



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

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Erik de Maaker. *Reworking Culture: Relatedness, Rites, and Resources in Garo Hills, North East India*. 2022. Oxford and New Delhi. Oxford University Press. 328 pp., £54 (Hardcover)/₹1695 (Hardcover). ISBN: 978-8-1948-3169-3.

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Reworking Culture is based on the author's ethnographic engagement with people in and around the village of Sadolpara in the West Garo Hills in highland Northeast India (HNEI), where he conducted more than 20 years of fieldwork. It cunningly deals with the broader anthropological question of what ties people to the place they live in, in an attempt to critically explore the concept of 'cultural identity' from emic perspectives. To de Maaker, the idea of community, much like 'culture', becomes manifest in the sustained enactment of mutual relations that people continuously create, maintain and transform through everyday interactions and in response to material conditions and political and economic opportunities. By carefully examining such nuanced networks of sociality, the author showcases the dynamic of Garo village life.

Central to de Maaker's argument is what constitutes 'a shared livelihood that demands cooperation and sustains a village community' (p. 213). But rather than ascribing primordialist bonds, the author spotlights how the Garos continue to practise



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and take pride in their ‘Garoness’, notwithstanding the form of social change emerging from within (Chapter 1). This is evinced by his portrayal of *niam*, an orally-passed-down set of social principles that uphold ways of behaving towards others, including plants, animals, spirits and deities. How it operates is situational and requires a community consensus on what is (not) appropriate. Fulfilling social expectations and obligations through the interpretation of *niam* becomes indicative of Garo living. In Chapter 2, he elaborates on the point of ‘being Garo’ by explaining a larger political and economic patterning of community-making. Ethnicity, religion and kinship – each of these social dimensions may shape the relationship between Garos, yet, they alone do not fully explain how Garos define themselves and find meaning in their established relationships. *Niam*, de Maaker demonstrates, while prevalently deemed traditional and immutable, is instrumental in foregrounding when and what relational categories become relevant and how they become subject to adaptation, redefinition and contestation across different social domains (Chapter 3).

The relationships that Garos forge with one another are, however, not confined to the realm of ‘people’. Through offerings and celebrations related to the growth of crops, for instance, they acknowledge the value of maintaining good relationships with spirits that are omnipresent in nature. The author points out that both practitioners of the Garo ‘community’ religion (Songsareks) and Christian Garos, despite their different religious positioning, similarly value ceremonial occasions, at which a sense of belonging – religious, genealogical, social – is respectively expressed through the act of sharing drinks and meals. Funerary rituals especially exemplify how people attempt to strategically and symbolically continue such social relations through negotiation. The dead, whether in the form of a physical body, immaterial soul or ghost, demands the living honour the relationship with the deceased and respect the matrilineal structure by finding a replacement for deceased spouses. This allows more flexible interpretations of *niam* for specific social gains and losses that are deemed important. Garos’ ontological understandings of ‘place’ – as agricultural land, a seat of spirits and also a matrilineal unit of property – extend beyond mere physical attributes, as described by the author as “House”. This encompasses intricate entanglements of religious, political and economic responsibilities and commitments to preserving the rights and property to which they belong (Chapters 4, 5 and 6).

In the subsequent chapters, the author explains that *niam*, however traditional it may be, becomes subject to reorientation in response to emergent changes in the ecological conditions essential for Garos’ livelihood. As available resources become increasingly scarce, he points out, the nature of ‘sharing’ in the sense of mutual dependencies also begins to shift in pursuit of securing access to resources, land titles and rights and accumulating privatised wealth, namely, cash. While ordinarily, to Garos, ‘prestige is gained by *giving* rather than *having* (p. 231), the meaning of ownership is redefined through marriage and hierarchical arrangements within inter-House relations. Furthermore, the author elucidates that the growing number of development initiatives in rural Garo Hills, too, brings out new ways of achieving and maintaining the status quo. The relationships that Garos create and maintain with civil servants and government officials depend on their positionality and personal connections. Those Garo, like village heads, who are entitled to have direct access to greater powers can earn prestige through the redistribution of, thus ‘giving’, funds to their kin. In this sense, *niam* is and will be continuously reinterpreted in line with the ecological and political current – insofar as Garos consider it vital to their way of living (Chapters 7 and 8).

The author seeks to bring rural life and traditional practices into focus, not to romanticise nor salvage Garo village life, but to identify within it collective negotiations, reinterpretations and reorientations that constitute ‘Garoness’. To illustrate such complex Garo logics, instead of merely explaining what they are, de Maaker shares with the reader his process of learning about the diversity of relatedness that Garos establish with ‘others’. By illuminating the agency of Garos this way, the author foregrounds emergent issues and concerns shared not only within the Garo Hills but also across HNEI regarding accelerating nature commodification and ‘remote’ identity. The latter is especially questioned in this book, through which to think about how differentiated disparities and inequalities are increasingly overlooked, and sometimes reinforced, in cultural terms.

Reworking Culture is an ethnography with the mission to challenge dominant views on what a 'traditional culture' may entail. But the scope of this book goes well beyond de-essentialisation. At the vanguard of climate change, biodiversity loss and increasing global pressure to 'modernise' the economy, agriculture and education, amid immense transformations, the Garo Hills that de Maaker portrays is also a harbinger of *resistance* to certain changes – not as a relic of the timeless past, but as an important element of Garoness today. The book brings to the fore pliable processes of community-making within an 'indigenous' village context in HNEI whilst highlighting much larger historical contingencies and future implications, relevant to those interested in the intersection of religion and livelihood across and beyond HNEI.

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