



THE GAROS AND THEIR TOTEMS

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Abstract

Garos are a tribal community in the state Meghalaya enriched with many cultural properties. They belong to the Tibeto Burman speech family. Their Matrilineal society, their habitation, clan system, Nokmaship and their language is what give them unique identity for their existence. Totem is also one of them. In Garo communities totems have been carried down to generations through objects and in their middle names. The image of a totem come alive through the stories they passed down orally. The study of Garo totem is still untouched. Some of the principles of Garo totems are not related to the general ideas of totem. Totems are preserved differently in Garo community unlike other tribes with many practices. The paper opens the gateway to explore the main idea of Garo totem and its uniqueness. Totems are found in many of their cultural traits that need to meet the proper ground of totemism in general.

Keywords: - Totems, Garo Totems, cultural adherence of totems, and Poles

Totem can be seen as an emblem of some group of people. The emblem would be of animal, bird, plants or any natural figure that they believed to have evolved from or somehow related to their evolution. Totems are believed as their guardian spirit by many people and named them in their own native language without calling it totems. They are marked in the form of painting, drawing, accessories, garments, jewelry and sculpture in their places and houses as a sign of respect to them. The term 'Totem' was first introduced by the British

merchant James Long in 1791. It is derived from the Ojibwa word 'ototeman' meaning kin or relatives which later became the word totem. Ojibwa or Ojibwe, or Chippewa is an American Indian tribe who called themselves Anishinaabe who lived in North America continent. The study of totemism is now being widely explored in many different areas of studies.

The people of Garo community from the state Meghalaya have the totem in their middle names. Their Ma·chongs are almost uncountable and many have not been heard by their own people. Each ma·chong has their own origin story told down from generations. The stories are preserved orally and this enhances the oral literature of a Garo community. The tradition of ma·chong chanani or ma·chong de·ani in Garo community is always been a prominent part of their social life. If they were to be known by their culture Ma·chong or clan system is the jewel to this community. The incidence in some ma·chongs' origin stories are related to totemism. The story of the origin of Do·po ma·chong came from the word do·po which means Owl. This Do·po totem is adopted by some group of people because in their origin story owl played a heroic role by saving two young girls from being kidnaped by matchadu matchabet or half tiger half human which in turn inspirit those group of people to adopt Do·po totem as their ma·chong. Am·pang ma·chong is the totem of am·pang which means tatch or vetiver plant with which the roof of the house was made. Some of the totems mentioned in Alan Playfair *The Garos* are Rangsan Ma·chong has Bear as totem, Naringgre Do·kru has Dove as totem, Drogre has Hen, Koknal has Kok or basket, and some other natural features as their totems. The totems of the Garos in terms of Ma·chong are not qualified to the theory of Totem. It is because neither the totems they adopted are considered sacred nor honored. According to Emile Durkheim's perspective "*Each clan had a totem, typically an animal or a plant which was represented by drawing or carvings made on wood*

or stone, typically link to a 'creation myth' that explains the origin of that clan and linked current members into that history. The totem served to distinguish the clan from all other clan. To clan members, totem was as sacred object, nothing less than 'the outward and visible form of the totemic principle or god' – their animal/plants was sacred and the totemic representation sacred if not more so." It is found that Garos do not give a special position to their totems in their society. All the totems they have were only a story they once told and passed down to generations. There are no specific evidences to prove to consider their totems as sacred, as Garos don't have such images kept in honor as mentioned in general totemistic theory. Talking about totem animals or birds, there are people who bring no violence to their totems. There are some group of people as mentioned in *Totemism and Exogamy, Vol. IV* written by James George Frazer "A respect which a man owes to his totem as a kinsman and a friend usually prevents him from killing it or eating it, whenever totem is an edible animal or plant."(06) While at the same time he also mentioned some totemic group of people who eat their totem animal or plant believing that "unless they thus convert themselves into their totems by occasionally eating a little of them they will be unable magically to multiply the totemic animals and plants for the benefit of the rest of the community."(06) However there are no such practices to be found in Garo communities. All the edibles are eaten without any practical restrictions. Alan Playfair in his book *The Garos* gives the statement on Garo totemism that "When I say that the origin of these ma-chongs is often totemistic, I must qualify the statement by adding that it is a modified form of totemism; for although the ma-chong may consider itself to be descended from some animal, in no case have I found that that animal was treated with respect or reverence."(65). The statement is found to be true for

the reason that Garos totemism is unique and perchance other principles of Totemism may be required to match the common theory totemism.

Along with the clan system the poles can also be found in Garo community. Some of it is a monumental poles erected to honor the dead person. The poles or sculptures found in Nokpante or House of bachelors are curved in the image of their mythical creatures. Some are to showcase their skills and some are to resemble the characteristic of their strength. The creatures are like Buga Rani (mermaid), Buga Raja (merman), Sangkni (Giant mythical snake), Aringga (Giant water monitor lizard), Matpu (Komodo), Ki·sing (Turtle), Guang (Spiders), Mangkram or Mangkisang (Scorpion), Mangguak (Centipede), Snare (Millipede), Matcha (Tiger) and many more. These objects can also be taken as a serious matter of study to match the theory of totem poles.

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