

## **The Changing Matrilocal Institution Of Nokrom Among The Garo Of Baka Village, Kamrup District, Assam**

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### **Abstract:**

The paper focuses on one of the significant features of the Garo matrilineal descent, that is, inheritance and residence after marriage, referred to as the 'nokrom' system (Bose, 1936). Nokrom, refers to the resident-son-in-law of a family who marries the daughter, selected to be the inheritress (nokna) of the family's property. Its ramifications, as revealed from previous studies, (Bose, 1936; Burling, 1963; Goswami & Majumdar, 1974; Majumdar, 1980), seem to influence the traditional Garo power structure and power relations amongst the land-owning matri-lineages in a society based traditionally on shifting cultivation. In this article, an attempt will be made to situate the nokrom system as it operates far away from the Garo hills of Meghalaya, their traditional abode, on the fringes of North Guwahati town, an old and important segment of the sprawling Guwahati city. The Garo people of this village, who had been practising wet-paddy cultivation for more than a century ago, are showing a trend of diversification in their livelihood strategies. Under this backdrop, the study shows that the nokrom system is declining among the younger generations, mainly due to contact with the neighbouring patrilineal communities.

**Key words:** social institution, Garo, mahari, matriliney, inheritance, transition

### **Theoretical Overview:**

Transitions from matriliney to patriliney has been one of the focal points of discussion in anthropology since the emergence of their discipline in mid-19<sup>th</sup> century. By using the concepts of survival or vestiges, the early evolutionists had tried to conjecture a unilinear sequence from matriliney to patriliney in the evolution of human civilization. (Bachofen, 1861 [1967]; Mc Lenan, 1865; Morgan (1871). In the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, with the rise of the Boasian theory of historical particularism, the functionalism of Malinowski and the structural-functionalism of Radcliffe-Brown, the importance of first-hand ethnographic works was highlighted in anthropology so that the claims of an earlier matrilineal/matriarchal stage of evolution took on a "more and more doubtful character. ( Spech F.G, 1922, c.f Shenk et. Al, 2019 ).

During the mid-twentieth century, Murdock ( Murdock, 1949, 207) showed that matriliney was negatively associated with patri/virilocal residence pattern, male authority and the 'concentration of movable resources or property in the hands of men. According to Gough, matriliney has declined in 14 of the 15 societies for which she examined the evidences of matrilineal transition( Gough, 1961,a) For her, economic development and economic prosperity, owing to contact with industrial Western societies during the colonial era, was the main reason for such transitions. She has also shown that the shift away from matriliney is associated with the rise of nuclear families and a decline in the functions of lineages within the broader transition to intensive agriculture and wider market processes (Gough, 1961b)

Coming to the ethnographic scenario of the north-east Indian ethnographic scenario, Raha (1989) noted that the transition from matriliney to patriliney among the Rabha of the Cooch Behar region is the outcome of close-proximity contact and prolonged interaction with their patrilineal Hindu neighbours, the Rajbangsi. He also mentioned that forces of urbanisation, modernization, cash and market economy have intensified the pace of such transitions in the Rabha culture "(Raha, 1989, 3)In a study entitled "From maternal uncle to father," Mawrie (2013) has observed that Christianity has had a foremost impact on the matrilineal Khasi society in which the mother's brother used to be the traditional administrator of the ancestral property. When the new laws of inheritance were introduced by the British government, much of the traditional authority of the mother's brother was eroded. Spatial mobility or the physical absence of matrilineal kin, particularly the mother's brother, had also weakened matrilineal norms. The rise of conjugal families and the influence of Christian values on parental responsibility are some of the fuelling factors.

### **Objectives:**

The present paper has focused on the changing dimensions of the nokrom system, a unique feature of marriage among the Garos, a significant matrilineal society of north-east India. The study village is a small but old Garo village located in the Kamrup (Rural) district of Assam on the fringe of North Guwahati town, an important segment of the sprawling Guwahati city. This Garo village, called Baka, is surrounded by patrilineal Boro-Kachari, Assamese Hindu, and Assamese Muslim communities. The total population of Baka is 1885 persons of which 880 are females. Although the beginning of Garo settlement could be traced to around 1818, but the establishment of the Baptist Church in 1919–21 is considered by many elders to be the actual beginning of a settled Garo community.

### **The people:**

The Garo are one of the three matrilineal tribal communities of North East India. Their traditional abode happens to be the Garo hill region of the present Indian State of Meghalaya, yet they are spread out in many different plain's districts of Assam (like Goalpara, Kamrup Metro, Kamrup Rural, Morigaon, Nagaon, Golaghat, Jorhat, Sivasagar, and Dhubri, among others), and Nagaland. There is a sizeable Garo community living in Bangladesh also. While the Garos living in Meghalaya, Assam, and Nagaland are accorded the status of scheduled

tribes, in Bangladesh they are considered an ethnic group only. Their language belongs to the Tibeto-Burman group, and they like to call themselves achik mande.

### **Methods adopted:**

The paper is based on primary data collected during 2018-2021 by using observation, census schedule, interview and case study. The junior author happens to hail from Mandakata, one of the neighbouring villages of Baka. As such he has close acquaintance with the Garo people of Baka. The study is supplemented by relevant secondary materials.

### **Nokrom system among the Garo:**

The nokrom system happens to be one of the cornerstones of Garo matrilineal descent, inheritance, and residence after marriage. (Bose, 1936; Goswami and Majumdar, 1971, 16-20). Its ramifications seem to influence the traditional Garo power structure and power relations amongst the land-owning matri-lineages in a society based on shifting cultivation. Although there is no mention of the nokrom system in Playfair's first full-length monograph on the Garos (1909), in 1936 Bose distinguished between two kinds of Garo son-in-law: a nokrom and a chawari. Goswami and Majumdar (1972) has used the term agate in place of chowary. Bose(1936) described that "the heiress" in the matrilineal Garo society is called "nokna" and her husband is called "nokrom". One of the daughters (mostly the youngest one) is selected by the parents in consultation with their respective maharis to be the nokna, or the inheritress. The heiress daughter must live with her husband and children in her parents' home.

As the matrilineal Garos follow the rules of matrilocal residence, the son-in-law, after the marriage, used to live in the village of the mother-in-law. Whereas the nokrom gets the privilege of living in the house of his mother-in-law, the chowary or the agate son-in-law has to build a separate house in the same village, generally with support from his parents-in-law. Inheritance among the Garos is always in the female line, but it is the husband who manages the property on behalf of his wife. A nokrom, after his father-in-law's demise, practically becomes the manager of all the ancestral property, while a chowary has no claim over it. (Bose, 1936). A nokrom, however, has to look after his parents-in-law in their old age, maintain the household, and also abide by the decisions of his wife's mahari (matrilineage). Thus, a nokrom is a resident son-in-law of a household who manages all the property and cultivation processes on behalf of the matri-clan. Traditionally, in the absence of a girl child in the family, the couple generally adopted a girl from the wife's clan group machong to become the nokna. The husband of the inheritress is known as the nokrom.

The most important aspect of this system is the choosing of a nokrom, which is usually left to the father, who always favours his own sister's son, i.e., his own nephew. Thus, a cross-cousin marriage of the FZS type emerges. If the sister's son is not available, or refuses to marry, then the search for a classificatory sister's son continues until a suitable match might be found among ever-larger circles of lineage kin. In most cases, though, the nokrom is chosen among the sons of the sister, own, or classificatory. Thus, nokrom marriages are, in actuality, cross-cousin marriages. The nokrom naturally lives with his in-laws' family and assists them with all household and economic activities. When his in-laws become old, he takes over the position

of his father-in-law as the principal male of the family. An agate marriage, on the other hand, does not require the groom to live with his in-laws permanently. In contrast, an agate son-in-law may opt to build a new home in his wife's village, or to move to his own natal village, or to a different village entirely.

In most cases, the agate (non-inheriting) couple is given a plot of land to establish their own independent home closer to the bride's family home. Goswami and Majumdar (1972) observed that although the Garo strictly adhere to the law of uxorilocal residence in regard to nokrom, they hardly have a set rule of residence as regards agate marriages. Thus, it appears that in any Garo village, vertical joint families are generally seen, while "horizontal joint families" can be found "only for very brief periods." (Ibid: 12).

Majumdar (1980, 153-156) demonstrated how the nokrom system had become nearly extinct as a result of the total impoverishment of one shifting agricultural hamlet called Matchakolgiri, primarily because no young man was ready to come to the village as a resident son-in-law. The contrary scenario could be seen at Wajadagiri village, where the residents had adopted wet-paddy cultivation, resulting in economic prosperity. A nokrom in Wajadagiri was very careful to keep good ties with his in-laws, knowing full well that if he quarrelled or broke away, acquiring a permanent plot of land to cultivate would be extremely difficult. Thus, adoption of wet-paddy cultivation gave a new lease of life to the traditional institutions of the Garos including the nokrom system. His study highlighted that economic factor like the continuation of shifting cultivation in a Garo village led to the decline of the nokrom system rather than reasons such as cultural contact or acculturation. It will be worthwhile to find out how far such an observation is true for Garo villages that are surrounded by patrilineal and patrilocal communities as in Baka.

### **The Baka village and its history:**

North Guwahati, a tranquil suburb of Guwahati till a few decades ago, is now being gradually transformed into a zone dotted with small and petty industries. On the fringe of this locality, Baka situated 18 km south of North Guwahati was established more than a hundred years ago ( around 1818 AD) by a migrant Garo group of workers who came to work as labourers in an adjacent tea garden from the foothills of the Garo hills in the Goalpara district of Assam. Later, they gave up their jobs in the tea garden, and gradually settled at a nearby place, with the help of Kachari villagers of Bor Nijora village to pursue plough cultivation by reclaiming swampy lands available in the vicinity. This area was later named Baka village. Lured by the availability of land for plough cultivation, Garo families from many other areas also moved in, and by the second decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, it had become a small but vibrant Garo settlement amongst Boro-Kachari, Assamese caste Hindu and Assamese Muslim communities. The Garos of Baka live in a multi-community setting, and none of their neighbour practise matriliney. The present essay tries to find out how far the Garo people of Baka still practise matrilineal social institutions like the nokrom. Or are they gradually heading in the direction of replacing matriliney with patriliney?

This partially hilly settlement started to grow as Garos from different regions came to settle there. The locality was named Bor-Baka only in 1890, and most people consider this date to be the year of its establishment. In 1923, Baka Baptist Church was established with the efforts of missionaries like G.R. Chelmsford, Rev. Rumanose and Rev. Keshab. Till then, Baka had been a typical songsarek (non-Christian) Garo village, but nothing is known about its early social life. Many components of Garo matrilineal social organisation, notably the nokrom system, could be traced in Baka only from this phase, according to old informants like Mr. B. Sangma, a senior citizen of Baka. He claims that despite Baka being a very old village, Garo social life in true sense, began with the arrival of Christianity. According to him, the nokrom system was very common in his generation and in the past. He himself came to Baka as a nokrom way back in 1979 from Goalpara and settled here with his wife's family. Although he is a retired government servant, he is managing the cultivation of the ancestral agricultural land of the family after the demise of his father-in-law in 1986. His father-in-law, late Mr. J. K. Sangma, was one of his mamas, or uncles (mother's brother). He had mentioned that a Garo marriage is not only between two individuals but it not merely establishes close reciprocal everlasting relations between two maharis (matri-clans). Such a permanent relations between the matrilineages of the husband and the wife is known as a'kim bond. Traditionally, in Garo villages practicing shifting cultivation, each mahari had ownership rights over plots of land called a'king and it was the duty of the nokrom to manage the a'king of his wife's mahari. Therefore, he had to abide by the decisions of his wife's mahari members, who were all male relatives. Traditionally, the maharis had to arrange for the replacement of their members in the event of the death or divorce of either the husband or wife. At present, all of the land in the village is privately held, while the government owns all of the common forest area. As a result, maharis in Baka do not own any land. In such a setting, the maharis' economic control is eroding day by day.

As revealed from field data, it is observed that in 56 % cases of nokrom households at Baka, the groom ( i.e. the nokrom) hails from within the village itself. Mrs Binita M. Marak, a lady of 55 years of age was the youngest among seven siblings of five brothers and one elder sister who are all married. Her mother is from Marak and father belongs to the Gabil Momin clan. Her brothers, since their marriage went to live separately with their respective wives and are also living at Baka. Only two of them are nokroms. After consultation of both the Marak and Momin maharis, Binita, the youngest daughter had been selected as the nokna and Ananta G. Momin (63 years), the actual nephew of her father, from another hamlet of Baka was chosen to be the nokrom of their family. After their marriage, her husband Ananta G. Momin came to live with her family as per their traditions and has been at the helm of all domestic affairs since then. Ananta's younger brother, Dhiren did not want to become a nokrom, so he went to Guwahati and works as a driver. Her elder sister lives separately in the same compound with her family.

Sometime, in unusual circumstances the grooms are seen bringing their brides to their natal families rather than to move out to.

Mrs S. Momin, had narrated that her maternal aunt, a nokna herself, have two sons and a daughter. The oldest son (aged 33 years) just became an invalid at an accident. So, he married a Garo girl from another clan. It was mutually agreed amongst clan members of both the clans that the new bride would come to live with her husband's family and reside in her in-household. Such cases are contrary to Garo uxorilocal traditions. Significantly, the only daughter of the family, aged, 28( years) as the nokna (inheritress) have brought in her husband (32 years) from Sangma clan as the nokrom to their household. This has created a form of horizontally extended joint family. The family plans to divide all its property equally amongst all the three children. It is only in such exceptional cases where nokrom system is working in the village at present.

In this way, the nokrom system in Baka village is being practiced over the decades, with the active participation of the respective maharis. Now, the question arises as to who are the members that generally are consulted. To quote Mr. A. G. Momin, one of the key informants,

“If I have to think of my daughter's marriage, then we shall invite as the mahari members: (i) my wife's mother and father; (ii) wife's brothers (or the daughter's mother's brother); (iii) occasionally, wife's sisters”

In the previous generations including that of Mr. A. G Momin, my key informant, one's mother's mother, mother's father and most importantly the mother's brothers, and to some extent mother's sister's husbands happened to the significant members of one's mahari. However, now a days, it has been observed in some families to invite father's father (fa fa); father's mother or some of one's patrilineal relatives. But such a practice is very rare. But one significant

One's mother's brother still occupies an important position in Garo society. In a few households, like the nokrom happens to be the actual or classificatory nephew (sister's son) of the property inheriting bride's (nokna) father as mentioned before. Burlings(1963, 81) had mentioned about a rather elastic definition of nephew gritang among the Garos. At present, it has been noted that the nokrom system is declining among the younger generation as could be seen from the following table :

**Table 1: Age-wise distribution of nokrom son-in-law in the village**

Age group (in years)	Number of nokrom son-in law recorded in Baka (%)
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80 & above	8 (10.10)
70-79	12(16.44)
60-69	15 (20.54)
50-59	18(24.65)
40-49	11 (15.068)
30-39	6(08.219)
20-29	3(04.109)
<b>Total</b>	<b>73 (100.00)</b>

Table 1 presents the age-wise distribution of nokrom sons-in-law who were alive at the time of data collection, from different households at Baka. Out of a total of 73 cases of nokrom marriages collected during fieldwork reveals an interesting trend. It may be seen that the nokrom cases are much lower in the younger age groups (between 20-49 years of age as compared to the older age groups (above 50 years of age). The declining trend is very much sharper among the younger age group than the older ones. It may be mentioned that, in the elderly age-groups, a few individuals who were nokroms had died.

It may be observed that the traditional nokrom system is becoming rarer among the younger generation of their society. Among the reasons of this shift away from practicing nokrom system, the most prominent happens to be a rise in inter-community marriages and unwillingness on the part of the Garo young men to leave his natal family and go as the nokrom to live with his in-laws. During the study, around 21 cases of inter-community marriages were recorded place during last five years preceding the last phase of data collection i.e. In 2020. Of these cases, 11 Garo girls got married to boys from different communities and out of these only 5 are now living at Baka, but not as nokrom. The other 6 girls had left Baka to join their husband's family. Non-Garo men were seldom seen to be a nokrom. Contrary to the matrilineal traditional norms, the present study recorded 61 cases of marriages wherein the grooms have brought in their wives to his natal family resulting in patri-virilocal residence. The boys are now averse to the practice of matrilineal residence (nokrom) come do not like to come to live as nokrom and in most cases the family try to divide its property amongst all the children. The very few cases of nokrom among the young generation are the outcome of being marrying the only daughter and some exceptional cases as mentioned earlier.

The Garo youths of today, since their childhood, are being influenced by the norms of the neighbouring patrilineal communities with whom they are interacting in their day to day lives. Mr. Morning Marak, a youth of 29 years disclosed that

“Most of my non-Garo school friends used to tease me and other Garo boys that in future we will become ‘ghar jowai’ ( son-in- law of the house) and often asked, will you cry when your wives will take you away from your home. It was really very frustrating and humiliating. Therefore, I have made up my mind that I will not go to live with my in-laws when I marry in future,”

According to a recent article, (Shenk et.al 2019) , cases of transition away from matriliney are about three times more common than instances of transition towards matriliney. They have noted from their cross-cultural analysis that anthropologists have taken two perspectives while discussing the causes of transition away from matriliney. From a substantive point of view, ‘cows, ploughs and markets’ are considered as ‘enemy’ of matrilineal institutions while the social perspective considered activities of missionaries and bureaucracy along with the ever-increasing social and spatial mobility which has been continuing in today’s globalized times since the beginning of the colonial period. The data from Baka indicate that arrival of the Baptist Church had given a new life or impetus to the matrilineal norms of the Garo society as it was through the Baptist Mission, that the people of Baka could come in direct contact with the Garos of Garo hills way back in the second decade of the last century. Prior to that period, the original settlers of Baka had been disconnected from the mainstream Garo society for a long time. Thus, coming of the missionaries cannot be considered as a factor for changing the matrilineal institution of nokrom among the Garo people of Baka. From the findings it is clear that rise of private or individual ownership of landed property at the expense of clan or lineage-based land ownership, occupational and spatial mobility along with rise in cash income, and more importantly the norm of equal sharing of property amongst sons and daughters are some of the conditions that have led to the fading away of the nokrom system at Baka. However, the most important force that have contributed towards discontinuation of such a matrilineal practice happens to be the attitudinal changes of the younger generation as a result of living in a multi-community setting with a wider patrilineal ethos that is reinforced in the school environment. Thus, we may conclude by agreeing that the gradual transitions away from matriliney among the Garo of Baka are not due to any one particular cause or factor but are multicausal in nature. (Ibid).

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