

Book Review

Review of *Reworking Culture: Relatedness, Rites, and Resources in the Garo Hills, North East India* by Erik de Maaker

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Reworking Culture

*Relatedness, Rites, &
Resources in Garo Hills,
North East India*

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Reworking Culture focuses on culture and its recent transformations in and around the village territory of Sadolpara in the West Garo Hills of Meghalaya. For a few decades, social science research on Northeast India has shed light on the consequences of the ‘rewarding’ of cultural specificity by the state, in particular through the granting of tribal status and its benefits. This framework has sought to highlight the political construction of ‘ethnic identity’ and its staging as a means of attaining political visibility (Meenaxi Barkataki-Ruscheweyh. 2017. *Dancing to the State: The Ethnic Compulsions of the Tangsa in Assam*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press), as well as the production of new hierarchies and intra-ethnic relations of domination through the rise of ‘tribal politics’ (Sanjib Baruah. 2013. “Politics of Territoriality: Indigeneity, Itinerancy and Rights in North-East India.” In *Territorial Changes and Territorial Restructurings in the Himalayas*, edited by J. Smadja, 69–83. New-Delhi: Adroit Publishers and Paris: Centre for Himalayan Studies) as responses to policies intending to ‘domesticate’ cultural difference (Arkotong Longkumer. 2010. *Reform, Identity and Narratives of Belonging: The Heraka Movement of Northeast India*. London: Continuum). The politicization of ethnic identity in the region, together with the questioning of ‘methodological nationalism’ in the social sciences, has led in particular to a rethinking of research on the culture of a single ethnic community: How can we approach culture and ethnic identity without reifying ethnic boundaries? In this context, the main challenge faced by an ethnographic study on a localized community is to give full account of the sense of belonging and ‘cultural coherence’ that are meaningful to people and are organizing principles of their social relations while also reflecting the cultural diversity within ethnic communities, the fluidity of ethnic boundaries and cultural dynamism.

Reworking Culture convincingly discusses Garo practices and representations in a way that sheds light on their inherent capacity to transform, and contesting prevailing views of upland societies in Northeast India

as culturally homogeneous, geographically contained and isolated, and disappearing. The book focuses on “what people experience as Garo culture” (p. 42), and the emic concept of ethnic identity is represented by orally transmitted principles called *niam*, which rather than being “inflexibly prescriptive serve to legitimate ‘re-worked’ ideas and practices by connecting them to the past” (p. 85).

The ‘House’ is an institution central to social relations in Saldopara. It includes a building, and is more generally a unit of property, rights, and belonging. It is a central element of the ‘social order’, and its continuity is ensured by the practice of replacing the deceased spouse, which is the responsibility (and right) of the deceased’s matrilineal group. The House also brings two matrilineal groups into a relation of exchange that can last over several generations, and organizes the share of resources between large kin groups. Houses that are hierarchically related to one another get rights over fields on which swidden agriculture can be carried out. The traditional Garo community religion is embedded into the village social and economic organization, and the maintenance of Houses and swidden agriculture particularly involve the cult of traditional Garo spirits.

Many of the concerns of this book would also be found in a classical ‘village study’: kinship and social organisation, the role of the house in the social organization, religious practices, land ownership, and so forth. It differs, however, from such a study by approaching these ‘fields of study’ as “relational categories.” Firstly, they are embedded into each other; consequently, economic, social and religious changes are also interrelated. Secondly, the ‘stable’ cultural elements are malleable. For example, the hierarchy of the Houses, based on their relation with the first settlers, was gradually reinterpreted following the disappearance of some Houses (p. 112). The organization of kinship relations in terms of categories also allows people to move from one category to another. Thirdly, they allow the transformation of social relations.

Thus, on one hand, the maintenance and transmission of Houses, kinship organization, ritual performances, and ‘tradition’ organize Garo culture, in the sense that they maintain exchange relations between matrilineal and affine groups, and foster respect for social hierarchy. On the other hand, they serve as a referential framework that bestows authority upon people’s relationships and commitments allowing for their reinterpretation and renegotiation according to the situation at hand. Ritual performances, in particular funerals, provide the ground for the revision of relationships between Houses in particular through circulation of different types of gifts.

“Far from adopting an essentialist approach, the book places the Garo community in the flux of time, and shows how it deals with changes that affect society as a whole.”

- Melanie Vandenhelsken on *Reworking Culture*

Far from adopting an essentialist approach, the book places the Garo community in the flux of time, and shows how it deals with changes that affect society as a whole. The study focuses on the period of the author’s fieldwork (from 1999 to the early 2000s), and also discusses the changes introduced during colonization (notably as a consequence of the endorsement by the colonial state of the position of village head) as well as the consequences of increasing numbers of Garo converting to Christianity since the 19th century. This has brought about important changes as Christianity is considered incompatible with the practice of the traditional community religion (or “Songsarek”) which is embedded in the social and economic organization of the village. The gradual increase in cash crops and paddy cultivation to the detriment of swidden agriculture has also led to a loss of meaning for the spirit cult since maintaining good relations with spirits is necessary for swidden agriculture: “Songsarek’s religious practices are gradually losing their economic relevance” (p.

126). More recently, the growing role of the state and market in the life of the community has favoured limitations on the number of beneficiaries of local economic resources, which has led to an increase of inequalities within the community.

Nevertheless, collective celebrations linked to the annual cycle of shifting cultivation are maintained for their social aspects. More generally, Songsarek followers’ “ideas, attitudes, practices, and *niam* are by no means frozen in time but flexible enough to incorporate the modernization of economic practices and to adapt to changing political contexts” (p. 246); Garo ‘culture’, the author argues, is a living resource for the community that enables it to adapt to changing economic and political conditions, and this concerns both Songsarek and Christians as, in practice, “Garo *niam* is encompassing; it defines social principles that transcend divisions of religion and class” (p. 248).

Based on a long-term ethnographic field study that focuses on cultural worldview and knowledge as enacted and transformed through collective practices that help communities adapt to changing societal conditions, de Maaker’s approach echoes other recent publications on Northeast India—for example, Michael Heneise’s work on dreams and agency as providing the Nagas with the means to negotiate everyday uncertainty and unpredictability (2018. *Agency and Knowledge in Northeast India. The Life and Landscapes of Dreams*. London and New York: Routledge), and Dolly Kikon’s exploration of identities and cultures as mediated by food (2021. “Bamboo Shoot in Our Blood. Fermenting Flavors and Identities in Northeast India.” *Current Anthropology* 62, supplement 24).

The fluidity of the writing is one of the strengths of *Reworking Culture*. The analysis is based on the description of concrete events and situations described in a lively way that leads the reader smoothly into the

complexity of Garo culture and its transformations. The theoretical debate does not obscure the life and views of the people. The writing also highlights the heuristic value of description in anthropology: not, in this case, to provide ‘data’—the descriptions of rituals, for example, include only the information relevant for the discussion—but rather to underpin analysis, which is the final purpose of the book. The book thus provides an insight into the concrete consequences of economic and political changes in a rural community of Northeast India. It also highlights the relevance of rural, localized, and ethnic studies, renewing such studies in a way that reintegrates communities into temporal, cultural, and geographic movements.

However, the book offers limited space for comparison. This remark is not intended as a criticism since the text indeed constitutes a well-proportioned whole, but rather reflects a wish for more comparative studies, and for more studies of trans-ethnic relations in Northeast India and across its borders. A comparative approach to a number of particularly salient topics in the book—such as the replacement of the deceased spouse, matrilineality, marriage by abduction, and the role played by community religious practices in swidden agriculture—would be of particular interest.

The author clarifies the confusion made by some between matriarchy and matrilineality, but a comparison with other matrilineal societies based on ethnographic literature may have shed more light on the specific nature of the Garo House. Marriage by abduction and spirit cults related to shifting agriculture are also found in ethnic communities of Northeastern Nepal such as the Limbu (Philippe Sagant. 1996. *The Dozing Shaman: The Limbus of Eastern Nepal*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press). In this regard as well, a comparison would highlight the continuities across ethnic boundaries and borders in the whole region.

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