

**TRANSFORMATION MYTHS: A STUDY OF
GARO NARRATIVE**

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An Abstract of Thesis

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An Abstract

The proposed research is a study on the Oral Narratives of the Garos, with special emphasis on the belief in Transformation myths also known as ‘Shape-shifting’ or *Therianthropy*. The Garos also known as the *A-chik Mande* (meaning Hill man) are one of the three tribes belonging to the state of Meghalaya, and they are the second largest tribe in Meghalaya after the Khasis and comprise about a third of the local population. Although majority of the Garo community are now Christian, before the advent of Christianity; the religion of the Garos was mostly pantheistic and animistic with a belief in a multitude of beneficent and malevolent spirits. Different Gods are attributed to as the Creator of the world, God of Natural Phenomena, Gods of the destinies of man from birth till death, all of whom must be appeased by way of sacrifice. Even with the advent of Christianity in Garo Hills, the people of this region still preserve their culture and beliefs and the non-Christians still perform the rituals they had practiced before Christianity made its presence felt.

The Garos are a culturally rich tribe with a host of oral narratives that has been handed down from generation to generation. Among the many myths that are narrated by the Garos, the transformation myth also known as shape-shifting is a common cultural myth. Transformation myth means the transformation of humans into

animals and other forms. 'Transformation Myth' or Shape shifting or *Therianthropy*, as it is referred to in English Literature, is the transformation of human beings into any animal form, either through conscious exercise of the psyche, or through unconscious experiences of the mind, body and soul. *Therianthropy* is the mythological ability of human beings to metamorphose into animals by means of shapeshifting. The term *Therianthropy* comes from the Greek word *therion* meaning 'wild animal' or 'beast' and *anthrōpos* meaning 'human being'.

Transformation or shapeshifting of human beings into animals has been prevalent among many cultures across the world. The Garo or *A·chik* culture is also not unknown to this kind of phenomena. In Garo dialect this kind of ability to physically transform into different animal forms is referred to as *Mande-matchapila* (transformation into tiger), *Mande-chipu pila* (transformation into snake), *Mande-makbil pila* (transformation into bear) and many others. This cultural experience has been prevalent among the people of Garo Hills for a very long time and one comes to learn of such phenomena or practices through the oral narration of the people who have either had personal experiences or have heard stories pertaining to such transformations. Many such occurrences have been documented by people who are interested and some have found a space in the handful written literature of the Garos.

This thesis will have the following chapters:

Chapter I: Introduction

Chapter II: A Study of A·chiks and their Cultural Beliefs

Chapter III: Garo Oral Narratives

Chapter IV: The Concept of Transformation Myth in A·chik Culture.

Chapter V: Conclusion

Chapter I: Introduction

Every culture across this world has a store house of information about its origin, beliefs, legends, folktales, saga and myths. Stories are often narrated through word of mouth, from one generation to the other, in order to carry forward the rich legacy of one's own culture and beliefs. 'Narration' or 'Narratives' are the process of relating a sequence of some true or fictitious events or connected sequence of events in spoken or written words. In the ongoing process of narration, certain stories get modified as it gets relayed from one person to the other, sometimes deleting irrelevant details and at times adding more information to make the stories more interesting. The process of narration began since time immemorial, and still continues to contribute in carrying forward the stories told by our forefathers. Narration of stories can vary from the personal experiences of our forefathers, to folktales, fables, myth, legends all of which may be considered to be facts or could otherwise be a make believe. 'Myth' which has become one of the most prominent terms in contemporary literary analysis is one of the forms of narrative. The word 'Myth' comes from the Greek word *mythos*, which means word, speech, tale, or story.

Humans unlike other animals have been blessed with the power of consciousness, and it is this unique ability that makes us wonder

both individually and culturally about human origin and about the significance of the present time and of the future. Stories that are told to the young generation by their forefathers describing their journey, is what helps in carrying forward the aspect of individual existence. Myth is universal, and all cultures across the world have their own myths that identify them and make it unique. The meaning of 'Myth' has been viewed differently owing to its wide scope for interpretation but among the theories of psychoanalysts and psychologists, the theories of Sigmund Freud and Carl Gustav Jung are essential for an understanding of mythic creativity.

Freud viewed myth as the expression of an individual's unconscious wishes, desires, drives and fears. He saw myths and their symbols as collective, cultural dreams, and he made use of myth to gain psychic insight into cultures, using the methods by which he applied individual dreams and their symbols to the analysis of the individual psyche. Carl Gustav Jung, a Swiss psychiatrist, however broke away from his mentor, Sigmund Freud, disagreeing with him on various matters, including the importance of myth. Jung viewed myth as an expression of a universal, collective unconscious. He believed that innate psychological qualities were common to all human beings and these determined how people experienced their lives. This collective pool of unconsciousness was made up of archetypes, such as the hero, the trickster, the fool and the wise woman. These were the images embedded in the unconscious, but depending on the individual's personal life journey, the shape and form of these archetypal images

would be expressed differently. The fact that myths throughout the world contain many similar themes and archetypes reflects the existence of a collective or universal unconscious.

The word “archetype” was coined by Carl Gustav Jung, who theorized that humans have a collective unconscious, which is a “deposits of the constantly repeated experiences of humanity... a kind of readiness to reproduce over and over again the same or similar mythical ideas...” Jung has defined Archetypes as universal, archaic patterns and images that are autonomous and hidden forms which are transformed once they enter consciousness and are given particular expression by individuals and their culture. There are many archetypes that Jung refers to from which images and motifs emerge like ‘the mother archetype’, ‘the child archetype’, ‘the trickster’, ‘the flood’ and other archetypes. Mythology has therefore been interpreted through the images and motifs that emerge in the unconscious psyche that appears as archetypes. Myths, according to Jung, are very important as they are the psychic life of the primitive tribe. No culture or religion can survive without the myths related to it.

Metempsychosis or Transmigration of souls; Reincarnations; Resurrection; Rebirth and Transformation are all archetypes. These archetypes that Jung enumerates are also found in the Garo narratives. The mother archetype forms relating to birth, the spirits in fairy tales and trickster are some of the archetypes found in Garo narratives. The mother archetypes appear in things representing the goal of our longing for redemption, such as Paradise, Kingdom of Heaven. The Garos have

a strong belief in the kingdom of God. The mother archetype is associated with fertility and fruitfulness. For the Garos the River form a major archetype and it symbolizes fertility as well as a mother figure. The belief of the Garos in life after death, in rebirth or reincarnation and in the existence of the spirit world is also deep rooted in the culture. The trickster archetype with ‘Shape-shifters, half animal, dual nature...’ etc., are also another common belief of the Garos. The transformation of human beings into an animal form is among the most interesting tribal belief. The belief in the phenomenon of transformation or what is termed in literature as *shapeshifting* has been common amongst the Garo community since time immemorial. The study of such transformation myths gives crucial insights into the psyche of the persons who have been gifted with the power to change themselves or be changed, or to exchange their souls with their animal counterparts.

Transformation or shape-shifting of human beings into animals which is common cultural phenomena is prevalent in many cultures across the world. Some are similar in their transformation while others are similar in their beliefs about the individual who transformed into a tiger or other animal forms. The term *Jasrea* is used by the A·chiks or the Garos for the transformation of humans into animals. *Jasrea* which means ‘Exchange of life or soul’ comes from the Garo word *Janggi* meaning ‘Life or soul’ and *Srea* meaning ‘Exchange’. *Jasrea* therefore refers to the ability of an individual to engraft his soul into the soul of an animal. Dewansing Rongmitu Sangma, one of the legendary literary

writers of the Garos, had written in length on this interesting cultural belief of the Garos in his book *Jadoreng* which he has subtitled it as 'The Psycho Physical Culture of the Garos'.

The Garos have always had a close connection with nature and it is through this relationship that Garos believe in the ultimate power of nature and spirit. They worship different forms of spirits whom they consider as their Gods and goddesses. Almost all the ceremonies that are observed by them start with sacrifices offered to these Gods followed by dance and rituals. Through the Oral narrations of the stories and myths regarding Garo culture, it becomes clear that there is a close affinity between human, animal and spirit and all three are interconnected which leads to similar behavior between the subjects namely the animal, human and their soul.

Chapter II: A Study of A·chiks and their Cultural Beliefs

The Garos are also known as the *A·chik Mande*, in which *A·chik* means 'hill' and *mande* means 'man'. They are the second largest tribe in Meghalaya after the Khasis and comprise about a third of the local population. Garo Hills lies to the Southwest of Assam, 25.9° and 26.1° North Latitude and between 89.49° and 90° of East longitude. It was formed into a district in 1866 and is now part of the state of Meghalaya. It is bounded by the districts of Goalpara of Assam on the North and West; Khasi Hills on the East and the Mymensing district of Bangladesh on the South.

The *A·chiks* were divided into eleven groups, viz; the *Ambengs*, the *A·kawes* or *Awes*, the *Chisaks*, the *Duals*, the *Matchis*, the

Matabengs, the *Chiboks*, the *Rugas*, the *Gara-Ganchings*, the *Atongs* and the *Megams*.

The *A·kawes* or *A·wes* inhabit the northern side of the mountain areas which is adjacent to the districts of Kamrup and Goalpara. They are mainly cultivators as is evident from their name, *A·kawe* which means 'ploughers of the plain'.

The group called the *Chisaks* occupies the northeastern part of the Garo hills, and lives in the region bordering the *A·wes*. They inhabit the eastern bank of the Simsang River (Someswari). The word *chi* means 'water' and *sak* means 'above'. Therefore, *Chisak* refers to the Garos living in the area above the water source.

The *Duals* occupy the area directly south of the *Chisaks* on the banks of the river Simsang. A great number of this sub-tribe dwells in the Mymensing district of Bangladesh.

The *Matchis* occupy the heartland of the Garo Hills, and they are famous for the production of cotton.

The *Matabengs* or the *Matjangchis*, who are more or less a culmination of the *Am·bengs* and *Matchis*, are found towards the north of the Simsang River, in between the *Am·bengs* and *Matchis*.

The *Am·bengs* inhabit the western section, and they populate nearly half the area of the district including Tura.

To the East of the *Am·bengs*, the *Chiboks* inhabit the upper Bugi river valley upto the Dareng River.

The *Gara-Ganchings* occupy the southern area extending from the Nitai River nearly to the Someswari River.

The *Atongs* occupy the Simsang valley and the hills in its vicinity as far as Siju.

The *Me·gams* inhabit the area bordering West Khasi Hills. They seem to be a fusion of the Garo and Khasi tribes. In appearance and custom they closely resemble the *A·chiks*, but they have their own dialect that cannot be understood by the other *A·chiks*.

A great number of *A·chiks* can be found in the neighboring states like Assam and the Mymensing district of Bangladesh. Even though they have retained their customs and traditions there are some modifications to the original form.

The *A·chik* language is classified with the Bodo Speech family by Sir George Grierson. The “Bodo” or “Bara” is one of the most important sections of the Tibeto-Burman Speech family. The generic name “Bodo” was first applied by Brian Hodgson to the group of languages that comprised of Bara Kachari, Garo, Dimasa, Rabha, Mech, Lalung, Koch, Rieng and Tripuri. Bodos spread over the whole of the Brahmaputra valley, Tripura and Bengal including Bangladesh. Linguistic evidence shows that the Bodos first appeared to have settled over the entire Brahmaputra valley and extended west into North Bengal. The *A·chiks* call their language, *Mande ku·sik* or 'the language of men', and also *A·chik ku·sik* or the 'language of hillmen'.

The *A·chik* language is not traditionally written down and as a result the customs, traditions, and beliefs are handed down orally. Scripts were used by them much later. In *The Garos (An account of the Garos of the Present Day)* written by Dharendra Narayan Majumdar, he

opines that the *A·chiks* did not have any original script of their own and was at first written in the Bengali script, but later the Christian Missionaries introduced the Roman alphabet to write in *A·chik*.

In the Introduction to *Ku·rongdik A·chikku into English Dictionary*, Lindrid D. Shira opines that the *A·chik* language was first reduced to writing by John Elliot, Commissioner of Dacca, during his public deputation to the southern border of the territory of the present Garo Hills District in 1788-89. It was during that time that he collected some *A·chik* words, which is evidently the dialect of the *A·beng* Division of the *A·chiks*, rendered English equivalent to each of them in the form of a dictionary and got them published in the *Asiatic Researches*, Vol. III, (1799). This was followed by a series of attempts by successive British Officers and the American Baptist Missionaries to compile *A·chik* vocabulary purposely for comparative studies of the languages of the various tribes of the North East. Linnie M. Holbrook, a lady missionary of great repute, also occupies a unique place in the literary world of the *A·chiks* as one of the major contributors for the enrichment of *A·chik* Literature. Apart from her varied literary works besides editing and publishing the *A·chik Ripeng*, a Garo periodical, her best contribution to *A·chik* Literature was her preparation of manuscripts for Garo-English Dictionary.

The *A·chik* language has a number of dialects which differ from one another depending on the areas that the thirteen groups inhabit, like the *A·wes*, *Duals*, *Chisaks* etc. The Garos living around the border areas of Bangladesh is a mixed group using different dialects like the

Braks, Jariadongs, Somons, Galnes and Malongs. In most cases, they retain their own language and customs, but they have been greatly influenced by the Bengali culture and language.

A·chik Society has been divided into various *Chatchis* or Clans namely; *Marak, Sangma, Momin, Shira* and *Areng*. These clans are again sub-divided into various sub-clans or *Ma·chongs*. The whole of Garo Hills is divided into many clearly defined areas known as the *A·kings*. Each *A·king* is under the ownership of a particular *Ma·chong* such as *Nengminja, Rangsa, Gabil, Koknal, Koksi, Ampang, Dalbot, Rongmuthu, Chambugong, Cheran* and others. Each of these *A·kings* is placed under the guardianship of a custodian-cum-supervisor known as the *Nokma (A·king Nokma)* who is selected by the *Ma·chong*. The *Chatchis* are exogamous wherein marriage within the clan is forbidden and severely punishable. Some sub-clans have now branched off from the original clans and are developed into independent exogamous clans.

Christianity dominates almost all the *A·chik* community, however before the advent of Christianity; their religion was mostly pantheistic and animistic with a belief in a multitude of beneficent and malevolent spirits. Different Gods are attributed to as the Creator of the world, God of Natural Phenomena, Gods of destinies of man from birth till death, all of whom must be appeased by way of sacrifice.

In *Glimpses of the Garo Heritage and Philosophy*, Prabodh M. Sangma, opines that since there was no founder of the Garo religion, the philosophical foundations of the life of the *A·chiks* were based on

the cosmic view, moral and social values and attitude towards God, man, life and death that had evolved throughout the ages.

Songsarek is the name given to the non-Christian *A·chiks* and they are a handful few who has preserved their culture, tradition, customs, faith, beliefs and social practices till the present time.

In all religious ceremonies, sacrifices were essential for the propitiation of the spirits. They had to be invoked for births, marriages, deaths, illness, for harvesting good crops and welfare of the community and for protection from destructions and dangers.

Even with the advent of Christianity in Garo Hills, the people of this region still preserve their culture and beliefs and the non-Christians still perform their rituals as they had practiced before Christianity made its presence felt in this region.

The *A·chiks* believe in the spirit of God permeating the objects of nature. Natural forces like the Sun, Wind, Rain, Thunder, Lightning etc., all became a personified form of the different types of Gods that they believed existed, and they feared all these occurrences of natural phenomena. Therefore, these natural phenomena are not in themselves the objects of worship or sacrifice, but since each of these events is controlled by a spirit, sacrifices must be offered to these spirits to propitiate them. Thus sacrifices are offered to the rain-god when rain is required and to the sun-god when sunshine is needed. They had a firm belief in the powers of the spirit world which they believed came from their close association with nature. Nature inspired their imagination,

adding colour to their culture including their folk stories and folk literature.

They worshipped different forms of nature and they attributed certain powers to them, by virtue of whom they felt was mightier and more powerful. The *A·chiks* also believe in the existence of a supreme being. They also believe in the existence of multitude of benevolent and malevolent spirits. These good and evil spirits are everywhere, in the sky above, on the earth below, in the depth of the water and in the dark caverns. Some of these spirits are attributed to the creation of the world, to others, the control of the phenomena and the destinies of man from birth to death are governed by a host of spirits whose anger must be appeased by sacrifices. The principal spirits are (1) Tatar-Rabuga at whose command the world was made by two lesser spirits, Nostu Nopantu and Machi. It can also cure kalaazar and fevers. An expensive sacrifice has to be performed to him by killing a bull, a goat and a fowl. (2) Saljong is one of the greatest gods and a giver of all good things to man. He is represented by the sun. The greatest harvest festival called Wangala which is also a thanksgiving ceremony is celebrated in his honour. (3) Nostu-Nopantu, who with another spirit called Machi fashioned the earth but no sacrifice is offered to them as they do not harm any man. (4) Chorabudi is a benign spirit and is a protector of crops. Sacrifices are offered to him for pain the ears and for boils. (5) Goera is a god of thunder and causes lightning and thunder. A pig, a fowl or a duck must be offered to him. (6) Kalkame is the younger brother of Goera and keeps all men safe from danger, from

wild animals and diseases. A goat or cock is sacrificed to him. (7) Susime causes lameness and deafness and so a pig or a fowl must be offered to her. Besides, there are still a number of other good and evil spirits to whom sacrifices must be offered to please them to gain their favour. They also believe that the constellation of stars have power and represent the spirits. Therefore, animals must be sacrificed to them.

The *A·chiks* have with them many stories, myths and folktales related to the spirit world and the incomprehensible power of nature in its entire splendor. They believe in a multitude of spirits and each spirit was known by different names. The spirits which the *A·chiks* refer to as *mite* have their existence in almost all elements that are air, land and water. They also attach great importance to the worship of the spirits which govern the seasons, and practice certain rituals to appease the spirits to obtain their blessings in the form of a good harvest.

They also have a great reverence for their ancestors and for the deceased in general, and can be observed in their cultural practices like placing of food for the spirits, the erection of shrines for the temporary sepulcher of the bones, and the carving of memorial posts.

The *A·chiks* believe in the existence in man a spirit which after death goes to a particular place, i.e., the abode of the spirits. Napak village, Balpakram and Balsiram are believed to be the places where the spirits of the dead persons go, and these spirits dwell there for some time before being reincarnated. They also believe in the rebirth of souls as a state of reward and punishment. Those who were morally wicked are punished by being born as low animals, and those who were

good and were regular in their sacrifices are born in high and wealthy families. The lowest form of reincarnation is that in the shape of insects and plants. The next higher form of reincarnation is the shape of animals and birds and then in human form. The greatest reward for a virtuous life is to be born into the same family as before.

As the *A·chiks* are entirely dependent on agriculture for their livelihood, they are naturally anxious towards the impending drought or excessive rains that might destroy their crops. The spirits that govern the different seasons are therefore considered the most important Gods to be revered in the *A·chik* mythology. In all stages of cultivation and harvesting, some kind of sacrifices and offerings must be given to them to appease them, and to ensure a good harvest. Religious observances in this connection commences when a man decides on a piece of ground which he wishes to clear and cultivate. Before beginning, he consults the omens in the following manner. In one corner of the plot of ground he makes a little clearance called *O·pata*. The patch of jungle which would be used for cultivation is considered to be the habitation of a malignant deity known as *Abet Rora Raka Ganda*. So, on cutting up the first plants for clearing the field, the farmer pays his obeisance to the deity and seeks the deity's approval to cultivate the field. If he dreams a bad or an unlucky dream, he abandons the land that he had initially decided on, and seeks another piece where the omens are more propitious. After clearing the land for cultivation, the first sacrifice to the God of the field takes place. The next stage in cultivation is the sowing of seeds and to

ensure the favor of the spirits, this must be preceded by the *gitchipong* and the *michiltata* ceremonies. The first is a personal sacrifice which each individual must offer, and the second is a collective ceremony in which the whole village joins. The spirit invoked is Rokkime, considered to be the mother of rice.

After the land for cultivation has been selected they observe the *A·galmak Krita* or *A·krita* which literally means performance of sacrificial ceremony for the freshly reclaimed jhum field. The field is cleared and burned in order to purify the land by invoking goddess Rokkime before cultivation. The *A·chiks* offer sacrifice of domestic animals and birds like fowls, pigs, ducks etc., to Minima Rokkime considered to be the mother of the paddy and Misi Saljong Jobepa Rangrupa, the God of fertility.

The sacrificial ceremony of *Akkal gala* is usually performed to eradicate any kind of famine. Sacrifices are offered in order to please the deity called *Akkal* or *Bang* or *Rakasi/Raksi* who is supposed to be the spirit of famine and who brings acute scarcity of food to mankind. *Rongchugala* which literally means offering of flattened rice is a sacrificial ceremony which is offered to the deity Misi Saljong Jobepa Rangrupa. *Rongchugala* is also called *Gindegala* or offering of rice flour. It is also known as *Chu rugala cha·sat so·a* which means pouring out the rice beer and the ritual burning of incense. In nature and content, this traditional ceremony is the first thanks giving ceremony in the cycle of agricultural year.

After the paddy has been harvested in the jhum cultivations, the sacrificial ceremony of *Jamegapa* is performed by the *A·chiks*. *Jamegapa* literally means ceremony for storing the paddy. *Jamegapa* is the initial post-harvest thanks giving ceremony. *Jamegapa* is also called *Jagapa*. Among the Dual and Matchi division of the Garos it is known as *Michong Ra·ona*.

Wangala ceremony marks the end of the agricultural year. This is the most festive observance of the year, and combines religious sacrifice with mirth and gaiety. The last ceremony in connection with harvesting crops is known as *Ja·kara* by the plain people and *Rusrota* by those living in the hills. It is intended to celebrate the safe housing of the paddy in the granaries. All these ceremonies and sacrifices are in the form of a thanksgiving or prayers to the beneficent deities Misi Saljong and Rokkime Mima.

Dance is also an integral part of the *A·chik* culture. They perform dances for various ceremonial social gatherings and occasions accompanied by their musical instruments. Dancing is a prominent feature of almost every social function as well as of religious ceremonies in the *A·chik* society. The ritual dances are performed in all their major sacrificial ceremonies so as to appease the Gods. *A·chik* dances can be classified into two types, namely, *Saatalo chroka* or outdoor dances and *A·bani kamrangko mesokanirang* or dances depicting the various stages in crop cultivation and harvest. Most of the dances are performed outdoors in their natural surroundings where they experience their soul being uplifted and achieve the feeling of

oneness with nature. They attach importance to the worship of the deities that are mythologically connected with the cultivation. Such rituals were considered essential for prosperous growth and fruitful harvest and often were accompanied with dances and musical performances.

The music of the *A·chiks* is traditional which means that it is transmitted or handed down from generation to generation, from the teacher to the student. It includes all those ideas, habits or tendencies, techniques, principle or disciplines which are based on experience of the past and are transmitted from one generation to another.

Before developing the skill and knowledge of using instruments, the *A·chiks* too accompanied songs with the clapping of hands, stamping of feet, whistling and by blowing tunes through certain types of leaves. Gradually they learnt to use the natural and abundant supply of foliage, wood and bamboo in ingenious ways, along with the horns, hides and entails of animals. Their technological skills and knowledge enabled the *A·chiks* to draw sustenance from the natural environment in which they live.

The *A·chiks* have a variety of musical instruments that has been manufactured by them. It is composed of different kinds of drums, horn wind instruments, gongs and cymbals. Other musical instruments of equal importance are *guridomik*, *kamaljakmora*, *bangsirosi*, *bangsi mande*, *chigring*, *dimchrang*, *ambeng dama*, *chisak dama*, and others. The *A·chiks* also believe that the deities reside in all their musical instruments and therefore they take proper care of the instruments.

Chapter III: Garo Oral Narratives

Oral narrative has been the chief basis for the creation and continuation of culture itself. Culture is often dependent upon the stories that people tell. It is chiefly through storytelling that people possess a past. Storytelling is an essential part of human nature. Man is the only creature that tells stories. Man has been telling stories and listening to them since the time he learnt to speak. The storytelling began with oral traditions and in forms of myths, legends, fables, anecdotes, ballads etc. These were told and retold and were passed down from generation to generation and they show the knowledge and wisdom of early people. Storytelling defines the human species as far as our knowledge of human experience extends into the historical past. Storytelling links the past and all pasts to a point in the present where humans can conceptualize about events that took place. People are natural narrators, retelling stories that they have heard from others. We create new ones through the use of the imagination and poetic license. We do not tell all possible stories, but we are selective in our choice among countless possible choices.

India is a vast and an ancient country that boasts of a treasure-trove of oral folktales. It is believed that India is rich in oral traditions as it is a culturally diverse nation. The diversity of India's cultures ensures a wide and complex range of tales, which help to maintain traditional language and customs from different regions, religious and social groups, and tribes. Folktales exercise a powerful influence over the popular imagination, with folk heroes often being idolised in

villages. The rich folk experience of the country finds its expression in its folk-lore and the best expression of the Indian world-view is in its folk narratives.

The *A·chiks* like the other tribes of India also possess a large number of verses and stories, which have been handed down from generation to generation by word of mouth. The Garo language which has been classified with the Bodo speech family has a rich vocabulary with over thirty thousand words and some of which are still being discovered till date. The *A·chiks* have a vast literary heritage in the form of oral and traditional and sacrificial rites, proverbs and maxims, which have not yet been properly recorded. William Carey in his *The Garo Jungle Book* writes that among the *A·chiks* 'their language is their history'. They perform each religious and festive celebration with a story or a song, and the priest recites them or sings them when occasion requires. The stories in prose are usually in the spoken dialects, but the verses are in an archaic diction which is very difficult to understand.

In the *Glimpses of the Garo Heritage and Philosophy*, the author opines that the *A·chiks* have no written history, but they have folksongs, folktales and folklores which give a clear idea about their rich culture and religion.

Having a close affinity towards nature and its pervading spirits, the *A·chiks* perform various rituals and sacrifices that are conducted through incantations which are in poetic form. Different spirits are

invoked for various purposes like birth, sickness, death, marriage, house- blessing, sowing of paddy, harvesting season etc.

Folktales, myths, songs, prayers and records of the history of the tribe formed the Oral literature of the *A·chiks*. Of all these, songs and prayers each with tunes of their own, may be said to constitute poetry. Prayers are chanted during ceremonies which are connected with various occasions. The prayer follows a particular pattern and though there may be slight differences in the recitation, the substance remains essentially the same.

A·chik poetry can be divided into two categories namely traditional and written poetry. Oral narration of poetry of anonymous compositions is categorized under the traditional poetry. The compositions are recited or sung on certain occasions to an audience and to Gods during ceremonies. They are passed down from one generation to another through word of mouth and they are preserved through oral translations. Almost all *A·chik* literature existed in the form of poetry. In earlier days the *A·chiks* did not have any written manuscripts and therefore most of their stories of the creation of life, their stories of migration, mention of the brave warriors and the battles fought were all narrated in the form of poetry. Oral poetry involves tremendous exercise of memory power, command over the language and use of certain devices like stock phrases, and rhythms and rhymes.

The Garos also possess a large number of folktales and folklores which are told both in prose and verse. They are also rich in proverbs or *Katta Me·apa*, Rhythmic words or *Katta Jikse*, Questions for mental

exercise or *Tol·katchia*, Legendary stories or *Katta Rongchu*, Traditional history or *Me·ambi* which are stories of the tribe told in verse or prose.

Garo written literature first began with the pioneering work of the missionaries. The missionaries carried on the work of producing text books of various kinds like books on grammar, dictionaries, and religious texts and translated works which contributed immensely to the development and progress of Garo literature.

Written poetry began with written literature which developed gradually with the growing number of publications. The first poem that was printed had been composed by Ramke W. Momin, who was the first Garo to be converted into a Christian. Among the poets who followed him were Modhunath G. Momin and Tuni Ram R. Marak.

In 1940, Howard Denison Wa·tre Momin began a journal of creative writings called *A·chik Ku·rang* which means the 'voice of the Garos'. He was helped by a small group of educated young men and women who had found a new enthusiasm in reviving the rich cultural legacy of the A·chiks through literature especially poetry. The *A·chik Ku·rang* (voice of the Garos) therefore served as a medium to awaken the minds of the Garos both culturally and intellectually.

Among the contemporaries of Howard Denison Momin and Jonmoni D. Shira who was a women poet. Jonmoni D. Shira was an educated woman who successfully wrote beautiful poems. Her poems which includes, *Do·kru* (Dove), *Anga Me·chik* (I, The Woman) and *Basako?* (When?) has feminine themes.

Other contemporaries who wrote poems that expressed their concern for the Garo community were Evelyn R. Marak and Baren Bangshall Sangma. Both contributed articles and poems which were published in the *A·chik Ku·rang*.

Prose writing started amongst the *A·chiks* with the translation of the Bible, writing of Primers and textbooks on various subjects. The Bible in Garo was a powerful influence, as it was read throughout the educated Christian community and people became familiar with that method of writing. Initially there were not much original writings and mostly only translated works such as Pilgrims Progress, Short stories and Fairy tales followed. A few biographies appeared and articles and essays were written for journals like *A·chikni Ripeng* and *Nokdangni Ripeng*. However, eventually writers like K.M. Momin, L.R. Marak, L.D. Shira, A.G. Momin, K.R. Marak, S.R. Sangma and many others have contributed to the written literature of the *A·chiks*.

Apart from these sources *A·chik* Oral literature is also enriched by varieties of proverbs or *Aganme·apa* or *Kattame·apa*, riddles or *Sompia* and *Tol·katchia*, and also *Kattajikse*.

Chapter IV: The Concept of Transformation Myth in A·chik Culture

Since the dawn of mankind, mythology has tried to answer life's greatest questions through stories and legends. Our forefathers from different cultures around the world had passed on tales of creation, explanations of the meaning of life, and stories of the gods and monsters that ruled the earth and the heavens. Each culture has developed its own myths, and as people have moved about the Earth,

many of these stories have moved with them. Mythology is both the link to our past, as well as, the spark that inspires the flames of inspiration for modern day storytellers.

No culture can be better understood without appreciating its mythologies, stories and dreams. Mythology gives an insight into various cultures, their customs, into the beliefs before Christianity took over; and it gives insights into the psychology and sociology of the past.

Carl Jung had opined that ‘myths are first and foremost psychic phenomena that reveal the nature of the soul’ and in trying to study myth in terms of psychology he was interested in the manifestations of the “archetypes” in myths and fairytale. Some of the major archetypes with which Jung is concerned are the shadow, the wise old man, the child, the mother figure, forms relating to rebirth, the spirits in fairy tales and the trickster figure. Shape-shifting or *Therianthropy* or transformation of humans into animals also form an archetype.

The idea of shape shifting or Transformation myth has been present since time immemorial and could be common in some cultures. Shape-shifting is present in the oldest forms of shamanism, as well as in the oldest extant literature and epic poems, including works such as the Iliad and the Epic of Gilgamesh, where shape shifting is usually induced by the act of a deity. The idea continued through the Middle Ages, where the agency that causes shape shifting is usually a sorcerer or a witch. Shape-shifting remains a common theme in modern fantasy, children's literature, movies and works of popular culture.

Religious historian Mircea Eliade has observed that beliefs regarding animal identity and transformation into animals are widespread.

'Transformation Myth' or Shape shifting or *Therianthropy*, as it is referred to in English Literature, is the transformation of human beings into any animal form, either through conscious exercise of the psyche, or through unconscious experiences of the mind, body and soul. *Therianthropy* is the mythological ability of human beings to metamorphose into animals by means of shapeshifting. The term *Therianthropy* comes from the Greek word *therion* meaning 'wild animal' or 'beast' and *anthrōpos* meaning 'human being'.

Therianthropy was used to refer to animal transformation folklore of Europe as early as 1901. Sometimes the term *Zoanthropy* is also used in its place. *Therianthropy* was used to describe spiritual beliefs in animal transformation in a 1915 Japanese publication, *A History of the Japanese People from the Earliest Times to the End of the Meiji Era*. *Therianthropy* refers to the fantastical, or mythological, ability of some humans to change into animals.

The term *Therianthropy* has been adopted to describe a spiritual concept in which the individual believes he or she has the spirit or soul, in whole or in part, of an animal. *Therianthropes* are said to change forms via shapeshifting. *Therianthropy* has long existed in mythology, and seems to be depicted in ancient cave drawings such as the Sorcerer, a pictograph executed at the neolithic cave drawings found in the *Pyrénées* at the Les Trois Frères, France, and

archeological site. *Theriocephaly* refers to beings which simultaneously share human and non-human animal traits. For example, the animal-headed humanoid forms of gods depicted in ancient Egyptian religion (such as *Ra*, *Sobek*, and *Anubis*). Mythological creatures such as centaurs and mermaids also exhibit *theriocephaly*.

Shapeshifting or *therianthropy* in folklore, mythology and anthropology, generally refers to the alteration of physical appearance from that of a human to that of another species. *Lycanthropy*, the transformation of a human into a wolf (or werewolf), is probably the best known form of *therianthropy*, followed by *cynanthropy* (transformation into a dog) and *ailuranthropy* (transformation into a cat).

In *The Folktales of Burma: An Introduction*, Gerry Abbott opines that in every culture the animal involved in the process of transformation are always the largest predator or the most feared creature in the region. In Europe, humans generally transformed into a wolf; in Africa certain people are said to transform themselves into lions or leopards; and in South America people were believed to transform into a jaguar.

In European folklore ‘Were-cats’ were featured as humans who can transform themselves into panthers or domestic cats of an enlarged size. African legends describe people who turn into lions or leopards, while Asian ‘were-cats’ are typically depicted as becoming tigers.

A Shape shifter is specifically a human who can willingly take the physical form of one to several animals while maintaining their

human consciousness. One major trait of shape shifters is that it transforms at will. It does not automatically change form in full moon, when immersed in water, etc. They can stay in their human form indefinitely, and many do not even know they have this ability during early childhood. Though their transformation is willful, they can accidentally cause transformation by losing control of their emotions, in particular anger.

Rosalynne Greene in *The Magic of Shapeshifting* views the transformation of humans into animals as a way to connect to animal power, to regain those valuable aspects that animals possess and humans' lack, without actually taking a step backward in our evolution or having to reincarnate as an animal.

In Greene's opinion, everyone has an animal side somewhere in the subconscious, along with an inner child and a host of other "selves". In shifters, this animal self comes to the surface more often than in normal humans. It is also more active, and cannot be banished to the subconscious for long. The animal self is not something that suddenly "possesses" the shifter during mental shifts. It is more or less present in the shifter at all times. The animal self-simmers in the surface of the subconscious and rises to conscious awareness most often.

Frank Hammel in his work *Human, Animals, Werewolves and Other Transformations*, asserts that the belief of men changing into animals and animals into men is as old as life itself. It originates in the theory that all things are created from one substance, mind or spirit,

which according to accident or design takes a distinctive appearance, to mortal eye, of shape, color, and solidity. The belief of primitive races that all created beings have an immortal soul dwelling in a material body applies equally to the animals and to the human race.

There are different ways in which individuals can transform their human selves into animal forms. In the book *Human, Animals, Werewolves and Other Transformations*, Frank Hammel elaborates that transformation was held to be accomplished in many ways for example, by a sorcerer, a witch or the evil one himself. The shamans and certain people who have been ascribed the power of self-transformation were also among the gifted ones.

The popularity of Shape-shifters has increased manifold with books being written about them as well as the making of TV series and movies. People have become interested in learning more about them and this is becoming a new topic for cultural studies as well.

Most tribes in the North-east of India have common folktales of men or women transforming into tigers or tigresses. These men and women are tied to the soul of a tiger. They do not look different from other human beings and appear to be just like anyone else but they are tied completely to the soul of an allied tiger. Some people attain tiger souls because the ancestors of the tiger and man are the same, and once a man acquires a tiger soul, his or her life is tied to a particular tiger. If the tiger feels unwell, the man will also feel unwell and vice versa. Sometimes when the human sleeps, if the tiger soul is roaming in the jungle and leaps, even the human will leap on his or her bed too. If the

tiger has gone hunting and caught an animal the previous night, the next morning, the human will wake up with pieces of raw flesh and blood stuck to his teeth. If the person gnaws and gnashes his teeth during the night, it is an indication that the tiger is hunting. Even in death the two are tied. If the tiger or the human dies a natural death, the other self also dies. However, there are times when the tiger dies an accidental death, that is, if it is hunted or killed by another animal, the soul of a related tiger replaces the dead tiger. Also, if the human dies an unnatural death the soul of the tiger will be acquired by the favorite child or descendant of the deceased man. Moreover, carrying a tiger soul is hereditary- the tiger soul “gene” only exists in certain families, or certain clans. Usually only adult tiger souls exist (this could be because it is hard to recognize in kids). Other villagers recognize tiger souls because of certain traits such as a tiger coming close to the human and not harming him or her, or witnessing the enemies of a certain tiger person being harassed by a tiger.

The human in the tiger form is often the protector of the other humans. If the human goes to the forest for instance, the tiger will make his presence known by growling, or scratching on the ground or making other noises so that no harm falls upon the human. Moreover, if the human has an enemy or people plotting against him or her, the tiger will be able to sense it and will keep disturbing and scaring the enemy. Thus, the human has a guard throughout his life.

This kind of phenomenon is not unknown to the *A·chik* culture as well. This cultural experience has been prevalent among the *A·chiks* for

a very long time and one learns of such phenomena or practices through the oral narration of the people who have either had personal experiences, or have heard stories pertaining to transformations. Many such occurrences have been documented by people who are interested in it, and some have found place in the handful written literature of the *A·chiks*.

Dewansing Rongmitu Sangma, one of the legendary literary writer of the *A·chiks*, had written at length on this interesting cultural belief of the Garos in his book '*Jadoreng*' which he subtitled '*The Psycho Physical Culture of the Garos*'. The author has used the term *Jadoreng* to explain the psychic phenomena in *A·chik* culture. In Garo dialect *ja* comes from the word *janggi* which means 'Life or soul' and '*doreng*' means a 'kite' or a 'hawk'. They believe in the existence of a number of phenomena like the transmigration of souls, shape-shifting and the psychic ability to shuttle between two places at the same time is common among the *A·chiks*. Dewansing Rongmitu Sangma opined that the soul of a human being is like a bird or a kite, which could fly or move easily from one place to another through psychic abilities and practices, which was a common phenomenon. The *A·chiks* use the word *jare·a* for 'Transmigration of souls' in which *ja* means 'life' or soul and *re·a* means 'to leave'. The term used for humans who are able to shuttle between two places at the same time through psychic practice is *jaruraa*, where *ruraa* means to 'move or shift about'. The term used to describe shape-shifting or the ability of human beings to transform into animals or birds is *jasrea*.

The term *Jasrea* is used by the *A·chiks* for the transformation of humans into animals. *Jasrea* which means ‘Exchange of life or soul’, comes from the *A·chik* word *janggi* meaning ‘life or soul’ and *srea* meaning ‘exchange’. *Jasrea* therefore refers to the ability of an individual who has gained psychic powers for his soul, to get engrafted into the soul of an animal.

The *A·chiks* believe that a human embodies the soul of an animal and vice versa. The transformation is reportedly not achieved through evil magic, but is rather conceived as a spontaneous psychic phenomenon. This phenomenon affects the individuals, sometimes even children, thus predestined by divine entities. Although many supernatural occurrences are attributed to the magic spells and incantations of magical practitioners known as the *kamals*, and *ostalgunwals*, the supernatural ability of transformation is possible by lay persons as well through hereditary transition.

Human beings that can turn into their animal selves are closely related and have a strong resemblance to their animal counterpart and their daily activities also show similar characteristics and if one is affected so is the other. The ways by which this close resemblance is achieved between them is either by inheritance or through practice with an experienced shaman, which is a far more complex process. It is either their physical features, like the eyes or facial structure, that bear a strong similarity to the animal form or their characteristic features, like feeling the need to sleep excessively, or if a person takes the form of a bear, he or she would constantly like to get their backs scratched.

It is interesting to note how these details actually determine the kind of animal form a person transforms into.

Some people are born with this gift of transformation while others attain it in different stages of their human life. If it is hereditary then the gift of transformation carries on to several generations within the same family, and if it is attained during different stages in life it could be through conscious psychic effort and continuous practice with the help of *kamals*, and *ostal-gunwals* or Shamans or through the practitioners of Garo folk medicines or magicians.

Another interesting characteristic of the people who can transform themselves is that the genders are reversed, i.e. the soul of a boy/man gets engrafted into the soul of a female animal and that of a girl/woman into the male animal counterpart.

According to the *A·chiks*, there are two ways of transformation; one in which a human can physically change or metamorphose into an animal form through rigorous psychic practice with the help of shamans or *Ostal gunwals*, and the other wherein the transformation does not take place physically but through dreams and is usually inherited and not attained through psychic practice.

The people who can transform physically are known as *matchadu* or *Dudurong* in the *A·chik* dialect. In the book *Jadoreng* the author talks about a community of *A·chiks* known as *Matchadu* or *Dudurong*. These people belong to a community that can transform themselves into tigers. It is believed, that every day at night fall, each member of the *matchadu* community gets ready to undergo the routine transformation

into a tiger. How the physical metamorphosis of the *matchadus* takes place is difficult to explain. In the unearthly hours of the night, each *matchadu* physically transforms itself into a tiger, prowls about in the deep jungles and hunts for wild pigs, deer, bison and other animals and also catches fishes in the streams, rivers, ponds and lakes. However, before the break of dawn they transform themselves back into their human form again. The author also claims that he had ascertained this fact while in conversation with the members of this community.

The other kind of transformation that takes place is not through physical change but in this kind of transformation, it is believed, that the soul of a human gets engrafted into the soul of an animal through dreams or some kind of psychic activity. Unlike most of the stories of shape-shifting in different cultures across the world, this kind of shape-shifting is unique to the *A·chik* culture because it is attained through dreams and could be considered a psychic phenomenon. Most of the people who can transform themselves into animals like tigers, bears, snakes or other animals begin with frequent dreams of eating fresh meat, like deer, fowl, wild pigs and boar. Stories told by those who can transform themselves reveal that in the course of their dreams, they feel a sense of inner satiation, but when they wake up from their slumber they feel nauseous and weak. *A·chiks* believe that this is the first sign of transformation. If one narrates these unusual dreams to others, one may escape the process of transformation, but if they keep it secret the gradual transformation occurs.

Normally, as a human being, when a person is asleep the body goes into a temporary state of trance, but in the case of people who transform themselves, they are usually known to experience this phenomenon mostly when they are asleep and the body is in a temporary state of rest. The soul of the person gets engrafted into the soul of their animal counterpart, and while the human self-lies in a mode of rest, the animal form gets active. It is said that when the human body is active, the animal body is asleep or at rest and when the human is asleep, the animal gets active. So, the person remembers everything that happens in his other body as if it were a dream.

A person with this gift of transformation has a form of clairvoyance with the ability to predict the future, especially of natural calamities like earthquake, flood and landslides. They also have knowledge about events that have happened in places where it would have been impossible for them to have been physically present at that moment. This is due to the fact that the person had been present at the location in his or her animal form, observing the event.

In order to achieve physical transformation as that of the *matchadus*, *A-chiks* believe that the shamans or the practitioners have to undergo secret exercises of the mind and body. They need to be fluent in their incantations or sacred prayers called the *Kritas* or *Amuas*, *Norsing Mantras* and *Kalams*. The *A-chik* shamans or *Kamals* or *Ostal gunwals* or *Ojhas* are known for their vast knowledge of herbal and indigenous medicines, their ability in performing magical or supernatural feat and also for their rare psychic caliber.

There are many shape-shifting stories that have been narrated by the rural men and women of this region. Though this is a myth from the Garo Hills region, other countries and nations have similar myths. Acquiring the tiger spirit is hereditary but it can also be resisted. Since Christianity started spreading, people began viewing this as a demon possession. Thus, more and more people started resisting it and people with animal souls are now becoming extinct and we don't hear of them as much now as we used to.

Chapter V: Conclusion

Storytelling and oral narrations have always been considered an important component in keeping cultural traditions alive. It is through these narrations that people are able to understand and associate themselves with their past history, religions, culture and traditions.

The *A·chiks* like other cultures across the world boast of rich oral narratives. From stories of their evolution to their migration, myths and popular beliefs and practices, they have a host of oral narratives.

Traditional *A·chiks* lived a nomadic life following the seasons and the food. With very few simple tools, which were used with incredible skill the *A·chiks* learnt to live in the harsh and inhospitable terrain. It was here that they felt completely one with nature and therefore started worshipping different forces of nature.

The *A·chiks* had lived a life of complete seclusion until significant social changes were brought about with the commencement of British rule in India. They dwelled in their simple life with basic

necessities in the calm presence of nature. Due to the inaccessibility and remoteness of the areas inhabited by them, it was not possible for others to establish contacts with them. As a result of this lack of contact and interaction, they had remained within the area of their social contours and cultural boundaries for many years. This profound proximity to nature has allowed them to find solace in their pantheistic and animistic belief system. Nature holds an important focus in their reverence, and whatever beliefs they hold about their gods, it was considered divine or sacred.

However, after the colonization of India, the areas that were occupied by the *A·chiks* had undergone a revolutionary change. The influence of Christian missionaries also brought in changes to the religious beliefs of the *A·chiks*. With the conversion of the *A·chiks* into Christianity, their pantheistic and animistic beliefs also started dwindling. According to Nikme Salse C. Momin in her book *Understanding across Cultures of North East India* (2010), the percentage of the *Songsarek Garos* or the ‘non-Christian’ Garos is very low whereas the percentage of converted Christians is exceptionally high.

The *A·chiks* like most of the tribals in India are also affected by the western culture in different aspects of their social life. Some of their beliefs and cultural traditions, life and tribal arts such as dance, music and different types of craft have been modified as a result of this enculturation.

A·chiks have a unique identity of their own. Their language, religious beliefs, cultural phenomena, food and their traditional attire, oral narrations, dances and festivals are all unique to them. They are a culturally rich tribe who need to preserve what has been handed down to them by their forefathers. They have a rich and diverse culture based on the profound spiritual relationship with their land and natural resources.

In her essay “Relevance of Oral Literature” in *Orality and Beyond: A North-East India Perspective* (2005), Caroline R. Marak, asserts the fact that *A·chikku* or the ‘language of the *A·chiks*’, is in the process of disintegration. With the progress of education, the vocabulary of the literate people has become limited to what is found in text-books. The tradition of listening to Oral narratives and listening to its vocabulary and style are no longer considered desirable among the educated.

The knowledge of the *A·chiks* is embedded in community practices, institutions, relationships and rituals. With the belief in the cultural phenomenon like *Jasrea*, *Jaruraa* and *Jarea* dwindling over the years, its practice among the *A·chiks* has also become rare. Many *A·chiks* now feel that such practices are a taboo in a civilized society and therefore need to refrain from them. Stories of such phenomenon have also greatly reduced because people now consider it as superstition or mere story without any factual accounts related to it.

In *The Roots of Coincidence*, Arthur Koestler opines that “We are surrounded by phenomena whose existence we studiously ignore or, if they cannot be ignored, dismiss as superstition.”

The relationship between realities, fantasy and imagination becomes important in trying to understand these phenomena. In this study, Transformation myth or shape-shifting is a cultural phenomenon, and the question of whether they are real or imaginary becomes unanswerable. It is only through the stories that have been narrated by our forefathers which have continued through generations that we come to know of its existence. Although stories of the existence of this cultural phenomena still lingers on through certain stories and real accounts given by those who can transform into animals, the question of whether it can be considered myth or reality all depends on how people perceive it.

Through the preservation of the cultural beliefs, traditions and rituals we can also ensure that a culture of a community stays alive and does not disappear into the oblivion.

These cultural phenomena are all a part of the *A·chik* culture and therefore efforts need to be made to document it, and preserve it, so that the following generations understand how the *A·chik* culture is filled with mysterious and supernatural phenomena.

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In the wake of working with narratives over the last decades, narratives have proven to highlight and bring to the fore the relevance of differentiating and integrating a sense of self in the identity formation processes of institutional and personal continuities (Bamberg, 2011a). However, at the same time, it is through those narratives that counter established norms and conventions that people can identify discontinuities and define "new" positions, thereby contributing to change and transformation—first of all locally and contextually, but also potentially more generally in terms of larger social structures.

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Transformation is the fourteenth episode of *Garou: The Makai Flower*. It features the debut of Makai Priest Shidou. When the Makai Knights finally find the Horror that carries the Seed of Eiryth and cut it down, Mayuri becomes sick and the Knights must find a way to cure her before she becomes a Horror. While Crow and Raiga are fighting and chasing the Slab Horror Idora, Mayuri detects that it has the Seed of Eyrith. She tells Raiga to cut it down before it's too late. After a bit of a struggle, Raiga