



# SEMIOTICS IN MUSIC: A STUDY ON TRADITIONAL MUSIC OF THE GAROS OF WEST GARO HILLS, MEGHALAYA

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**Abstract:** Music is seen as a medium of expression and communication in many cultures. For the Garos of West Garo Hills, Meghalaya too, music is not only an important part of their everyday life, but acts as a communication between and among several groups within the tribe. Their traditional music comprises of over 140 instruments, and several types and forms of music. Again, some of them are sacred in nature, thus acting both as a unifying and segregating force, and related to the believers of the traditional religion, Songsarek. These are variously composed of recitations, incantations, prayers etc. calling upon or propitiating deities and spirits; many times accompanied by sacred instruments, which are at times played alone. Secular music comprises of those which are used by all, including Christians (except modern day Church songs) and those following other faiths, as well as during festivities connected to Wangala, the harvest festival, and music related to past events and merry making. This paper explores the symbolic communication existent in traditional Garo music, in the context of singing and recitation, communication within communication, intra and inter personal communication music and paralanguage.

**Keywords:** Traditional music – semiotics – communication in music – beats and phrases – Garo

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## INTRODUCTION

Music is an art of expression, revealing the versatility of commitment, an act of conscience and emotions related to experiences. Geertz (1973) states that music

is a powerful symbol and a source of explanation that helps people understand their world. It provides a system of shared meanings - conveying a culture's ethos and worldview through symbolic structures - influencing a people's understanding of their place in the universe and the meaning they attribute to life. Among the Garos, a tribal community residing majorly in the Garo Hills region of Meghalaya, music plays an important role in their everyday lives. Just as Shepherd (1991) looked at music as a 'social text', amongst the Garos too, there exists much symbolic meaning in music, and can thus be looked at as a system of signs within which meanings and realities are produced and interpreted. Anthropologist Merriam (1964) defines music as social behaviour, focusing on the theoretical and methodological foundations of knowledge related to it. Bernstein's (1965) 'restricted code lexical prediction' appears apt to the Garo situation where the musician knew exactly what he/she was going to say, and the listener knew what was coming.

The Garos are one of the major Tibeto-Burman tribes in the state of Meghalaya, residing in the western escarpment - in the West Garo Hills, East Garo Hills, North Garo Hills and South Garo Hills districts. Much of their villages and clusters of villages are grouped based on linguistic affinities. Though their language is A-chikku (or Garo), they have twelve sub-tribes with distinct dialects - the standard dialect being A-we (which is variously referred to as Garo), which is the standard language used in schools and textbooks. They also reside in the adjoining districts of Kamrup, Goalpara, Karbi Anglong and others in the state of Assam, and in Tripura, Nagaland and West Bengal. Across the international borders, they reside in Mymensingh, Tangail and Gajipur districts of Bangladesh. The word 'Garo' is an exonym and they prefer to call themselves A-chik or Mande. They are one of the tribes well-known in anthropological circles due to their unique custom of matriliney - in which lineage, residence after marriage, inheritance and succession is in the female line. Thus, a child born into a family will be considered a member of the mother's clan or sub-clan; residence after marriage being matrilocal, a newly married couple would set up residence in the bride's mother's house; house and property is passed on to the daughters (specifically, the most favoured daughter); and succession to chieftainship, i.e., clan chief (*nokma*) passes from the mother to the inheriting daughter (though in practice, the effective *nokma* is the father [of the girl] followed by her husband). Out of the four major districts in the state of Meghalaya, Garos following the traditional religion,

i.e., Songsarek are found in West Garo Hills, though they comprise only about 2% of the total Garo population, while the rest are Christians. Much of their traditional music is connected to Songsarek religion, and due to their traditions and customs, ownership and the right to play some musical instruments (such as *kram*, *nagra*, *rang* etc.) is connected to the societal norms of inheritance and succession. One of the popular traditional ritual connected to agriculture is the Wangala ritual (held in every Songsarek village), which is today communally celebrated as the 100 Drums Wangala festival in Tura every year in the month of November.

West Garo Hills district occupies an area of 3714 km<sup>2</sup> and has a population of 643,291 (Census of 2011), thus showing a population density of 173.2/km<sup>2</sup>. Out of 1209 villages, four villages were selected for this study – based on the type of religious practices (i.e., Songsarek) – Sadolbra (25.6843N, 90.2274°E), Gongdenggre (25.6225°N, 90.4371°E), Chidaogre (25.5788°N, 91.8933°E), and Selbalgre (25.5961°N, 90.3452°E). These villages still had some Garo people following the traditional religion. Data collection for this ethnographic work was conducted over 19 months from the year 2022 to 2024, and the methods used were participant observation, interview and case study.

### **Traditional Music of the Garos**

By traditional music, we mean music that has been passed on through generations, thus music that has withstood time and is considered 'old' or 'ancient' or 'inherited' is included in this category. There is no known term equivalent to 'music' within the Garo society; however, there are variants associated to it. Music is referred to as '*doka dama*' (beating drum), which translates to 'musical instrument' and when suffixed with '*ni*' becomes '*doka dama-ni*' (of music). The 'music' or 'sound' produced with Garo traditional musical instruments is referred to as '*doka damani ku-rang*' ('*ku-rang*' referring to 'sound', 'voice' and 'beat').

Traditional music of the Garos comprises of a number of instruments and forms and types of music. All of these are a part of their beliefs, language, ideas, emotions, material culture, shared behaviors, ethnicity, and identity characterized by a commonly shared group.

### **Types of Musical Instruments**

Instruments used by the Garos can be classified as under:

- (a) Idiophone: These instruments create sound when struck, shaken or tapped. Most Garo idiophones are composed of metal (such as brass, copper, and steel) and wood or bamboo. They can be cymbals, bells, tambourine and bamboo (or cane) instruments. Some examples of cymbals are *chengchap* and *kamal jakmora*, the former used as accompanying music during *Songkristan* music (of Christmas), and the latter is a sacred instrument used by the *kamal* (priest) of the Songsarek. *Chigring* is a stringed instrument carved from a single bamboo tube, and is believed to be the first musical instrument invented by the Garos.
- (b) Aerophone: These wind instruments primarily produce sound through vibrating air. Most common natural wind instruments are *adil*, *singga*, *gongmina* (or *gonggina*) and *matjong*. *Adil* and *singga* are natural horn instruments used as trumpet; *gongmina* is Jews harp made from bamboo; while *matjong* is metallic. Flutes like *dakok*, *illepi*, *otekra*, *olongma*, *wa-pipi* and others are also included in this group.
- (c) Chordophone: These are stringed musical instruments that produce sound from the vibration of strings when strummed, struck or plucked. *Sarenda* is a violin-shaped instrument with one or two strings made from barks of trees. *Dotrong* is a mandolin-shaped instrument with two or more strings used for rhythmic music.
- (d) Membranophone: These musical instruments produce a sound from the vibration of a stretched membrane or animal leather (skin). *Dama* is the popular elongated drum, secular in nature, and mostly known for cultural representation through 100 Drums Wangala Festival. *Kram* is an elongated drum but shorter than *dama* and used by the *kamal* (priest) and *nokma* (chief); while *nagra* is a conical shaped drum played with two sticks. Both the *kram* and *nagra* are heirlooms and inherited by the inheriting daughter of the *nokma*, and can thus be played only by the chief (*nokma*) or the priest (*kamal*).
- (e) Bi-Ensembled: Bi-enssembled instruments are hybrid percussion instruments such as the *dimchrang* which is a bamboo and cane musical instrument shaped like a rectangular shield. It is interlaced with rows of cane and bamboos having two sides with separate functions - One side is interwoven with strips of thin bamboo strings with a lifted bridge, while the other side is tightly aligned with flat caned surface.

- (f) Metallophone: These are instruments in which the sound is produced from the vibration of body of the metallic instrument when struck. *Rang* is a gong made from metal elements such as brass and hybrid metals. This is played by beating the surface of the gong with a stick while the other hand grips the instrument. There are 101 types of gongs used by the Garos, some of which are sacred, and some of which are considered heirlooms.
- (g) Lithophone: These are rocks or stones that produce musical notes when struck. Some examples are *imbanggia rong·chok* and *rangdokram*. *Imbanggia rong·chok* is a stalactite which reproduces the high pitched *dama* (drum) sound when tapped or struck; while *rangdokram* is a stationary rock which produces sound like the *rang* (gong) when struck with another rock.

### Types and Forms of Songs

Forms of songs refer to variations in the way of singing and recitation, while type of songs refer to variations in the intention, i.e., the way of pursuing the song subjectively. Forms of Garo songs are governed by the elements of sound and melody, lyrical texture and musical patterns. However types of songs are thematic by nature and are characterised by events. Types of Garo songs can be segregated into funeral, rites and ritual-spiritual or meditative, agricultural, lullabies, hunting, war, and sacrificial, chanting, ceremonial, festive, recreational and other religious types.

**Table 1: Types and Forms of Garo Songs**

Sl. No.	Types of Songs	Forms of Garo Songs
1	Funeral Songs	(a) <i>Grapmangtata</i> or <i>Mangona</i> or <i>Ka-bea</i> (a) <i>Mi-mang Dila</i>
2	Rites and Recitations	(a) <i>Ajea</i> or <i>Am-beng Balsala</i> (b) <i>Doroa</i> (c) <i>Dani Doka</i> (d) <i>Grika</i> (e) <i>Katta Agana</i> or <i>Katta Doka</i> or <i>Saling Ring-a</i>
3	Agricultural Songs	(a) <i>Ahoma</i>
4	Lullaby	(b) <i>Mumua</i>
5	Sacrificial Songs	(a) <i>Amua</i> (b) <i>Krita</i>

Sl. No.	Types of Songs	Forms of Garo Songs
6	Recreational & Festive/ Ceremonial Songs	(a) <i>Arerea</i> or <i>Rere Kala</i> or <i>Nanggore Ring-a</i> (b) <i>Chera Sola</i> (c) <i>Damik Ring-a</i> or <i>Gose Ring-a</i> (d) <i>Dara Doka</i> (e) <i>Gayok</i> (f) <i>Gelo Ring-a</i> (g) <i>Gogae Ring-a/Doka</i> (h) <i>Gonda Doka</i> (i) <i>Harara</i> (j) <i>Kore Doka</i> or <i>Kore Bima</i> (k) <i>Rada Ring-a</i> (l) <i>Serijing Ring-a</i> (m) <i>Songkristan</i>
7	Other Religious songs	(a) <i>Songkrikstan/kristan</i> (modern Christian folk song) (b) <i>Gayok</i>
8	Chanting & Eulogies	(a) <i>Amua</i> (b) <i>Grika</i> (c) <i>Krita</i>

Source: Fieldwork.

Table 1 shows different types of songs and within the classified group consisting different forms of songs. The table highlights the variation between different forms of songs due to their function and patterns of singing. Each type of song has different forms of songs. For example, funeral songs are *Grpmangtata*, *Mangona* (or *Ka-bea*) and *Mimang Dila*; whereas, recreational type consists of *Ajea* (or *Am-Beng Balsala*), *Doroa*, *Dani doka*, *Grika*, *Katta Agana* (or *Katta Doka* or *Saling Ring-a*). It is the same with rites and recitation, agricultural, lullaby, chanting and other religious songs. Each form of songs is guided by principles, thus, different type of songs can only be sung under their own category. For instance, *Grpmangtata* cannot be sung during agricultural ceremonies and recreational songs like *Harara*, *Serijing*, *Songkristan* etc., which in turn cannot be sung during funerals. Each form of songs has their role in fulfilling their functions.

### Symbolic Communication in Music

Garo music possesses meanings which are either meant for a specific group of people and/or understood by a specific group of people. Thus, some music

appear to have encrypted instructions, which for people outside the specific group may be considered noise or just melody.

### ***Singing and Recitation***

Not only do instruments vary among the Garos but the music itself varies widely in style; Singing may be accompanied by musical instruments or without them using just a vocal. The types of singing among the Garos are solo, duet, group, and participatory, while different forms of singing are *Doroa*, *Chera Sola*, *Dara Doka Rada Ring-a*, *Gogae Doka*, *Khore Doka*, *Gelo Ring-a Damik Ring-a* (or *Gose Ring-a*), *Serinjing*, *Arere* (or *Rere Ka-a*), *Nanggo Rere Ring-a*, and *Gonda Doka*. These forms of singing incorporate different technical aspects of music such as melody, tone, pitch, and linguistic aspects to form a song – thus they all sound different from each other. All of these forms of singing communicate different meanings, and are meant for different occasions.

Recitation can be considered an important medium of propagation of cultural heritage and history of their ancestors and their origin. Recitation (*katta agana*) uses variables and language in the communication process. Most recitations are performed during rites and rituals of Wangala, Ahaia, storytelling, narration of history, and Songsarek religious events. In recitation, the priest (*kamal*) and the clan chief (*nokma*) usually perform the ordinances and rites especially to invoke the deities or to narrate a series of events, epic lores, and incidents of past generations.

### ***Communication within a Communication***

Communication within a communication is a process where the motive of the message is double intended. For instance, phrases used in most melodic forms of Garo songs like *Harara* have a semantic and syntactic lyrical structure that expresses one's statement by contextualizing nature with social characteristics to communicate his/her feeling or messages.

Even in musical beats (of instruments), there exists what we refer as 'hidden message' – For example specific beats of the drum (*dama*, *kram*, *nagra*), and specific tunes on the flutes (*bangsi mandi*, *otekra*, *olongma*, *imbanggi*) – have different meanings. Some specific beats on the secular drum (*dama*) used by drummers during Wangala are taken as phrases of unsung and unworded lyrics, which are understood by the Wangala dancers alone. Similarly, the beating of the *nagra* drum by the priest or chief signified an emergency, a call for meeting

or that the privy was occupied. Sonification in Garo traditional music is used through overtuning and drum beats (*damani ku-rang*). The information conveyed is a set of phrase but transmitted using beat patterns. Each phrase is conveyed in the form of notes of drums. In this case, a language or verbal communication is not necessary to convey messages, instead a set of sounds are produced using musical instruments by few shared group of individuals. Traditionally, sonification is represented through visualization of sound spectrum of a vocal or instruments played on sound recording software. Typically, through beats of *dama* and *chigring*, signal message in music notes shared can be perceived as an information by the dancers and other accompanying musicians to react differently when indicated sonifically.

### ***Intra-and-Inter Personal Communication***

Intra-Personal Communication Music (IPCM) in Garo music can be seen mostly among the priest (*kamal*) and head of the clan chiefs (*a-king nokma*). Most recitations and rituals are conducted by the *kamal* to invoke the deities at the altar (*kimindam*). During the invocation ceremony for *Minima Rokime* (deity of fertility and prosperity) in the jhum field, the *kamal* urges the spirit of the deities through IPCM. Here he pretends to call upon the deity with ordinance, chants, songs, and alternately blows a flute (*wapipi*) for the deity to hear. The whole process is a communication with oneself and in addition, he responds on behalf of the deity. This ritualistic ceremony happens during Ahaia ritual when the first rice ripens, and the first harvest is offered to the deities.

Interpersonal Communication Music (ICM) is an interaction between two musicians or individuals using verbal, non-verbal, and paralanguage communication techniques. The practice of ICM in traditional Garo society has been effective for dialogues, conversations, sharing opinions and knowledge, signalling, and sharing information between two individuals or musicians. The Garos involve three types of interpersonal communication - oral communication, nonverbal and listening. ICM was highly valued especially in enhancing the ability to create a meaningful interaction through conversation with a pentatonic tune. The exchange of information or conversations in traditional Garo society was common with the practice of certain tune known by most people. In fact, the daily conversations between the two individuals were spoken with a tune like a vocal music. Paralanguage is one of the crucial parts of the daily conversation among Garos. Certain pitch, tone, gestures,

hint and facial expressions are some of the characteristics which convey meanings and reflect the mood of a person during the communicative event. For instance, an interaction between the drummer (*dama dokgipa*) and Wangala dancer (*wangalgipa*) is a concrete example of semiotic event where certain beats of the drum signals the dancers and accompanying musicians to change the dance and music sequence without verbal communication.

## **Conclusion**

Traditional Garo music can be considered as one of the richest due to its communicative nature in para-language through dance, gestures, non-verbal, verbal, music and harmony, overtone and sound semiotics. Messages and information are encrypted in songs and recitations in Garo music. Some forms of songs have transformed from just being a song (with words and phrases), to music with codes and signal transference or a communication within a communication. It is also seen that the Garo mind responds to different emotions and channelizes the mood depending on the waves of sound spectrums, scales, melody and genres and reacts in a culturally appropriate manner. Among Songsarek people, invocation and prayers are channels of intra-communication leading to transpersonal energy with deities. To really connect with music one needs to understand the context of the language and meaning ascribed by the sender of the information. Thus for Garos, after Geertz (1973), music functions as 'models of' reality and 'models for' behavior integral to understanding their symbolic landscape.

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