

# The Bamboo Objects of the Garos: An Ethnographic Documentation

**Tokse Karen D Sangma**

Research Scholar, History and Archaeology Department, North Eastern Hill University, Tura Campus, Meghalaya, India.

***Abstract:** Humans have long been able to develop the art of making objects. With the evolution of human cognition, the material objects created also started to evolve and the creation of objects, at some point shaped the culture of the humans. Objects which humans use in their everyday life are known as material culture. These objects are handcrafted from the readily available materials which surrounds them. The Garo tribe has a galore of material culture. These objects act as an integral part of the society. The purpose of this paper is to highlight and discuss the material culture of the Garo with an emphasis on bamboo as a raw material.*

***Keywords:** Material Culture, Garo, Bamboo*

## **INTRODUCTION:**

Material culture refers to the material objects which humans create and employ on a daily basis. The objects created are the product of human minds, which helps to ameliorate his position in the surroundings. The vast array of objects which humans fashioned out of nature does not essentially preserve well in any conditions and hence tends to perish. Though these objects are subjected to deterioration yet they reflect the aspects of their culture and acts as an agent of the past. The Garos, are few of the surviving matrilineal tribe, inhabiting the Northeast region of India, has a diverse range of material objects that surrounds them. They are found in the western hill of the present day Meghalaya. Though the Garo are the settlers of the Garo Hills region, they are also found in adjoining states of Assam, Tripura, Nagaland and also in the neighbouring country Bangladesh. The oral tradition of the Garo suggest that they were the dwellers of Tibet in a place called Torua, who migrated to the present day Garo Hills under the leadership of Jappa Jalimpa Sukapa Bonggipa as the land they settled earlier was exhausted due to the frequent jhum cultivation and had to face scarcity of water. The Garo people prefer to call themselves as A'chik (hill man) or Mande (the man) or simply A'chik Mande. Geographically the Garo are sub divided into twelve sub-divisions on the basis of their distinct dialects. They are the A'we, the A'kawe, the Chisak, the Dual, the Matchi, the Am'bung, the Chibok, the Ruga, the Gara Ganching, the A'tong and the Me'gam.

The objects which the Garo utilize in their daily activities are hand crafted and the traditional knowledge of crafting handed down from generations. The raw materials used are mostly organic materials of which, bamboo is one of the essential materials used. The bamboo is distributed widely in the Garo Hills region and therefore, the extensive availability of bamboo has made them reliant for their existence. The Garo use varieties of bamboo like wa'nok, wa'bok, wa'dro, wa'ge , borua and wa'sim among others. Bamboo as a versatile raw material is deep rooted in the Garo culture and traditions and as such the objects made of bamboo are significant representation of material culture.

### **METHODOLOGY:**

The present topic attempts to stress and highlight on the material objects made of bamboo from the ethnological perspective. Since bamboo is copiously found in the region, the Garo utilize it in all possible ways. For the present study, the data's were collected from the traditional villages of Garo Hills during the year 2018-2020. The Emic approach has been adopted while collecting and analysing the data as it will help in understanding the material culture from the insider point of view. As the material objects are made of organic materials and are liable to rot, there is paucity to material evidence; the ethnographic study would give valuable information about how the Garos used bamboo in their daily activities.

### **THE USE OF BAMBOO AMONG THE GARO:**

Bamboo plays an important role in the Garo society. It is utilized in many ways like construction of shelter houses, making household items like containers, baskets of different size, utensils, musical instruments, agricultural implements, fencing and even fuel and food. The present paper classifies the usage of bamboo among the Garos into household items, basketry, fishing equipment, agricultural implements, musical instruments, shelter houses and other miscellaneous items.

### **HOUSEHOLD ITEMS:**

Though the household items made of bamboo are perishable, they play a dominant role within the domestic domain. The important household items worth mentioning are as follows:

- i. Wa'sing:* The Garo tribes, often use wa'sing for storing items specially dried fish or na'kam. For this purpose, a bigger bamboo pole is preferred. From one bamboo pole, multiple bamboo tubes or wa'sing can be made by cutting the bamboo into sections keeping one stem wall intact and the other end open. Apart from storing, wa'sing also acts as an apparatus to cook. For this, meat is thinly chopped and is inserted inside the hole of the wa'sing plugged with banana leaves, and is left on the fire to cook. Sticky rice and rice can also be cooked similarly. This kind of delicacy, cooked inside the wa'sing is known as brenga among the Garo. Cooking in a bamboo receptacle is still being practiced today.

- ii. *Pabi or pabe*: Another item worth mentioning is pabi or pabe, a bamboo tube used as a water vessel. Unlike the wa'sing, the stem walls are kept intact and are punctured with a small opening that acts as a mouth to either fill or drink water. Pabi filled with water is usually carried to the jhum fields to drink water while working.
- iii. *Me'gol and brak*: Easy to carve, me'gol is a long, flattened, plain, and smoothed spoon used to stir rice while cooking. The brak on the other hand resembles the shape of a cooking spoon having a head with a little depth at one edge and the other edge acting as a handle usually use to stir the curry or serve or even transfer the food. Even if they use simple spoons for cooking, the Garo prefers to eat food with their hand.
- iv. *Tokkari*: A stand-like holder made of bamboo, to keep kitchen utensils, especially the spoons.
- v. *Wa'singtok*: Bamboo tube used for blowing air to keep the firewood burning is known as wa'singtok. For this, bamboo is made hollow by cutting both ends of the bamboo stem and clearing the inner walls of the bamboo.
- vi. *Wa'gok*: The utility of wa'gok is that it acts as a utensil replacing the modern-day bowls. It is specially used to transfer the rice from rongdik (an earthen pot where rice is stored) to the cooking pot. For this, a bamboo with a larger diameter is preferred, keeping one stem wall intact and the other open.
- vii. *Jaktap*: Jaktap is bamboo-made pest control or killing device. It has a square flat head weaved out of bamboo with a long handle. It is lightweight and flexible allowing a fast movement to kill the insects like houseflies, mosquitos, moths, etc.
- viii. *Mora*: In some houses, a stool made of bamboo called mora is found. They are usually offered to the visitors of distinction. (1)

### **Basketry:**

The basketry among the Garos is an old age craft which became an intrinsic part of the day to day life and pursuits. The basketry produced or woven basket holds an essential part in the Garo household items. For instance, it is used to carry firewood, store paddy, store seeds, and so on. Apart from bamboo, canes are also used to make baskets. The baskets are done manually where the bamboos are split with a sharp knife into a flat thin strip. These strips are further made thinner by peeling the upper layer strip and are smoothed with the help of a knife. The smoothed strips are left out in open air, and among the Garos, they keep the strips in the roof allowing the dewdrops to fall on it. The bamboo strips coming in contact with the dewdrops allow the strips to be more flexible and also stronger that even small insects which attack bamboo especially termites could not harm or damage it. Following are the several types of basketry of different shapes and sizes used for different purposes.

- i. *Gachek* or *Machek* : *Gachek* or *macheck* is a small, closely weaved bamboo basket used especially to store paddy seed or other seeds. At the time of sowing seeds in the jhum fields, the Garo carry this basket on their waist filled with seeds and toss the seeds to the jhum fields.
- ii. *Kokcheng* : Another type of basket prevalent is the *kokcheng*. It is a carrying basket woven with slight gap alternately. This basket is primarily use to carry things like firewood gathered from the jungle, or carry *basing* when need to collect water from spring bed for different purposes.
- iii. *Megam Koksi* : This is a finely woven basket with a conical shaped cover meant for keeping clothes and other items. It is said that this basket was mostly prevalent among the Garo sub tribe Megam and hence the name *megam koksi*.
- iv. *Kilkok* : Perhaps this basket is the longest with loosely woven basket among the Garos. This basket is used to carry or transport cotton from the fields to their respective homes.
- v. *Dol* : This basket becomes extremely useful during the harvest season. *Dol* is used to keep and store the paddy. Apart from storing the paddy, it is used to store and carry other items as well.
- vi. *Kudu* : *Kudu* is a small finely woven cylindrical shape basket used to measure the quantity of rice for cooking . It is kept inside the *rong'dik* where the Garo store their rice.
- vii. *Janchi* : It is a cylindrical longer than the *kudu*, basket which is used to filter the *minil* or sticky rice while making or brewing the traditional rice beer. When in use it is kept inside the middle of *chu dikka*. Depending on the height of the *dikka* or earthen pot, the *janchi* is weaved.
- viii. *Gengreng* or *Dengreng* : A conical shaped woven tightly with a small hole on the tip. This is used to filter the ash and obtain the alkaline liquid from the tapering end. *Gengreng* or *dengreng* is found extensively in the traditional Garo villages as alkaline or *kalchi* is one of the distinct food ingredients of the Garo.
- ix. *Ruan* : This is a winnowing fan, designed in the form of a tray with high ridges on one side and a slanting ridges on two sides and one side left open. The border of this basketry work is bordered with bamboo for better grip when in use. It is shaken with a slightly forward and upward motion to separate the husk from the rice. It is also used as a tray where the Garos dry the sorrel leaves, chilies, and other edible items on then sun.
- x. *Koksi* : *Koksi* is fishing accessory basket used for holding fish or other aquatic animals like crabs, shrimps, frog and so on after they have been caught from the rivers, streams or ponds. This basket is pot shaped with firmly woven bamboo strips. It was woven in such a manner that the aquatic animal could in no way escape. It has a narrow mouth, a neck a broad base and is usually attached *koksi* around the waist by a rope or a cloth. It differs in sizes.

- xi. A'kok* : This is a cage made of bamboo to keep the pigs to sell in the market. This is also sighted regularly in the Garo weekly markets.
- xii. Koksep*: A *koksep* is a cage made of bamboo loosely woven with gaps. Domesticated hens and cocks are kept in the *koksep* for sale. Depending on the size of the birds, the *koksep* is woven. Sometimes five or more birds are kept inside the *koksep*. This cage filled with bird is mostly sighted in the Garo weekly markets where they are put up for sale.
- xiii. Do'gring or do'pra*: *Do'gring* or *do'pra* are bamboo made baskets filled or cushioned with straws for hens to lay eggs. To find eggs easily and quickly for food and also to protect the eggs from animals, *do'pra* is placed on the elevated side of the traditional house above the ground.

### **Fishing Equipment:**

Fish forms an important item in the Garo diet and people give good deal of attention to fishing operations (2). Apart from construction a fishing weir across the stream, the Garo people make fishing traps out of bamboo as well. Few known fishing equipment made of bamboo are:

- i. Chempa* : A *chempa* is a fishing trap made out of bamboo strips. It is biconical or diconical in shape. This fishing trap has a flexible opening or valve like opening in the middle and the circular edge of one side is woven, while the other side is not woven and is left a hole. While fishing, this trap is submerged and kept in the water in a horizontal position keeping the valve like opening against or towards the running water and sometimes cover the *chempa* with mud or bushes. The fish enters this trap via the valve like opening with no chance to get away. The fishes are then taken out through the hole of the circular edge which was plugged with leaves or a cloth when kept submerged in water.
- ii. Cheki* : *Chekki* is a fishing gear made out of bamboo. It has a long stiff bamboo stick which is used as a handle and a triangular shape with the front part open. This fishing trap is usually used by the women folks and also children who fish fishes from shallow or rocky rivers. They dip or submerge the *chekki* in the river, which is then lifted from the water. The trapped fishes are easy to handpick as it has a wide open front.
- iii. Bamboo spears*: This fishing equipment, were used by the divers to spear big fishes under water. Used mostly by the dwellers of Siju, situated in southern part of the province who plunged into the Simsang river to catch big fishes.(3)

### **AGRICULTURAL IMPLEMENTS:**

The Garo traditionally practices the jhum or slash and burn cultivation for their sustenance. The tools and implements use for agriculture are simple because agriculture among the Garos is limited to clearing and burning of forest and dibbling of seeds in the ashes of the burned forest. Though the agricultural

implements specifically made of bamboo are fewer, yet, bamboos are used as a shaft to iron agricultural implements like *atte*, *gitchi*, *rua* among others.

- i. *Gongkati* : *Gongkati* is a simple implement procured from the branches of trees or a bamboo with a gradual sharp curve. It is a hand tool used specifically to clear the bushes and shrubs. It is use as an assister to scoop or pull the bushes and shrubs.
- ii. *Matta* : *Matta* is a long, sharp and pointed stick at both ends. The plot of land which is ready for cultivation is not dug but is made holes with the use of *matta on* regular intervals. The seeds are then dropped and buried in these holes. The process continues until the plot of land is covered.

### MUSICAL INSTRUMENTS:

The Garos play the musical instruments mainly for entertainment, festivals and ceremonies and for relaxation. Apart from wood, major portion of musical instruments are made of bamboo. For musical instruments, the Garo prefer *wa'dro*, *wa'tre* etc.

- i. *Chigring*: According to the oral traditions, the Garo use chigring as the main instrument before the emergence of drum. It was only later that the Garos started to make drums from solid wood as it transmit a louder sound than the bamboo. Chigring is a bamboo instrument with strips slit out of the bamboo itself. The strips slit from the bamboo are known as ding'chita. The instrument has a hole punctured in the centre, known as do'go which helps to make a vibrating sound. It is played with the help of sticks.
- ii. *Bangsi*: The flute or bangsi, is one of the widest and simplest instrument used among the Garos. This wind instrument is made of bamboo (preferably *wa'tre*, *wa'dro*, *wa'tebok*) with varied holes to produce sounds. Among the Garos, bangsi is blown or played during the time of celebration, merriment or even relaxation but not during the time of mourn. There are two ways of making the bangsi. One way is by using iron wherein the holes of the bangsi are made or hollowed by heating the iron in the fire and percussion making a hole. The other way of making is simple by using *atte*. They make this kind of bangsi on the way to the jhum fields where they can play while resting. There are different types of bangsi prevalent among the Garo. Bangsi Olongma, Bangsi Oktera, Bangsi Roroma, Bangsi Doroma.
- iii. *Digang*: Another type of wind instrument among the Garo, made by joining two different sized bamboos from smaller to bigger is the Digang. The *bima* or the hole through which the instrument is blown is smaller in size than the opening end, known as *bipa* and which is bigger in size comparing to *bima*. Digang does not have any religious connotation. It is specifically blown in the jhum fields or the *a'ba* as a means of communication. The Garos, work in their jhum fields from early morning. So as soon as they reach their fields they blow this instrument indicating

their arrival to their jhum fields. The blowing of the digang also acts as a wakeup call to other families who might have overslept. It is also blown to chase away the animals and birds trying to destroy the crops from the jhum fields as the jhum lands of the Garo, are extensive that one cannot run around the *a'ba* chasing away the animals or birds. The digang produces a loud sound, which startles the animals and birds trying to ruin the crop. The digang produces a loud sound, which startles the animals and birds trying to ruin the crop.

- iv. *Kal*: This instrument is used by the Ruga (a sub-tribe among the Garos). It is a trumpet type instrument which is made by joining together different sized bamboos tightly, from the biggest to the smallest.(4)

### **Housing:**

Bamboo serves as the key element for building purposes. Not only because bamboo is found in abundance, but because of its structural advantage bamboo is used in the construction of house along with other natural resources like the hardwood, thatched grass and cane. The floors and walls of the house are weaved together by flattened bamboo. The slanting door is also made of bamboo. *wa'ding* (bamboo strips), are used as a fastener of joints of the house replacing the use of nails. A typical Garo dwelling house is known as *Nok Mande*, is rectangle in shape, where the front portion is levelled with the ground and the part of the house which falls within the inclined ground are supported by bamboo and wood. Bamboo leaves are also used as a roofing material. Besides the dwelling house, there are other shelter houses among the Garos used for different purposes like the Bachelors Dormitory or the *Nokpante*, the Granary or *Mi Jam*, or Fieldhouse or *Jamadal*, Rest House or *Bandasal*, Tree house or *Borang*. Though the structures of these houses are different from each other, yet bamboo is extensively used in all parts of the shelter houses.

### **MISCELLANEOUS:**

The significance of bamboo among the Garo is profound. Besides the uses of bamboo mentioned above, bamboos are also widely used as water-pipes to divert spring water from the source. In addition bamboo is constructed as shelves above the hearth known as the *onggare* to keep and store articles like food, seeds, gourds, baskets and other items that need to be kept dry. They also erect altars out of bamboo for religious rituals specially relating to agriculture, sickness and death. Furthermore, there are many indigenous games with bamboo acting as the principal material, like *chongegera sika* (pushing of bamboo pole downwards towards the opponent) and *wa'pong sika* (pushing each other with a bamboo pole). The form of sports and games most commonly played by them are very much conspicuous these games involve a trial of physical strength of each individual or a group.(5)

### **CONCLUSION:**

From time immemorial, the poor man's timber has occupied an indispensable part in the social, cultural and religious lives of the Garos. The objects crafted by the Garos are eco-friendly as well as unsophisticated and the knowledge system handed down from generations. The variety and diverse range of bamboo objects crafted exhibits the skills and traditional knowledge system of the craftsmanship. It is observed that most of the objects be it of bamboo or other resources are going through an evolution, wherein some of the objects are undergoing a slight modifications or adjustments or even being replaced by aluminium objects as it is readily available in the market. Since the objects crafted represent the beliefs and traditions in a way produces an identity of the community or the tribes. Therefore there is an urgent need to document the material culture of the Garos and preserve it for posterity before it is lost forever.

**Acknowledgement:**

This paper is a part of research work conducted for my Ph.D. thesis between 2018-2020. I wish to record my deep sense of gratitude to my supervisor, Dr. Tilok Thakuria, Department of History and Archaeology, Tura NEHU Campus, for his keen interest and guidance. I would also like to thank Shri Chisaka Marak (Ranger) Forest Department, East Garo Hills, Williamnagar, for his knowledge and information on bamboo. I am grateful to Abi Tiana, Susan, Sallivina and Silchang for their company during my fieldworks. Inevitable errors remain mine.

**Reference:**

1. Sangma, S. Milton. (2012), *History and Culture of the Garos* (p.155). Guwahati, North East Printing Press.
2. Playfair, A. Major. (2011), *The Garos* (p.54). Tura, D.J. Publication.
3. Kar, Angira. (2018). *The Garos of Meghalaya Pre-Colonial and Colonial Times* (p.137). Guwahati, DVS Publishers.
4. Thomas, Watre. Iris. (2007), *Music and Musical Instruments of the Garo Tribe of North East India* (p.68). Delhi, Akansha Publishing House.
5. Sangma, Koksi. Tharsush. (2021): Indigenous Games of the Garos. *Onggare the Hearthrake*. Literary Journal of the Garo Sahitya Sabha. Volume 1, Issue 1. (p49)