travellers; but there's a glitch, when travellers take shelter for the night under its awning space, spirits do not allow them to have a peaceful, restive sleep for they would keep haunting them whole night through. It was as if the spirits do not approve of the humans taking possession of the cave even though only temporarily.

11. *Chi-mite*: It is believed that the spirits always hover; one such particular place is around the source of *Mahadeo* River. There seems to be some hovering spirits around there at all times for they say anytime of the day spirits either

show themselves or make it clear of their presence to the visitors. Hence it is conjectured that probably that source of water could be the common bathing or cleaning ground for the spirits; and hence the name *chimite* or the water source of the spirits.

12. *Rangdokram*: One place in *Balpakram* is called *rangdokram* or the place where gongs are played. In the days gone by sounds of music drums and gongs used to emanate from that particular place. The general notion is that the spirits after death do not give up what they were doing during their life time here on this earth. They continue to live normal existence doing everyday chores like normal people here on earth. Once in a year when it is time for *wangala*; the post-harvest thanks giving ceremony, the spirits too faithfully observe the festival in their land. Hence during the *wangala* season there used to be audible sounds of merry making heard from that particular direction.

13. *Me-mang Mesal Cha-ram* : Near *Chi-dimak Chi anggal* or the black pool there is one big flat surface rock where the spirits of the dead stop to take their midday meals. The hard-working agrarian Garos in the villages are habituated to taking meal three times a day which the town people no longer follow preferring high tea in the afternoons. The breakfast is *mipring* or early morning meal, then *mesal* or lunch at noon and close the day with *meattam* or dinner. So, it is believed that the spirits after cleansing themselves in the *Chi-dimak* often sat in the nearby flattop rock to enjoy their *mesal* or lunch before proceeding again on their way to the realm of the dead. All around the rock and even on the surface of the rock there are tiny rice like grains scattered around which are said to be the *merim* or dropped rice crumbs or leftovers from their lunch.

14. *Me·mang Songgitcham* : This site is believed to be the old abandoned village, it is also called *Natappani Nokkap* or the homestead of *Natappa*, the patriarch king of the spirits. *Natappa* originally hailed from *Ringring Bri Takrak A·ding* in the land of *Napak*, the old land of the spirits. Together with *Me·gam Gairipa*, *Dikil Singgiripa*, the first man to die on the earth, they made their first dwelling places in *Balpakram* and eventually ruled like a king over the spirits who joined them later on. The site is nothing but a cluster of boulders close to each other. However, from afar it looks like the small huts of a village. The spirits no longer occupy that site hence the term *songgitcham* or old abode.

15. *Wakso Chiring* : On the northern side of the plateau, there is a small perennial stream known as *Wakso chiring* or the stream of rotting pig aptly named by the locals because the stream emits strong sulphuric smell similar to the overpowering stench of the rotting entrails. According to the Garo folklore when the monster pig *wakmangganchi aragondi* was finally defeated by *Goera* after a very prolonged battle, *Matchru*, the maternal uncle of *Dikki* and *Bandi*, rushed out and quickly cut open its belly where *Rokman Me.a* and *Chongman pante*, maternal uncles of *Goera* were still alive inside the pig monster's belly. The monster pig's entrails were cleaned at that very stream thus leaving a permanent overpowering stench of rotting entrails.

16. *Rong sobok Rong·kol*: Within the periphery of *Balpakram* plateau but now within West Khasi Hills District; in the *a·king* land of *Pindengru* there is a beautiful rock cave in the shape of a banana flower, known as *Rong·sobok Rong·kol* which means the banana flower cave. Amazingly the rock formation is in the exact shape of a banana flower. The Garos call it *miwagam rong·machari*. This cave was once

considered sacred by the Hindus for they believed that in the days past, the Hindu god Shiva Thakur used to reside in that very cave. The cave is already abandoned and they no longer hold it sacred anymore.

17. *Rong·saljong Agal*: On the border of West Khasi Hills district there is one tank that appears to have been manmade which has some magical charm about it. The tank is roughly one hundred and twenty ft long and ninety ft broad or 20x90ft in area. The magic of this tank is that the water in it is so clear and remains perpetually crystal clear and transparent at all times of the year. What is amazing and intriguing about it is that the water level never changes throughout the year. Even when there is heavy downpours it never overflows and when it is hot and dry the water never seems to evaporate. Such a mystic phenomenon had baffled many but it is strongly believed that there must be some important aquatic creatures like *sangkni* the water serpent or the *buga raja*, the mermaid king. They are the ones known to keep the pool where they reside spotlessly clean, not allowing even a single leaf to fall on it.

18. *Goera Rong·jaleng*: In the southern side of the plateau, near the mysterious inexplicable *mebit mebang*, there is a remarkable rock ledge known as *Goera Rong·jaleng* and *Goera Rong·gat*. This rock ledge stands jutting out above the deep gorge. It was from this rock ledge that *Goera*, the god of thunder and lightning discharged his fatal arrow on the humongous pig monster called *wakmangganchi aragonidi*, the mythical pig monster which was so huge that when it stood up its snout touched the *Durama*, the Tura peak and its tail lay immersed in *Songdu* the Brahmaputra River. It took several years for *Goera* to finally defeat his arch enemy and

rescue his maternal uncles *Rokman Me.a* and *Chongman pante* from the belly of the pig monster.

19. ***Areng Patal***: Just a few kilometres below *Balpakram* plateau near the village *Chimitap* (*chimitap* means underground flow) there is one massive flat rock that defies all description. It is called *Areng patal* and is said to be a virtual death trap for small animals and birds. Anything small whether it is a bird or an animal is quickly and inexplicably drawn towards the rock as if by an invisible force or magnet from which it could never escape. Shri H. A. Marak in his *Balpakram* brochure mentioned that at one time Sir George David Walker, Deputy Commissioner of Garo Hills during pre-independence period witnessed it with his own eyes and was greatly mystified. He pronounced it as *janwar ka chumbuk* or the magnet that attracts animals and birds. It however does not affect bigger animals and is completely impotent against humans. Why and how it works nobody can tell. There is absolutely no scientific explanation to such a phenomenon.

20. ***Jogu Rong-sal*** :- A few miles below the *Balpakram* hill there is one long slab of rock that lies jutting out towards the *Mahadeo* river and is clearly visible from afar. It is roughly twenty ft above ground but the geological experts had reportedly measured an astounding one mile three furlongs and seventeen ft or nearly two kms long still embedded deep underground. According to legend, one demigod by the name of *Jogu* vowed to construct a bridge over *Maadi* (*Mahadeo*) River and was tugging it from the deep inside the belly of the earth when the cocks began to crow and he had to abandon the work incomplete.

It is generally believed that gods, demi gods and all supernatural spirits or *mite* work during the night time only.

If somehow in the course of their activity they could not complete the task before dawn it had to be abandoned as it is and where it is. It was precisely because of this reason that there are innumerable tales of gods and goddesses who abandoned their works half done which later on turned to stones. In this case too, since *Jogu* could not complete the task, the half done incomplete work remained for posterity as a stark reminder to our descendants.

Actually there are many more sites of mythological importance but which bears no distinctive characters of their own, like, *Do·de mesaram*, or dancing ground of the peacocks, where in the days of old hundreds of peacocks used to throng together for an annual dance showing off their resplendent plumes; *Ganchi so·ram* or the alter built for burning fires to announce some important events during British times, perhaps the only site not directly connected to mythology; *Gittingni chu·unte* or *Gittings* fireplace, *Matchruni kram* or drum, a drum looking rounded rock; *Matchruni dikking* or *Matchru's* head gear; the rock formation that roughly resembles the hat; *Matchruni sel·u donram* or the place where *matchru* kept his spear, a crevice in the rock that is in the shape of the Garo traditional spear; *menggo kol* or cat's cave, *So·reni auram* or bathing ghat of *So·re*; *Dikkini ring* or *Dikki's* boat, *Sogin sa·ram* or vulture's nesting place; *Sogin nokpante* or the vultures resting place and many more of less significance, therefore no need to go into details.

If anyone is interested in visiting *Balpakram*, he is hereby advised to take an official guide from the Forest Ranger's office who are familiar with all the nooks and corners of the hill as well as the sites of mythical importance otherwise, going on his own, not only there is every chance of getting lost in the labyrinth of the place but would also fail to notice

important sites and landmarks. To an ordinary layman, *Balpakram* does not offer any visual exciting to the eyes apart from the deep canyon itself but to a person with the discerning mind, keenly interested in epic lore and tales, sky is the limit; there is no end to explore. Many more sites are yet to be meticulously discovered and identified, depending on the person's interest and will.

In conclusion I would like to say that truly Garo Hills is a charming place, steeped in tradition, custom and culture deeply entrenched in mysticism. To top it all *Balpakram* alone holds the distinction of not only being a sacred hill both for the locals and Hindus but also a spooky treasure trove of learning and experience for those who are willing to venture out of their comfort zones.

Praise be to the Lord who maketh all thing possible

To all my readers

As you may be aware that in our fast-changing world our ancestral primitive beliefs and practices are eroding fast swamped by the invasion of alien culture and practices. I am afraid that at this rate our very survival will be at great risk, our rich heritage, the distinctive traditional beliefs and practices and our vibrant culture and customs being relentlessly pushed back to the brink of oblivion. This book is my feeble attempt to remind the younger generations of our ethnicity and to protect and preserve some of the most beautiful beliefs and practices of our ancestral parents.

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1. Meghalaya Yours to Discover 2004 - Guide to Tourists
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