

# UNVEILING GENDER DYNAMICS THROUGH PROVERBS IN GARO FOLKLORE

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## Abstract

In Garo folklore, proverbs provide a revealing look into the intricate dynamics of gender, highlighting the roles and experiences of women. These concise expressions of wisdom offer profound insights into the cultural norms, expectations, and power structures that shape the lives of Garo women. By examining these proverbs, we can delve into the complexities of Garo society, especially concerning women's status and roles. This study enriches our understanding of the socio-cultural context of the Garo tribe and the place of women within their community. Moreover, these proverbs serve as oral traditions that have been passed down through generations, preserving the collective memory and values of the Garo people. They function as tools for socialization, teaching young members of the community about appropriate behaviours and societal expectations. The analysis of these proverbs also reveals the ways in which gender relations are negotiated and maintained within the tribe. Through this exploration, we gain a deeper appreciation of Garo women in navigating their cultural landscape.

**Keywords:** Garo, Women, Proverbs, Folklore, Culture, Status.

## INTRODUCTION

Folklore serves as a mirror to society, reflecting its geographical and socio-cultural environment through elements such as riddles, folktales, folksongs, and proverbs. Family folklore includes the traditional expressions that people create, share, and practice within the context of family life, focusing on family members, events, and history. Proverbs, a significant component of folklore, have guided social interactions for millennia, encapsulating everyday experiences and common observations in memorable and concise language. Despite being the most succinct form of verbal folklore, including fairy tales, legends, tall tales, jokes, and riddles, proverbs are far from simple. They fulfill the human need to distill experiences and observations into compact wisdom that can be readily applied to personal relationships and social matters.

Women in traditional societies are well-represented in various forms of folklore, such as folksongs, riddles, and maxims. It is well-known that women are central to society, with culture being primarily transmitted through them. The Garos have a rich oral tradition, abundant with proverbs, idioms, oral narratives, and traditional poetry in songs and rhymes. The history, religious beliefs, and cultural practices of the Garo people are largely preserved in their oral literature, passed down through generations. This study aims to explore the role of Garo women in various aspects of their society as depicted in their proverbs.

Northeast India is home to a diverse array of ethnic groups, each with distinct racial origins and histories of migration to the region. These groups brought with them varied socio-cultural traditions. According to Garo legend, they too migrated to this remote part of India in the past. The Garos, a scheduled tribe in Meghalaya, India, call

themselves *Achik-mande*. They are the second-largest tribe in Meghalaya after the Khasis, comprising about a third of the state's population. They belong to the Tibeto-Burman family of the Bodo linguistic group. Based on their place of residence, dialectical and cultural variations, and inter-tribe marriages, the Garos are divided into several sub-tribes.

The Garos are one of the few remaining matrilineal societies globally, tracing descent, inheritance, succession, authority, and post-marital residence through the female line. After marriage, a woman continues to live with her family of origin. In this system, the right to inherit parental property, both movable and immovable, goes to the women, passing from mother to daughter according to Garo inheritance law. This privileged daughter, known as *nokna* (heiress), has a husband called *nokrom*. Clan affiliation is determined through the mother, with only one daughter inheriting property. If a woman has only one daughter, she automatically becomes the heiress, taking over family responsibilities after her mother's death. If there are multiple daughters, a choice is made for the heiress.

Folk traditions suggest that women once held comprehensive prerogatives—familial, social-religious, economic, and political. Myths and legends related to clan origins often reference the revered system of matriliney, consistently glorifying the mother's role. In Garo society, women play a dominant role in managing household affairs, performing strenuous work in the fields, and participating actively with men. They handle all agricultural tasks and are expert horticulturists. Women also perform all household chores, including cooking, cleaning, caring for animals, and child-rearing. Interestingly, a Garo husband is referred to by his wife as *nok-gipa*, meaning 'owner of the house,' reflecting the balanced relationship between males and females in Garo society. The relationship between the *nokrom* and his in-laws is crucial, with the *nokrom* assuming the role of a son in the family and sharing responsibility for the family's peace and prosperity.

### **Identity and Cultural Expression reflected in Folklore:**

Traditional gender roles are frequently intricately woven throughout the stories in Garo folklore. Different duties and obligations allocated to men and women are often shown in oral traditions, proverbs, myths, rituals, beliefs, and other narratives that are passed down from one generation to the next. For example, stories of bravery and heroism usually have male protagonists, which reflects the masculine vigor that is associated with Garo culture. On the other hand, narratives emphasizing caring traits or household responsibilities typically feature female protagonists, perpetuating the misconception that women are nurturers and homemakers. In addition to reflecting gender relations, Garo folklore helps the community express its culture and build its identity. The Garo people pass their values, beliefs, and cultural memory from one generation to the next through stories, myths, and legends.

As human beings interact with each other, they ceaselessly express what they think, feel, know and believe. This is done in various forms of expressions, most of which are verbal forms. The proverbial sayings are one of the most indefinable means of verbal communication. They rely on predecessors and peers for its authenticity. With time and repetition these informal sayings are conceived as traditional. They become identified individually or collectively as folklore. When we use an expression in words, to convey a particular message through periods of time, that refined and artistic expression becomes a proverb. While the use of proverbs enhances the sweetness of

a statement it also carries the seriousness of a situation. *The Bible* has an entire book on proverbs attributed to Solomon, son of David, King of Israel. The book defines proverbs as 'wisdom and instructions: to perceive the words of understanding ....to give subtlety to the simple, to the young man knowledge and discretion. A wise man will hear and will increased learning: and a man of understanding shall attain unto wise counsels: to understand a proverb, and the interpretation: the words of the wise' (*The Holy Bible*, London: 507).

Abrahams cited in Dorson (1972:119), 'Proverbs are short and witty. He added, 'Traditional expression that arises as part of everyday discourse as well as in the more highly structured situations of education and judicial proceedings. Each proverb is a full statement of an approach to recurrent problem. It presents a point of view and strategy that is self- sufficient, needing nothing more than an event of communication to bring it into play. Proverbs are the shortest form of traditional expression that calls themselves as formal artistic entities'.

Bascom (1954:333-349), advocates functional approach to the study of folklore. He says, 'Proverbs are highly effective in exercising social control. Because they express the morals or ethics of the group, they are convenient standards for appraising behavior in terms of the approved norms. Because they are pungently, wittily and seriously stated, they are ideally suited for commenting on the behavior of others. They are used to express social approval and disapproval; praise for those who conform to accepted social conventions and criticism or ridicule of those who deviate, warning, defiance or derision of a rival or enemy and advice, counsel or warning to a friend when either contemplates action which may lead to social friction, open hostilities, or direct punishment by society'. Proverbs have diversified functions. It is used as a means of relieving stressful situation or as a medium of giving advice.

The proverbs that Garo people used to utilize in their daily lives have significantly decreased. Proverb usage is cautious and unknown to the younger generations, which can be attributed to societal changes in culture and way of life. The alien civilization that adopted Christianity as their new religion supplanted the practices of the past. There were several modifications brought about by religion, including adjustments to diet, clothing, employment, and educational systems. Consequently, some of these modifications have had an impact on their pure way of life and thought. A few chosen proverbs were used for this study, with the majority of the sub-divisions focusing on the hardworking nature of the women, their character and beauty, and marital problems.

### **Proverbs Integral to Garo Women**

**(i) *Agal kamo wal.chakgipa; Saarakao salchakgipa*** The Garo proverb "Agal kamo wal chakgipa; Saarakao salchakgipa" underscores the significance of familial support and solidarity during challenging times. "Agal kamo wal chakgipa" refers to the responsibility of caring for one's maternal family and relatives in need, emphasizing the duty to provide support and assistance during difficult situations. "Saarakao salchakgipa" translates to "when a house burns due to fire-related accidents, one who spends the night of distress with the aggrieved family and stands by or is the first to face the misfortunes of a family." This part stresses the importance of being present and supportive during crises, sharing the burdens of affected family members.

**(ii) *Am.bol ja.bak gate; Merong rongdik done*** This proverb highlights the link between the diligent work ethic of Garo women and the abundance of resources, such

as a well-stocked granary and firewood, as evidence of their hard work. In the Garo community, managing resources like grains and firewood often falls under women's responsibilities. Therefore, a household with ample supplies suggests that the women have been industrious and diligent in tasks like farming, harvesting, storing grains, and gathering firewood.

**(iii) *Be.en na.batko sala; Kni rasin jaksala*** This proverb praises a woman's beauty, likening her radiant skin to the shimmering scales of a silver fish and her lustrous hair to the gleaming rays of the sun.

**(iv) *Chajakchom dokrimita; Chinna do.rimita*** This proverb refers to young women who dress beautifully and carry themselves well, emphasizing their elegance and poise.

**(v) *Chambil gondang mesenga; Deba gngang an.senga*** This proverb draws an analogy between the sour but eventually enjoyable chambil fruit and the completeness of a family when a couple has a child. "Chambil gondang mesenga" indicates that despite initial challenges, like the sourness of the fruit, the experience becomes rewarding. "Deba gngang an.senga" emphasizes that a family feels complete and fulfilled with the arrival of a child, despite the initial difficulties of parenthood.

**(vi) *Cha.o mikkimitaia; Tuo janggilitaia*** "Cha.o mikkimitaia" describes a couple constantly quarreling, indicating a lack of harmony in their relationship. "Tuo janggilitaia" refers to sleeping with one's back turned to the partner, symbolizing emotional distance and estrangement.

**(vii) *Cha.o ringo bon.gija gamchongmot; Doko ino katgija jikchongmot*** This proverb highlights a household's financial stability and abundance, where wealth remains intact despite expenditures. It also praises the loyalty and commitment of a faithful wife who remains devoted to her family, emphasizing the importance of dedication in maintaining a harmonious household.

**(viii) *Do.bok wagam gri; Me.chik gisik gri*** "Do.bok wagam gri" refers to a toothless goat, struggling to eat and survive. "Me.chik gisik gri" describes a girl lacking autonomy or a voice of her own. The proverb suggests that just as a toothless goat faces challenges, a girl without the ability to express her opinions or think independently may struggle in life.

**(ix) *Jikna dena kokh; Ma.na nona ok*** This proverb illustrates a man relying on his mother and sister for sustenance for himself and his family, carrying food from his mother's home to support his household.

**(x) *Jika dea bobil; Ma.a noa ja.dil*** This proverb depicts a man seeking support and solace from his sister and mother during difficult times, especially when experiencing discord with his wife or daughter. It underscores the significance of familial bonds and the role of family members as sources of comfort and assistance.

**(xi) *Matcha chikop mangrika; Buga ra.o chiripa*** "Matcha chikop mangrika" refers to misfortunes affecting one's family or relatives, while "Buga ra.o chiripa" emphasizes the maternal uncle's role as the primary support figure during such times. The proverb highlights the uncle's proactive and supportive role in alleviating his sisters' families' difficulties.

**(xii) *Magnasa kanga dakaijok; Nengrasa kappa salaijok*** This proverb reflects the Garo community's cultural tradition of preferential marriage, where daughters are more

likely to marry their paternal cousins rather than their maternal cousins, emphasizing the importance of maintaining familial ties through marriage alliances.

**(xiii) *Mikkang sona chijjim; Kni dast dimrimrim*** "Mikkang sona chijjim" describes a girl's face as shining like gold, indicating a radiant complexion. "Kni dast dimrimrim" praises her beautiful, flowing hair. Overall, the proverb celebrates a girl's beauty, highlighting her radiant face and elegant hair.

**(xiv) *Seko pako mande raja*** This proverb refers to a woman who does not honor or show respect to her husband and father, reflecting cultural values and expectations regarding women's roles and behaviors within the family unit. It emphasizes respect, obedience, and loyalty as key elements of familial relationships.

**(xv) *Me.chik suri, gisik gri*** This proverb uses the metaphor of "torn garments" to describe women seen as lacking intelligence or rationality. It perpetuates the belief in female inferiority and reinforces male superiority and female subservience.

**(xvi) *Aganakon ra.ja; Kokkarengkon olja*** This proverb describes someone who refuses to follow instructions or complete assigned tasks, symbolized by the act of refusing to carry woven bamboo baskets, representing defiance or non-compliance.

**(xvii) *Chios su.o taljajok; Salo ramo ran.jajok*** This proverb refers to tasks or deeds that are so significant they remain ingrained in memory indefinitely, enduring despite attempts to diminish their importance. It highlights the lasting impact of certain actions.

**(xviii) *Ding.a ding.a inoba salkode sokja; Ama ama inoba ma'gitade ong.ja*** The proverb compares the sun's unmatched brilliance to the irreplaceable love and connection one shares with their mother, emphasizing the unique and incomparable significance of certain relationships and conditions in life.

**(xix) *Ku.ba e.ching bisi; Wagam kitma achare*** This proverb compliments girls with beautiful lips and teeth, comparing pinkish lips to wild beads and small white teeth to attractive pearls, highlighting their physical beauty.

## CONCLUSION

As we delve into the corpus of Garo proverbs, it becomes apparent that they serve as illuminating vignettes depicting the multifaceted roles of women within traditional Garo society. These proverbial expressions not only extol the physical allure of women but also underscore the virtues prized by the Garo community, such as kindness and industriousness. Women, in the Garo tradition, are lauded for their ability to adeptly navigate the intricate web of familial obligations, seamlessly blending domestic duties with agricultural pursuits.

Embedded within the lyrical tapestry of these proverbs is a celebration of feminine aesthetics, encompassing attributes like luminous complexion, immaculate dentition, and resplendent tresses. Yet, juxtaposed against this celebration of beauty is a sobering admonition against moral transgressions, with the proverbs unequivocally censuring those who deviate from virtuous paths. It is within this nuanced interplay of adulation and critique that the complexities of Garo societal norms come to the fore.

Beyond their ornamental language, these proverbs serve as invaluable conduits through which the ethos of Garo society is distilled. They offer profound insights into the pivotal roles assumed by women, portraying them as the linchpins of familial harmony and societal cohesion. Even amid the winds of societal change, the enduring

reliance of sons on their mothers and sisters stands as a testament to the enduring resilience and fortitude of Garo women.

Indeed, women emerge as the veritable pillars upon which Garo society is erected, infusing their traditions with vitality and imbuing their cultural fabric with depth. Yet, amidst this reverence for tradition, there exists an undercurrent of subtle defiance, as Garo folklore occasionally challenges entrenched norms and stereotypes. Through these narratives, a nuanced portrait of women emerges, one that transcends simplistic categorizations and embraces the kaleidoscopic spectrum of human experience.

In essence, Garo proverbs transcend their status as mere linguistic artifacts; they serve as windows into the collective consciousness of Garo culture. They beckon us to contemplate the myriad dimensions of womanhood, inviting us to reassess our preconceived notions and embrace a more nuanced understanding of gender dynamics. As we navigate the labyrinthine corridors of Garo folklore, we are reminded of the indomitable spirit and indelible contributions of Garo women to the tapestry of human civilization.

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