

Mythological Figures in Garo Lore

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Abstract

Oral literature can be considered the earliest form of literature in any literary tradition, preceding the written form. It signifies originality, adaptability, and fluidity, thereby contributing to the evolution of literature.

The Garos possess a diverse collection of oral narratives that have been passed down through generations. This oral tradition is deeply ingrained in the communal consciousness, serving as a reflection of the community's ethos. Within these oral compositions lie ancient and authentic lexicons that are meticulously preserved in their traditional sayings, songs, legends, proverbs, rituals, and incantations.

This paper endeavors to examine the mythological entities present in Garo folklore, meticulously preserved through oral traditions by the ancestors. Myths, as repositories of communal history, chronicle the vicissitudes of kingdoms and encapsulate the essence of a community's past. They not only mirror the people but also foster unity, continuity, and coherence within a cultural milieu.

Human civilizations worldwide possess traditional oral poetry, epic narratives, lyrical compositions, proverbs, enigmas, and anecdotes that have been passed down through generations via spoken word. The term "myth" stands as a universal concept, serving as a fundamental element of human culture. Myths are characterized as narrative sequences, typically traditional and anonymous, through which a given society upholds its social norms and offers explanations for the origins of human and natural phenomena.

The Garos, much like numerous other linguistic groups worldwide, possess a vast and profound reservoir of traditional narratives that have been passed down and safeguarded for generations solely through oral tradition. Various forms of poetic expression exist among them, including chronicles, dirges or funeral laments, songs performed during the Wangala, the harvest festival, epic poetry, myths, legends, and chants recited during rituals and ceremonies. All these oral accounts manifest themselves in poetic form, akin to many other languages. The colonization of the Garo Hills by the British brought about transformative shifts in their cultural ethos and cognitive frameworks. The systematic documentation of their oral literature commenced at the onset of the 20th century.

The Garos firmly believed in the existence of benevolent and malevolent spirits, the tales of which are interwoven in narratives concerning creation, the origins of staple crops, avian species, fauna, flora, and so forth. Among them are Supreme Beings such as Tatara Rabuga Stura Pantura, as well as lesser spirits like Susime, Abet Rengge, Misi Saljong, Kalkame, and Goera, each vested with distinct responsibilities ranging from creation to the regulation of natural phenomena like ailments and maladies. Many of these accounts are intricately intertwined with the religious, social, and philosophical fabric of the Garo community.

As previously mentioned, each spirit is recognized by various appellations, with the specific name used depending on the context. For example, among the Garo people, there exists a belief in a singular supreme creator known as Dakgipa Rugipa or Tatara Rabuga, signifying the ultimate deity responsible for the creation of all natural entities. In the realm of human origins, this supreme being is referred to as Ma-gipa Jagring, Janggini Nokgipa Jamani Biambi, denoting the creator of human souls and the bestower of life. Another epithet attributed to Tatara Rabuga is Bisikrom Bidatare, symbolizing the earth goddess. Additionally, he is also recognized as Suulgipa Imbanggipa, a title that embodies his role as the shaper of existence, the cohesive force that binds all elements together, and the arbiter of destinies.

Tatara Rabuga commands all the subordinate spirits to carry out the assigned tasks. For example, Nostu Nopantu, the deity, sculpted the physical form and characteristics of the earth at the behest of the supreme creator. The specific mission of Tatara Rabuga is to oversee the well-being of humanity, to heal individuals from fatal ailments like kala-azar and severe fevers.

Saljong, commonly referred to as Misi Saljong, is symbolized by the sun and often revered by the Garos as the deity of fertility. He is the guardian of all food crops, and without his favor, no harvest can be reaped. Prior to cultivation, a sacrificial ritual is conducted in the fields, and immediately after harvesting, the people must appease him by offering a cock on the sacrificial altar and presenting the finest rice beer during the wangala festival in his honor.

Abet Rengge is another subordinate spirit entrusted with the responsibility of safeguarding the primary sources of streams and forests.

Nawang is a malevolent spirit that perpetually seeks to consume the souls of individuals on their journey to Balpakram (The land of the dead or the abode of the spirits). A mortal carrying a weapon made of iron, brass, or silver ornaments is completely safeguarded, which is why the Garos traditionally place coins or silver ornaments with the deceased at the time of passing.

Goera, the heroic figure, is a demigod possessing both divine and human attributes, exhibiting superhuman strength surpassing that of ordinary mortals and possessing the ability to commune with the gods. The circumstances surrounding Goera's birth were notably unusual: the gestation period spanned seven full winters and summers, his mother endured labor pains for seven days and nights, and attendants prepared seven large earthen pots of water to bathe the newborn. *Goera* proclaimed his name while still in his mother's womb. Born with a full set of teeth, as an infant, he displayed exceptional cleverness, intelligence, and beauty. At dawn on the day of his birth, when his mother briefly left him unattended to bathe in a nearby stream, he ventured to the Nokpante (Bachelors dormitory), beating drums, performing a martial dance, and joyfully chanting "Goera, Goera, Gorea, Goera...". (Sangma, 100)

He vanquished the seven-headed monster boar named *wakmangganhi aragondi*, shielding his people from fear and demise. He embarked on global adventures, confronting numerous monsters like *Budangma*, *Noeri Smeri Japrama*, which wrought havoc on human lives, systematically eradicating them all. As a human, he coexisted harmoniously with his matrilineal kin and the populace of various regions.

Before leaving his people, he ascended on a wisp of white cloud, addressing the assembly that he would ascend to the celestial realms, where he would find greater joy among the inhabitants of the high heavens and forever remain as one of the immortals. He reminded them that when rain-clouds gather and peacocks cry, shrouded in clouds and rain, he will descend to visit the world. Playfully, he will target trees or objects with his trusty bow, releasing arrows at will. The flashes of light from his mil-am shall

be visible when he wields it in martial exercises. The resounding echoes of his steps shall reverberate as he dances in unison with the cosmic symphony, and he shall be united with the Supreme Being, eternally dancing. Goera is revered as the eternal and indomitable deity of thunder and lightning, as well as the god of vitality and vigor. (Sangma, 181)

Goera Krita is performed by the Garos when individuals have been afflicted with prolonged illnesses. They offer a pig, a duck, or a fowl to the deity and conduct a ceremony at the base of a tree, beseeching the spirit for the health and vigor of the ailing individual.

Gonga, akin to Goera, is a revered hero, a demigod embodying divine and human qualities. His birth mirrors that of Goera, and immediately after his arrival, he traversed the world, visiting significant locales like *Misini Nokgitcham*, *Saljongni Ki-gongdam* (Land of Misi Saljong), and *Minima Gitok De-ram*. He befriended the progeny of Katchi Beari Misi Susime and Jugi, journeying to notable sites like *A-sokme A-japang*, *Balwa Gitokram*. At *Karu Chimongram Rong-ma Dandakram*, he encountered *na-chi nokma* (who indiscriminately slaughtered cattle. Following in Goera's footsteps, he shoot the *na-chi nokma* with his bow and arrow.

Gonga resided among his people, aiding them in various ways. In an era where people clothed themselves in tree bark due to the lack of garments, he sought divine assistance to fell a colossal cottonwood tree, enabling them to weave threads and fashion attire. Gonga, alongside his wives, initiated agricultural practices, cultivating food grains and cotton seedlings, imparting agricultural knowledge to his people.

With his extraordinary strength, Gonga delved deep beneath the seas, penetrating the earth's seven layers to retrieve birds, tree seedlings, drums, and other items. Like Goera, he advocated for peaceful coexistence and cooperation among fellow humans, emphasizing fidelity, honesty, and respect. He stood not only for traditional expertise but also embodied values such as integrity, justice, respect, and dignity. Similar to myths found worldwide, the Garo legends elucidate universal and local origins, natural phenomena, and cultural practices or rituals. These narratives are deeply intertwined with the spiritual and religious fabric of the community, symbolically reflecting the people's aspirations, fears, values, and ideals.

As W. Wallace Douglas aptly expressed in *The Meanings of Myth in Modern Criticism* (1953), *a society enriched with myths is a vibrant human society... myths emerge, as they likely have in the past, from profound and enduring passions, crystallized and shaped, perhaps, by visionary artists, gradually integrated into a collective culture because they mirror or inspire profound beliefs and fulfill the impossible dreams of that culture.*

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