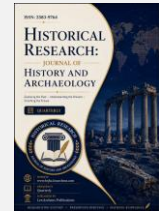




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The Advent and Expansion of Christianity among the Garo of Meghalaya: Indigenous Agency, Religious Transformation and Cultural Continuity

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ABSTRACT

The Garo, a matrilineal tribal society of the Garo Hills of Meghalaya and adjoining districts of Assam and Bangladesh, moved within a century and a half from an almost universal adherence to the indigenous Songsarek faith to a population that is today overwhelmingly Christian. This paper traces that transformation through documentary and secondary historical sources, situating it within debates on missionary encounter, indigenous agency, and cultural continuity in tribal Northeast India. Rather than reading Garo Christianity as the straightforward outcome of American Baptist missionary initiative, the paper foregrounds the role of native evangelists — most notably Omed Watre Momin and his nephew Ramke Watre Momin, and the native colporteurs and preachers who followed them — whose baptism in the early 1860s and subsequent preaching at Rajasimla inaugurated an indigenously mediated movement that missionaries such as Miles Bronson and Issachar Jay Stoddard later helped consolidate into a permanent mission station at Tura. The study traces the institutional pathway from the first Rajasimla congregation (1867) through the founding of the Garo Baptist Convention, mission schools, vernacular Bible translation and the Harding Theological College, and examines the later arrival of Catholic, Adventist and other denominations. It further asks how core elements of Songsarek cosmology and Garo matrilineal kinship — most visibly the Wangala harvest festival — have persisted alongside, and been absorbed into, Christian practice, and situates the Garo case comparatively against the Welsh Presbyterian mission among the neighbouring Khasi. The paper argues that Garo Christianity is best understood as a negotiated and indigenously mediated transformation rather than as a straightforward colonial imposition.

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INTRODUCTION

Northeast India occupies a distinctive place in the historiography of Christianity in South Asia. Unlike the deep-rooted Syrian Christian traditions of Kerala or the Portuguese-era Catholic communities of the western coast, Christianity in the hill tracts of Assam, Meghalaya, Nagaland and Manipur is almost entirely a product of nineteenth- and twentieth-century Protestant mission, arriving in the wake of British administrative expansion into the hills after 1826 (Downs, 1983, pp. 12–18). Among the peoples of this region, the Garo — who call themselves A·chik Mande, “people of the hills” — present a particularly striking case: a matrilineal, until recently non-literate, agrarian society whose traditional religious life, known as Songsarek, has in the space of some six generations given way to a Christian population reported at close to ninety per cent (Bajaj, 2016).

This transformation has often been narrated, in both missionary literature and popular accounts, as a straightforward story of evangelisation: American Baptist missionaries entered the Garo Hills, preached the gospel, and the “animist” Garo converted. Such an account understates the extent to which the advent of Christianity among the Garo was mediated, from its very beginning, by Garo agents themselves. The two figures most closely associated with the advent of Christianity in Garo historical memory — Omed Watre Momin and his nephew Ramke Watre Momin — were themselves Garo, and it was through their own initiative, and their subsequent work as preachers among their own people, that a foreign faith first took root in Garo soil (Barpujari, 1986). This paper accordingly treats the Garo case less as an instance of missionary success narrowly conceived than as an instance of indigenous religious innovation carried out in dialogue with, and later institutionalised by, an external mission. Beyond the advent narrative itself, the paper reconstructs the institutional pathway by which a small, indigenously initiated movement at Rajasimla became, over the following half-century, the dominant religious and educational infrastructure of the Garo Hills — the establishment of a permanent mission station at Tura, the formation of a native Baptist convention, the opening of mission schools and, in time, a college for the training of Garo pastors, and the translation of scripture into the Garo vernacular. It also traces the later arrival of Catholic, Seventh-day Adventist and other missions, which produced a denominationally plural Christian landscape among the Garo rather than a single, uniform “Christianity.”

The paper further asks how, notwithstanding this near-total religious change, significant elements of pre-Christian Garo social and cultural life — the matrilineal clan system, customary law, and above all the Wangala harvest festival — have continued to structure Garo identity. It draws on the wider historiography of Christian mission in Northeast India, which has increasingly moved away from binary readings of “colonial imposition” versus “authentic indigeneity” toward frameworks of negotiation and cultural adaptation (Downs, 1983, pp. 12–18), and asks whether such a framework illuminates the Garo case, including through a brief comparison with the contemporaneous, but institutionally quite different, Welsh Presbyterian mission among the neighbouring Khasi. The paper is organised as follows. The Review of Literature first sets out the wider scholarship on Christianity in Northeast India, then reconstructs, in roughly chronological order, the pre-Christian Songsarek world of the Garo, the arrival of the American Baptist mission in Assam, the advent of Christianity among the Garo through Omed and Ramke Watre Momin, the building of a permanent mission at Tura, the organisation of a native Baptist convention, the growth of mission education and vernacular literacy, the extension of the faith by Garo evangelists to neighbouring peoples, the later arrival of Catholic and other missions, and the persistence of Songsarek and matrilineal cultural forms. Four brief case studies then illustrate these processes at named institutions. The paper closes with a discussion, conclusion and a statement of the study's limitations.

Review of Literature

Christian Mission and Tribal Society in Northeast India

The scholarly literature on Christianity in Northeast India remains comparatively modest next to the literature on Christianity in South India, and within it the Khasi Hills — evangelised by the Welsh Presbyterian Mission from the 1840s — have received considerably more sustained attention than the neighbouring Garo Hills. Standard regional histories by Frederick S. Downs and O. L. Snaitang



establish the broad periodisation of Protestant mission in the region and its entanglement with colonial administration (Downs, 1983, pp. 12–18), while offering comparative material on the different tribal missions of the region (Snaitang, 1993, pp. 60–75). The institutional histories of Milton S. Sangma — covering American Baptist mission activity, education and vernacular literature in the Garo Hills specifically — remain the most detailed documentary foundation for any study of Garo Christianity, though they are chiefly descriptive rather than analytically concerned with questions of indigenous agency (Sangma, 1987).

Geographic and Administrative Setting of the Garo Hills

The Garo Hills lie immediately south of the Brahmaputra valley, separating the plains of Assam from the Sylhet basin of what is today Bangladesh. For much of the early nineteenth century the hills remained outside direct British administration, partly because of the serious malarial risk the area posed to outsiders and partly because of periodic Garo raids on plains villages, which the colonial administration sought to contain rather than to govern directly (Barpujari, 1986). It was only in 1867 — the same year in which the first Garo Christian congregation was founded at Rajasimla — that the British established a permanent administrative headquarters at Tura, primarily to bring the raiding under control. The near-simultaneous opening of the hills to direct administration and to sustained missionary contact was not coincidental: colonial administrators and American Baptist missionaries were, in this period, often mutually dependent, the former providing physical security and the latter providing schooling, medical care and a channel of communication with hill communities that the administration itself lacked.

Garo Society and the Structure of Matrilineal Kinship

Garo social organisation is built on a system of matrilineal descent that predates, and has in large part outlasted, the coming of Christianity. Garo society is divided into two exogamous moieties, or *chatchi*, each composed of a number of clans, or *machong*; descent, clan membership and the inheritance of property pass through women, and a person is required to marry into the opposite *chatchi* from their own (Marak, J. L. R., 1986). Marriage between a man and his mother's brother's daughter is the most widely favoured form of alliance, and residence after marriage is *uxorilocal*, with the husband moving into his wife's household; his continuing tie to his own *machong*, and his relationship to his wife's *machong*, are given the specific kinship terms *gachi* and *akim* respectively (Burling, 1963). This kinship structure, elaborated further below in relation to its persistence under Christianity, forms the backdrop against which the advent of a patriarchal, congregational Protestant faith must be understood: Garo Christianity was received into, and has continued to operate within, a social structure that Christian mission did not fundamentally alter.

Pre-Christian Garo Religious Life: The Songsarek Worldview

Before the advent of Christianity, Garo religious life centred on Songsarek, an animistic and agrarian belief system organised around a hierarchy of spirits preserved chiefly through oral literature. At its apex stood Tatara Rabuga (also invoked as Dakgipa Rugipa), a supreme creator deity described in oral tradition as too exalted to be approached directly; below him, subordinate spirits carried out specific responsibilities — Misi Saljong, the spirit of the sun, crops and fertility, Susime, the spirit of wealth, and Goera, a thunder deity of martial strength — received the greater share of everyday ritual attention (Marak, D. C., 2024, pp. 1–4). Other spirits, including Gaera, associated with strength and the thunderbolt, and various ogres and biting spirits (*mite*), populated the Songsarek cosmos. Propitiation of these spirits typically involved animal sacrifice and offerings of rice beer, practices concentrated above all in the post-harvest Wangala festival dedicated to Misi Saljong (Marak, D. C., 2024, pp. 1–4).

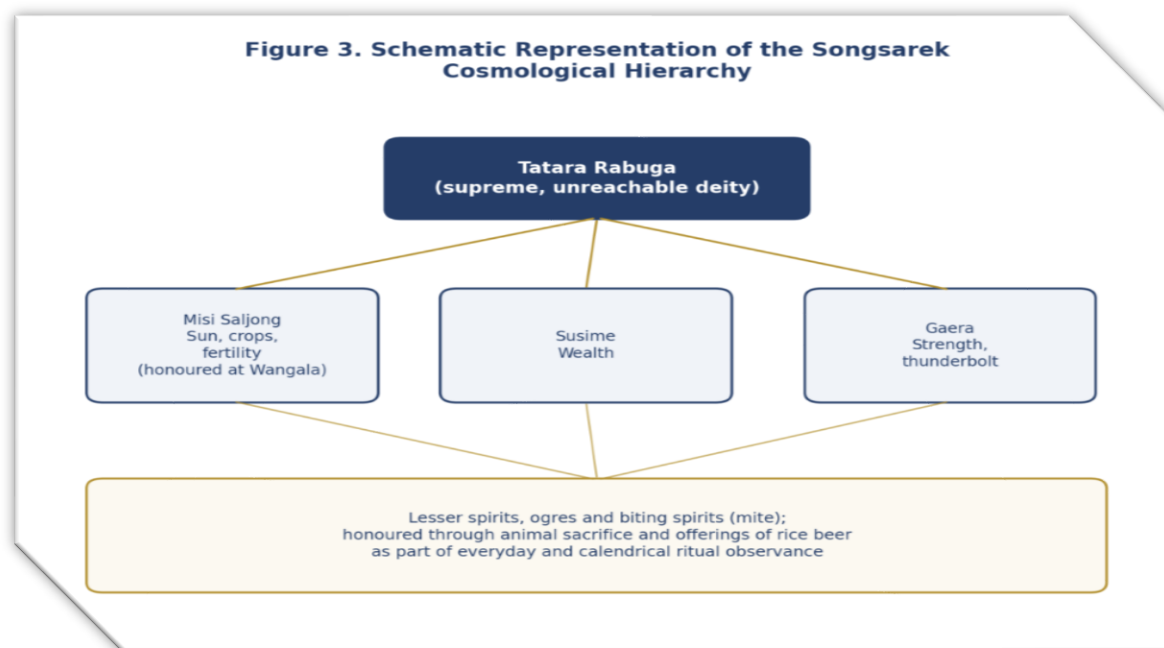


Figure 1. Schematic representation of the Songsarek cosmological hierarchy.

Diagram prepared by the author from the documentary descriptions cited above; not a reproduction of any single source.

Contemporary field-based accounts of Songsarek observance describe a religious culture that, prior to conversion, permeated the whole of Garo social life rather than being confined to occasional ritual occasions, and note that Songsarek elders have historically shown little hostility toward Christian conversion among younger relatives, tolerating individual religious choice even while lamenting the decline of ancestral custom (Mazumdar & Mahanta, 2021). This tolerance of religious plurality within Garo families, evident already in the earliest phase of conversion, helps to explain the relatively low level of intra-communal conflict that accompanied a demographic transformation as complete as the one traced in this paper.

The Coming of the Mission to Assam

The mission that would eventually reach the Garo did not originate in the Garo Hills themselves but on the Assam plains, and its background lies in a decision taken more than two decades before Omed and Ramke Watre Momin's baptism. Captain Francis Jenkins, the colonial political agent and commissioner for Assam, first approached the Serampore Baptists in 1834 seeking missionaries to help pacify and administer the frontier tribes; finding that response unsatisfactory, he was advised to approach the American Baptists then working among the Shan in Burma, and duly sent an official invitation to the Burma Mission in early 1835 — a decision driven, on the colonial side, chiefly by considerations of frontier security rather than by evangelistic sympathy (Daimari et al., 2025, pp. 23–42). Two American Baptist missionaries, the linguist Nathan Brown and the printer Oliver T. Cutter, arrived with their families at Sadiya in north-eastern Assam in 1836, with the initial intention of using Assam only as a route toward the Shan country of northern Burma and southern China; when that plan proved impracticable, the mission's American board accepted a permanent Brahmaputra valley field instead. Miles Bronson, who would later baptise Omed and Ramke, joined the Assam mission a few years afterward, moving from Sadiya to Jaipur and eventually to Sibsagar. From these early stations the missionaries combined preaching with the establishment of schools and the production of vernacular-language books — an early instance of the pattern, repeated later among the Garo, in which mission activity produced consequential linguistic and educational effects independent of the number of converts it initially achieved. A separate, less-documented thread of missionary contact is also associated with the Garo Hills specifically: one historical account credits David Scott, an early political

agent on the North-East Frontier, with having invited the English Baptist Missionary Society to the Garo Hills, leading to the despatch of the missionaries James Rae and Robinson Williams there in 1867, the same year in which the Rajasimla congregation was independently founded through Omed and Ramke's own preaching (Daimari et al., 2025, pp. 23–42).

The Advent of Christianity Among the Garo, 1863–1868

Garo Baptist tradition places the advent of Christianity among the Garo in 1863, when two Garo men, Omed Watre Momin and his nephew Ramke Watre Momin, were baptised by the Reverend Miles Bronson at Guwahati; a near-contemporary missionary account from 1878 corroborates a baptism date in February of that year (Barpujari, 1986). British administrators, notably David Scott's successors in the frontier administration, are also credited in local historical memory with having encouraged the earliest contact between the hills and the mission, though the initiative to be baptised, and to return and preach among their own people, was the two men's own (Barpujari, 1986). Returning to their community, Omed and Ramke began preaching among the Garo, and their efforts culminated in the establishment of the first Garo Christian congregation at Rajasimla in North Garo Hills; the congregation's own institutional history dates its founding precisely to 14 April 1867, while other accounts give a founding date in early April of the same year — a minor discrepancy that does not affect the wider chronology (Sangma, 1987).

The Rajasimla congregation moved quickly from receiving the faith to propagating it. On 20 February 1868, less than a year after its founding, the church commissioned three of its own members to carry the gospel further into Garo country: Sakhen (also recorded as Chakin) and Possalu were sent out as colporteurs at a stipend of eight rupees each, and Ramsing, formerly a police head constable, was engaged as a Bible reader and colporteur at ten rupees a month, the whole arrangement costing the young congregation twenty-six rupees monthly — a modest but telling indication of how quickly an indigenously founded congregation began generating its own indigenous missionary personnel (Sangma, 1987).

Figure 2. Schematic Map of Key Sites in the Advent and Early Consolidation of Garo Christianity (not to scale)

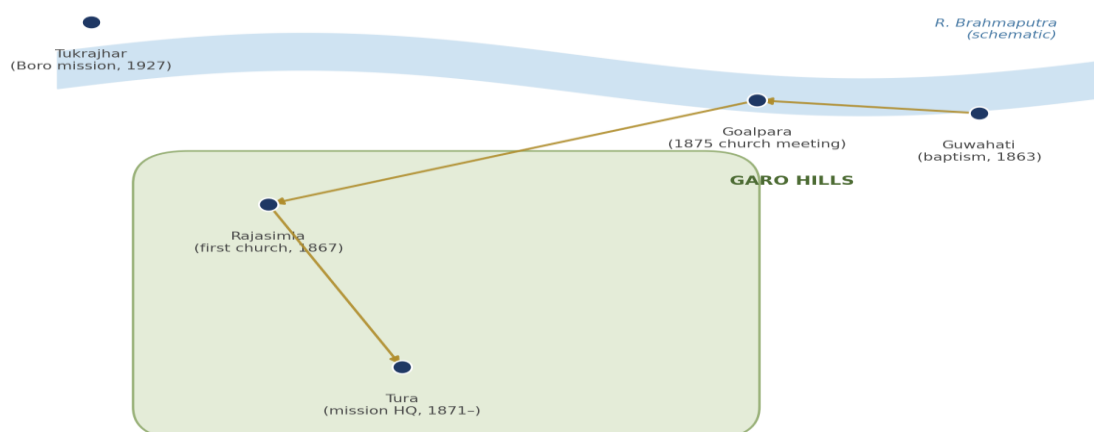


Figure 2. Schematic map of the principal sites in the advent and early institutional consolidation of Garo Christianity.

Diagram prepared by the author from the documentary sources cited in this section; positions and distances are indicative only and not drawn to scale.

From Rajasimla to Tura: Building a Permanent Mission Station, 1868–1878

The consolidation of a permanent mission presence took a further decade after the Rajasimla conversions. In March 1868 the American Baptist missionary Issachar Jay Stoddard, a co-worker of Bronson stationed at Nowgong, conceived the idea of establishing a mission centre at Tura during a visit to the area, but the local Assistant Commissioner, Lieutenant J. Williamson, judged the political situation in the newly opened hills too unstable to permit an immediate move (Barpujari, 1986). Full British administrative control over the Garo Hills was established only in 1872–73, after which conditions for missionary settlement improved considerably. In January 1871, Bronson, Stoddard and a colleague named Comfort visited Tura and selected a site for a future mission headquarters. Toward the end of 1874, two newly arrived missionaries, the Reverend Marcus Clark Mason and the Reverend Elnathan Gooding Phillips, both graduates of Colgate University, reached Goalpara and were received by the Reverend Thomas J. Keith; the two travelled up to Tura on their first visit in September 1875 and selected a further site for the mission's permanent headquarters. A formal mission station was established at Tura in 1878, becoming from that point the administrative and educational centre of the entire Garo mission.

Organisation of the Garo Baptist Association and Convention

Alongside this physical consolidation at Tura, the scattered Garo congregations that had grown out of Rajasimla moved toward formal association. On 3 April 1875, Garo Christians gathered in the chapel at Goalpara, where forty-three delegates were enrolled representing eight churches that had responded to the call by letter; articles of association were read and adopted at the meeting, marking the beginning of an organised Garo Baptist body (Downs, 1983). The Garo Baptist Convention itself traces its formal origin to 1874, with establishment as a constituted body in 1881 and its permanent headquarters at Tura (Sangma, 1987). Later denominational statistics allow the scale of this growth to be tracked over time: a report to the Council of Baptist Churches in North East India covering the period up to 2003 recorded 2,246 constituent Garo Baptist churches, 199,680 communicant members, a further 4,001 non-communicant members and 74,408 unbaptised children, organised into ten regional associations (locally termed Krimas) together with two extension centres among Garo congregations settled in the Khasi Hills (Garo Baptist Convention, 2003). Reporting on the Convention's sesquicentennial (150th-anniversary) jubilee celebrations held at Bethel A.bri in February 2024, the Convention gave its current membership as over 2,600 constituent churches, including 309 designated mother churches, with nearly 400,000 baptised members and a further 200,000 unbaptised adherents — continued substantial growth on the 2003 figures and confirmation of the Convention's position as by a wide margin the largest Christian body among the Garo (Garo Baptist Convention, 2024).

Figure 4. Documented Growth of the Garo Baptist Convention, 2003 to the 2024 Sesquicentennial Report

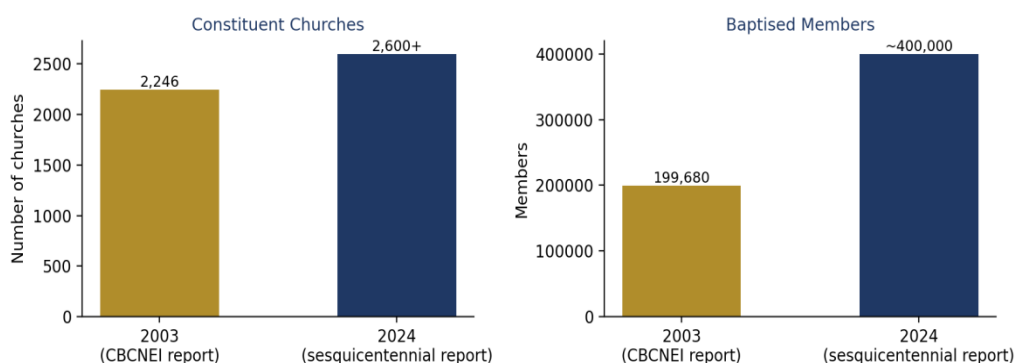


Figure 3. Documented growth in the number of constituent churches and reported membership of the Garo Baptist Convention, from a 2003 denominational report to the 2024 sesquicentennial report.

Chart prepared by the author from the figures reported in the sources cited above.

Education, Literacy and Vernacular Scripture

Mission education for Garo girls was proposed almost as early as the mission itself: Bronson mentioned the need for such a school as early as 1868, and his colleague Stoddard subsequently wrote of a girls' school operating at Rajasimla. A dedicated boarding school for Garo girls was opened at Goalpara in 1874 by Mrs Keith, and when Mason and Phillips arrived they specifically requested that the mission's Women's Society send a missionary to establish a comparable institution among the Garo themselves. Marian Russell arrived at Tura in 1879 for this purpose, and in 1883 built a school of bamboo construction at Nishangram, to which thirty-eight girls, many of them already grown women, came for instruction (Sangma, n.d.-a). That institution was formally reconstituted at Tura in 1920 as what is today the Christian Girls' Higher Secondary School — the oldest school in the Garo Hills and among the oldest in Meghalaya as a whole, which marked its centenary in February 2020; its last American missionary principal, Zelda Bate, was succeeded by the school's first Garo principal, Graciefields K. Marak, and the school today teaches Wangala dance as part of its curriculum, a small but telling indication of the accommodation reached between mission-founded institutions and indigenous Garo culture.

Literacy and vernacular scripture translation proceeded alongside formal schooling. Missionaries reduced the previously unwritten Garo language to the Roman script, and by the early twentieth century this had produced a sustained vernacular literature: the Garo New Testament, titled *Niam Gita*, was translated with the assistance of native Garo collaborators by missionaries of the American Baptist Missionary Union and published in Calcutta by the Bible Translation Society, an auxiliary of the Baptist Missionary Society, in 1912, from an original imprint dated 1909 (Sangma, n.d.-b). Theological education for a native Garo ministry followed in 1919, when the English Baptist minister Frederick W. Harding, who had arrived at Tura shortly after his ordination in 1907, founded the A'chik Theological College; the institution was later renamed the Harding Theological College in his honour and continues today to be operated by the Garo Baptist Convention (Sangma, 1987). The first formally organised school within the town of Tura itself opened in 1920, consistent with the founding date of the Christian Girls' Higher Secondary School, and in the century since Tura has grown into the principal educational hub of the Garo Hills (Barpujari, 1986).

Indigenous Agency and Native Evangelism

Garo agency in the spread of Christianity was not confined to the initial advent at Rajasimla, nor even to the colporteurs Sakhen, Possalu and Ramsing whom the Rajasimla congregation sent out in 1868. Contemporary missionary reporting on the wider Assam mission, of which the Garo work formed a part, recorded that by the late 1870s the mission's Assam field already counted eleven ordained native preachers alongside its six resident foreign missionaries, and a native Christian community exceeding 4,500 persons with 1,933 communicants — figures that make plain how heavily the mission had come, within a generation, to depend on indigenous personnel for its day-to-day operation rather than on missionaries sent from abroad (Barpujari, 1986). Garo Christian agency extended, moreover, beyond the Garo Hills themselves. Between 1924 and 1928 the American Baptist missionary A. J. Tuttle was in charge of the Goalpara district churches, and in 1927 he despatched a Garo preacher, Uman (also recorded Umon) K. Marak, to Tukrajhar to work among the Boro people; under Marak's leadership the Goalpara Boro Baptist Church Union was established that same year, and in 1930 he built its headquarters and a mission compound at Tukrajhar before finally leaving the field in December 1932 after five years of missionary work — the institutional ancestor of today's Boro Baptist Church Association (Daimari et al., 2025, pp. 23–42). That a Garo Christian became, within a generation of his own community's conversion, a missionary evangelist to a neighbouring tribal people underscores the extent to which the Garo case involved active indigenous participation in the mission enterprise rather than passive reception of an externally imposed religion.

Catholic Mission and Denominational Pluralism

Baptist Christianity remained overwhelmingly dominant among the Garo, but was not the only Christian tradition to reach the hills, and its Catholic counterpart in particular followed a markedly slower and more cautious institutional path. Although Christianity had taken root in the Garo Hills as

early as 1867, organised Catholic evangelisation began only in 1933. Isolated Catholic contact preceded that date by two decades: Father Rudolf Fontaine, a Salvatorian priest resident in Guwahati, became the first Catholic priest to visit Garo territory in 1913; a Jesuit, Father Carberry, visited the village of Laskarpara in 1921; and the Salesian Father Gil toured the hills in 1923, followed in subsequent years by Fathers Piasecki and Marmol, who visited annually via the Baghmara route from Mymensingh (Karotemprel, 1990). In 1931 Monsignor L. Mathias, then prefect apostolic of Assam, appointed Fathers Archemedes Pianazzi and Louis Rocca to work specifically among the Garo; barred initially from residing within the hills, the two priests were based at Dhubri from 1932 until permission was granted in 1933 to open a permanent Catholic mission at Tura, organised with the assistance of two local Garo laymen, Jobang D. Marak and Nagen Diengdoh (Karotemprel, 1990). What began as a single mission station at Tura in 1933 had, by 2022, grown into a full ecclesiastical diocese covering a territory with a total population of some 1.19 million across several ethnic communities — Garo, Rabha, Koch and Hajong among them — served in Garo, Rabha, Assamese, Khasi, Bengali and English (Karotemprel, 1990).

Elsewhere in the wider Garo community, the first recorded Catholic conversion occurred as early as 1910, in territory that today lies within Bangladesh; Garo commentators generally describe Catholic missionary practice as having sought greater accommodation of indigenous song, dance and communal custom than the harder line taken by early Protestant missionaries, who more often sought to suppress the traditional dance, singing and ritual drinking of rice beer associated with Songsarek observance (Karotemprel, 1990). A Seventh-day Adventist mission reached the Garo Hills in 1954, and by the later twentieth century the Church of North India (successor to the Anglican mission in the region), various Pentecostal bodies, and indigenous denominations such as the Church of God, founded in Meghalaya in 1902, had also established a presence in and around the hills (Snaitang, 1993). Garo Christian identity today is accordingly denominationally plural even as it remains overwhelmingly Baptist in its historical roots and institutional weight.

Religious Transformation and Demographic Change

The scale of religious change across Meghalaya as a whole, of which the Garo transformation forms the larger part, can be tracked through successive national censuses. The Christian share of Meghalaya's population rose from 70.25 per cent (1,628,986 persons) at the 2001 census to 74.59 per cent (2,213,027 persons) at the 2011 census, making Meghalaya one of only three Indian states with a Christian-majority population (Bajaj, 2016).

Figure 5. Christian Population Share in Meghalaya, Census 2001 and 2011

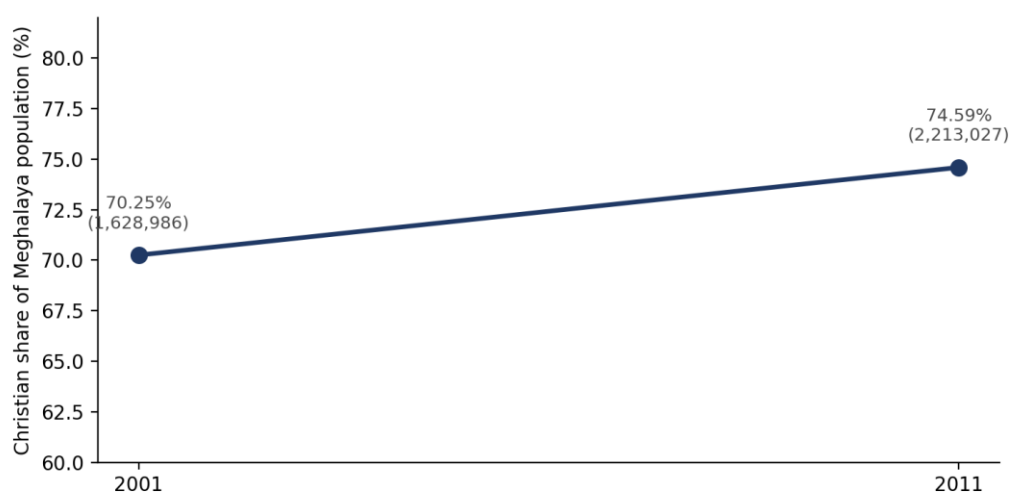


Figure 4. Christian population share of Meghalaya, Census of India, 2001 and 2011.

Chart prepared by the author from Census of India figures as reported in the source cited above.

Cultural Continuity: Songsarek Survival and the Wangala Festival

Religious change among the Garo has not been total. Small Songsarek communities persist, particularly in the more interior villages of the Garo Hills away from the plains; a revivalist body, Rishi Jilma, founded at Dadenggiri in 2003 by a group of concerned Garo youths, now works to safeguard Songsarek ritual, belief and festival observance across several hundred villages (Ministry of Tribal Affairs). More strikingly, the Wangala harvest festival — the central ritual expression of Songsarek devotion to Misi Saljong — has been retained as a marker of Garo ethnic identity even among the Christian majority (Marak & Thirumurugan, 2021). Its most visible modern form, the state-supported “Hundred Drums Wangala Festival,” was first organised at Asanang near Tura on 6 and 7 December 1976 by a group of Garo intellectuals concerned at the decline of traditional practice, and has been held annually since, drawing performers, Christian and Songsarek alike, from across the Garo Hills, Assam, Bangladesh and Karbi Anglong (Marak & Thirumurugan, 2021). Christian Garo families who no longer perform the animal sacrifices and spirit propitiations proper to Songsarek Wangala nonetheless frequently participate in its communal, musical and culinary dimensions, treating the festival as an expression of Garo ethnicity distinct from strictly religious observance (Marak, D. C., 2024, pp. 1–4).

The matrilineal system of inheritance and clan affiliation described earlier in this review has, likewise, continued largely undisturbed by religious conversion, remaining the organising principle of Garo domestic and property life irrespective of a family's Christian or Songsarek affiliation (Marak, J. L. R., 1986). Figure 5, reproduced below for ease of reference alongside the discussion that follows, summarises this kinship structure schematically.

Figure 6. Schematic Diagram of Garo Matrilineal Kinship (machong, chatchi and akim)

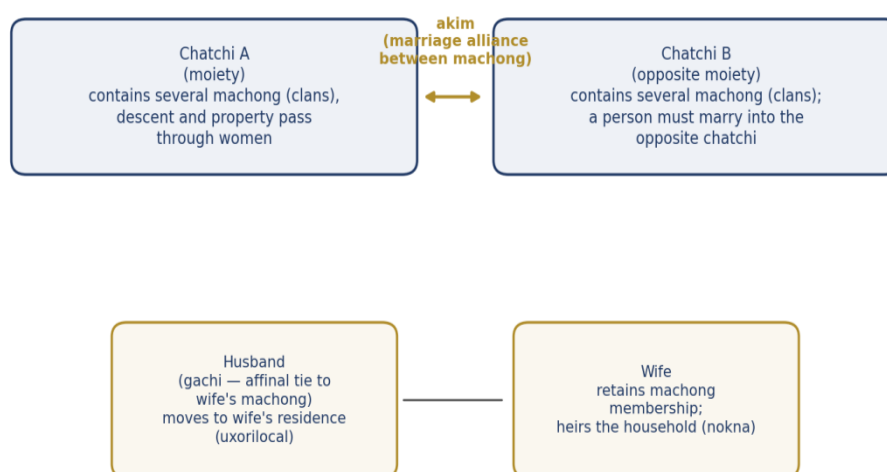


Figure 5. Schematic diagram of Garo matrilineal kinship (machong, chatchi and akim), summarising the descriptions cited above.

Diagram prepared by the author from the documentary sources cited in this section.

Comparative Perspective: Garo Christianity and the Khasi Hills Mission

The Garo case gains sharper definition when set against the contemporaneous, but institutionally quite different, evangelisation of the neighbouring Khasi Hills. An earlier, short-lived Serampore Baptist effort in the wider region — the Bengali convert preacher Krishna Pal's eight months of unaccompanied preaching at Pandua, at the foot of the Khasi Hills, in 1816 — left no lasting mission; it was instead the Welsh Presbyterian Mission (Welsh Calvinistic Methodists), beginning permanent work at Cherrapunji (Sohra) in 1841 under the Reverend and Mrs Thomas Jones, that became from the 1840s the dominant Christian tradition among the Khasi, much as the American Baptists — whose own

field, as shown above, grew out of an 1835 invitation extended to missionaries working among the Shan of Burma rather than any design specific to the Khasi-Garo region — became dominant among the Garo (James, pp. 4–9). The result, within a single present-day state, is two adjoining hill peoples converted within a broadly similar colonial-era timeframe but by entirely different missionary societies, producing two distinct denominational majorities — Presbyterian among the Khasi, Baptist among the Garo — that owe as much to which mission society happened to have the resources and inclination to take up a given field as to any uniform colonial religious policy. This comparison lends support to the paper's broader argument that the particulars of Garo Christianity — its Baptist character, its origin in Garo rather than missionary initiative, its later Catholic and Adventist additions — are the product of a specific, contingent and substantially indigenous history rather than an instance of a single, uniform “colonial Christianity” imposed on the hill peoples of the region as a whole.

Case Studies

The following brief profiles illustrate, at the level of individual institutions, the processes traced in the preceding sections: the indigenous origin of the faith, its consolidation at a permanent mission headquarters, its investment in female education, and the distinct and later path taken by the Catholic mission.



Rajasimla First Garo Church

Figure 6. Rajasimla First Garo Church, North Garo Hills, Meghalaya

Rajasimla — the First Garo Church

Rajasimla, a small town in present-day North Garo Hills, is where Omed and Ramke Watre Momin returned after their baptism to found, on 14 April 1867, the first Garo Christian congregation. Within a year the congregation had itself commissioned three native colporteurs to extend the faith further into Garo country. Rajasimla continues to be marked in Garo Baptist memory as the site where “the seeds of Christianity were planted,” and its 150th anniversary was formally observed in 2018 with the participation of Christian communities from across the Garo Hills (James, pp. 4–9).



Tura Baptist Church

Figure 7. Tura Baptist Church and the historic Baptist mission centre at Tura, Meghalaya

Tura Baptist Church and the Tura Mission Station

What is today Tura Baptist Church traces its institutional lineage to Issachar Jay Stoddard's 1868 proposal for a mission centre at Tura, the site selection of 1871, and the formal establishment of the station in 1878. As the headquarters of the American Baptist Mission's Garo field and, subsequently, of the Garo Baptist Convention, Tura became the administrative, educational and publishing centre for the entire Garo mission, hosting in time the Harding Theological College and a cluster of mission schools that made the town, in the words of one local institutional history, the effective “mother church” community of Garo Baptist Christianity (Sangma, 1987).

Christian Girls’ Higher Secondary School, Tura

Tracing its origins to Mrs Keith's 1874 boarding school for Garo girls at Goalpara and to Marian Russell's 1879 arrival at Tura for the specific purpose of establishing comparable education among the Garo themselves, the school that opened in bamboo construction at Nishangram in 1883 was formally reconstituted at Tura in 1920. It remains the oldest school in the Garo Hills, marked its centenary in 2020, and today teaches Wangala dance as part of its curriculum a concrete institutional instance of the accommodation between mission education and indigenous Garo culture examined later in this paper.



Christian Girls’ Higher Secondary School, Tura

Figure 8. Christian Girls’ Higher Secondary School, Tura, Meghalaya.

The Catholic Mission at Tura and the Diocese of Tura

Opened in 1933 by the Salesian Fathers Pianazzi and Rocca after two decades of occasional visits by other priests, the Catholic mission at Tura developed, over the following century, into the Diocese of Tura, serving by 2022 a diocesan population of roughly 1.19 million people across several ethnic communities. Its slower, later-arriving institutional history — beginning fully six decades after the Baptist advent at Rajasimla — illustrates the denominational pluralism examined above, and its reliance from an early stage on local Garo lay assistance, in the persons of Jobang D. Marak and Nagen Diengdoh, echoes the pattern of indigenous participation already visible in the Baptist mission's own history (Karotemprel, 1990).

Research Gap

Taken together, the existing literature — the general regional histories of Downs and Snaitang, the detailed institutional record assembled by Milton S. Sangma, denominational and institutional histories maintained by the Garo Baptist Convention, Tura Baptist Church, the Christian Girls' Higher Secondary School and the Diocese of Tura, and scattered ethnographic accounts of contemporary Garo religious life — provides substantial raw material for a history of Christianity among the Garo, but comparatively little of it is organised around the specific question of indigenous agency in the advent and spread of the faith, around the institutional pathway connecting Rajasimla to Tura, or around the mechanisms of cultural continuity that have allowed Songsarek and matrilineal elements to persist within an overwhelmingly Christian society. This paper attempts a synthetic, exploratory treatment of the Garo case addressed to that gap.

Objectives of the Study

1. To trace the documented historical trajectory of the advent of Christianity among the Garo, from its background in the American Baptist mission to Assam through the baptism and evangelism of Omed and Ramke Watre Momin.
2. To examine the role of indigenous evangelists — the Rajasimla colporteurs, the wider corps of native preachers, and Garo missionaries such as Uman K. Marak — in the origin and extension of the faith.
3. To reconstruct the institutional pathway from the first Rajasimla congregation to the permanent mission station at Tura, the Garo Baptist Convention, mission education, vernacular literacy and Bible translation.
4. To examine the later arrival of Catholic, Seventh-day Adventist and other denominations among the Garo, and the differing accommodations each reached with indigenous custom.
5. To identify continuities and points of negotiation between Songsarek tradition and Christian practice, with particular reference to the Wangala festival and the matrilineal social system.
6. To situate the Garo case comparatively, including against the Welsh Presbyterian mission among the neighbouring Khasi, within broader frameworks of religious change and indigenous agency in tribal Northeast India.

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative, exploratory design based on documentary and secondary-source review. Primary reliance is placed on the institutional histories of Milton S. Sangma covering American Baptist mission activity, education and vernacular literature in the Garo Hills; the regional church-historical scholarship of Frederick S. Downs and O. L. Snaitang; peer-reviewed journal articles on Garo oral tradition, Wangala and Baptist missionary history in the wider region; institutional histories published by the Garo Baptist Convention, Tura Baptist Church, and the Diocese of Tura; and government and archival records bearing on the administrative and educational history of the Garo Hills. No independent field visit to the Garo Hills was undertaken for this study; the analysis is accordingly confined to published and publicly reported material, cross-checked across sources where more than one account of a given event was available, and minor discrepancies between sources (for instance, in the exact date of the Rajasimla founding) are noted rather than silently resolved.

Thematic Analysis

Data were coded inductively and organised into the following thematic domains, which structure the Results section below:

- i. Missionary Advent and Indigenous Initiative
- ii. Institutional Consolidation: From Rajasimla to Tura and the Garo Baptist Convention
- iii. Education, Literacy and Vernacular Scripture
- iv. Indigenous Agency and Native Evangelism
- v. Denominational Diversification
- vi. Religious Transformation and Demographic Change
- vii. Kinship Continuity and the Wangala Festival
- viii. Documentation and Preservation of Garo Christian Heritage

Six schematic figures — a timeline, a map, a cosmological diagram, two data charts and a kinship diagram — were additionally prepared by the author from the documentary material to aid exposition; these are original diagrams summarising the cited sources and are explicitly not to scale and not photographic records of any site.

RESULTS: THEMATIC ANALYSIS

i. Missionary Advent and Indigenous Initiative

The documentary record consistently identifies the advent of Christianity among the Garo with two named individuals, Omed and Ramke Watre Momin, rather than with a resident missionary figure. Their baptism at Guwahati in 1863 and their subsequent, self-directed preaching among the Garo — culminating in the founding of the Rajasimla congregation in 1867, followed within a year by that congregation's own commissioning of three native colporteurs — establishes the advent of Garo Christianity as, in its origin, an indigenously initiated and indigenously propagated movement that external missionaries and colonial officials assisted and later formalised rather than one they unilaterally introduced.

ii. Institutional Consolidation: From Rajasimla to Tura and the Garo Baptist Convention

Between 1868 and 1878 the American Baptist Mission converted an initially small, indigenously led movement into a durable institutional presence centred on Tura. This required overcoming administrative caution (Lieutenant Williamson's 1868 reluctance to sanction an immediate move), waiting for the extension of full British control over the hills in 1872–73, and a decade of site visits and personnel changes before a permanent station was finally established in 1878. The near-simultaneous 1867 establishment of British administrative headquarters at Tura and the founding of the first Garo church at Rajasimla underlines how closely intertwined colonial administrative penetration and missionary consolidation were in this particular case, even though the initiating conversions themselves preceded and were independent of the missionary station-building that followed. Alongside this physical consolidation, the 1875 Goalpara meeting of forty-three delegates from eight churches marks the point at which scattered Garo congregations began to constitute themselves as a single organised body, a process formalised in the Garo Baptist Convention (dated 1874/1881). Comparison of the 2003 denominational report (2,246 churches, 199,680 communicant members) with the 2024 sesquicentennial report (over 2,600 churches, some 400,000 baptised members) indicates substantial continued institutional growth well into the twenty-first century, from a base that was already, by 2003, one of the largest Baptist bodies in Northeast India.

iii. Education, Literacy and Vernacular Scripture

The results indicate that mission education among the Garo, and in particular the education of Garo girls, was a sustained institutional priority from a very early stage — mentioned already in 1868 and pursued continuously through the 1874 Goalpara school, Marian Russell's 1879 arrival and 1883

bamboo school at Nishangram, to the 1920 formal establishment of what is today the Christian Girls' Higher Secondary School. This educational effort ran in parallel with the reduction of Garo to a Roman-script written language, the 1912 publication of the Garo New Testament, and the 1919 founding of the A'chik (later Harding) Theological College for the training of a native ministry, together constituting a literacy and educational infrastructure whose reach extended well beyond the specifically religious purposes of the mission.

iv. Indigenous Agency and Native Evangelism

Garo agency in the spread of Christianity extended beyond the Garo Hills themselves and beyond the founding generation of Omed and Ramke. The 1868 commissioning of Sakhen, Possalu and Ramsing as paid native colporteurs, the eleven ordained native preachers already active in the wider Assam mission by the late 1870s, and the documented case of Uman K. Marak's evangelism among the Boro people of Goalpara district in the 1920s together indicate that Garo Christians moved rapidly from the status of converts to that of paid, ordained and in some cases cross-tribal missionary agents in their own right.

v. Denominational Diversification

While Baptist Christianity remains numerically and institutionally dominant, the results indicate a denominationally plural religious landscape among the Garo that developed on a markedly different, and considerably later, timetable for each tradition: occasional Catholic contact from 1913, permanent Catholic mission only from 1933, Seventh-day Adventist mission from 1954, and further Anglican/Church of North India and Pentecostal presences developing across the twentieth century. Sources further suggest a genuine difference in missionary strategy toward indigenous custom, with a harder Protestant line against traditional song, dance and rice-beer ritual set against a more accommodating Catholic approach, a variation with implications for how far Songsarek cultural practice has survived within different Christian communities.

vi. Religious Transformation and Demographic Change

Census-based estimates place the Christian share of Meghalaya's population at over seventy per cent by 2001 and approaching seventy-five per cent by 2011, with the Garo tribe among the most thoroughly Christianised communities in the state, against a residual Songsarek population now confined to a small minority concentrated in the more interior parts of the Garo Hills. This demographic transformation, achieved within roughly six generations of the Rajasimla conversions, represents one of the more complete instances of tribal religious change documented in Northeast India.

vii. Kinship Continuity and the Wangala Festival

Notwithstanding this near-total religious transformation, the results point to significant continuity at the level of social structure and festival culture. The Garo matrilineal system of chatchi, machong and akim, and the practice of uxorilocal residence, have persisted largely independent of religious affiliation. The Wangala harvest festival, though rooted in Songsarek devotion to Misi Saljong, has been retained and even institutionally amplified — notably through the state-supported Hundred Drums Wangala Festival at Asanang since 1976 — as a marker of pan-Garo ethnic identity embraced by Christian and Songsarek Garo alike. A small but organised Songsarek revivalist movement, Rishi Jilma, founded in 2003, further indicates that indigenous religious tradition among the Garo persists as an active, if minority, tradition alongside the Christian majority.

viii. Documentation and Preservation of Garo Christian Heritage

The material assembled in this review also points to a documentation gap of some urgency. Much of the primary record of the advent and early consolidation of Garo Christianity — missionary correspondence, station diaries, the minute books of the 1875 Goalpara meeting and its successors, and the early registers of congregations such as Rajasimla and Tura — survives, where it survives at all, in mission and denominational archives that have not been systematically catalogued or digitised, and much of what is available to a study of this kind is instead mediated through denominational commemorative websites, centenary journalism and locally circulated institutional histories rather than



through archivally verified primary sources. The same is true, in an even more acute form, of the Songsarek side of the record: oral tradition concerning Tatara Rabuga, Misi Saljong and the ritual calendar has historically been transmitted without a written literature of its own, and its systematic documentation by scholars only began in the early twentieth century, so that its survival today depends heavily on the continuing vitality of bodies such as Rishi Jilma and on the willingness of Songsarek elders to pass on ritual knowledge to a shrinking pool of younger adherents (Marak, D. C., 2024, pp. 1–4).

A parallel with the heritage-conservation literature on Christian architectural sites elsewhere in South India is instructive here, even though, as argued above, the principal locus of Garo cultural continuity is kinship and festival rather than architecture. Just as the systematic documentation of church inscriptions, burial grounds and mission compounds has been identified as a precondition for an evidence-based account of Christian heritage in regions such as Telangana, a comparable programme of archival consolidation — bringing together Garo Baptist Convention records, Diocese of Tura archives, the surviving correspondence of missionaries such as Bronson, Stoddard, Mason, Phillips and Harding, and oral-historical documentation of Songsarek ritual practice — would substantially strengthen the evidentiary base for any future study of the Garo case. In the absence of such consolidation, accounts of the advent of Garo Christianity, including the present one, remain more heavily dependent on secondary and denominational-commemorative sources than a documentary history of this significance ideally warrants.

CASE STUDY SYNTHESIS

The four case studies presented above — Rajasimla, Tura Baptist Church, the Christian Girls' Higher Secondary School and the Catholic mission at Tura — illustrate these eight thematic domains at the level of individual institutions: an indigenous origin (Rajasimla, Theme i), consolidation into a permanent institutional headquarters (Tura Baptist Church, Theme ii), a sustained investment in female education that has itself accommodated indigenous custom (the Christian Girls' Higher Secondary School, Theme iii), and a distinct, later-arriving, and locally assisted Catholic institutional trajectory (the Diocese of Tura, Theme v) that qualifies any account of Garo Christianity as a single, undifferentiated religious movement.

DISCUSSION

The results support a reading of Garo Christianity as a negotiated, indigenously mediated transformation rather than as a straightforward instance of missionary imposition. The advent narrative itself places Garo actors, Omed and Ramke Watre Momin, at its centre; the Rajasimla congregation's own commissioning of native colporteurs within a year of its founding, the wider corps of ordained native preachers documented in the Assam mission by the 1870s, and the subsequent spread of the faith beyond the Garo Hills through a Garo evangelist, Uman K. Marak, together indicate that Garo Christians rapidly became active agents of religious change rather than its passive objects. This pattern resembles processes documented elsewhere in Christian South Asia, where colonial-era ecclesiastical institutions have been shown, on closer examination, to depend heavily on indigenous initiative, labour and leadership even where missionary and administrative records foreground the roles of foreign personnel.

The institutional pathway from Rajasimla to Tura complicates any simple account of missionary agency as well. The decade-long gap between Stoddard's 1868 proposal and the station's 1878 establishment, and the intervening dependence on colonial administrative control being extended over the hills in 1872–73, indicate that the mission's institutional consolidation was itself contingent on, and to a degree subordinate to, the pace of colonial administrative penetration — a dynamic quite different from the initiating conversions at Rajasimla, which were substantially independent of direct colonial sponsorship. The Garo case thus contains, within a single, tightly documented sequence of events, both a moment of indigenous religious initiative largely outside colonial control and a subsequent moment of institutional consolidation heavily conditioned by it.

At the same time, the Garo case illustrates a distinctive pattern of cultural continuity. Where studies of Christian heritage sites elsewhere in South Asia have emphasised architectural and material hybridity — the adaptation of church buildings to local materials and climatic conditions — the Garo material examined here suggests that the principal site of continuity lies not in built form but in social structure and festival culture: the survival of matrilineal kinship organisation essentially untouched by religious conversion, and the retention, and even public amplification, of the Wangala festival as a marker of ethnic rather than strictly religious identity. This suggests that in societies where religious change proceeds through conversion of belief and ritual practice more than through the wholesale reconstruction of the built environment, cultural continuity may be better sought in kinship and calendrical festival life than in architecture.

The documented divergence between a stricter early Protestant stance toward traditional song, dance and rice-beer ritual and a more accommodating, but considerably later-arriving, Catholic approach also points to the analytical value of disaggregating “Christianity” among the Garo into its constituent denominational traditions, each of which appears to have negotiated the relationship between Songsarek custom and Christian practice somewhat differently and on its own institutional timetable — Baptist from 1863, Catholic in a sustained way only from 1933, Adventist from 1954. The comparison with the Khasi Hills, evangelised on a broadly similar timeline but by an entirely different missionary society, further underlines that the specific denominational character of Garo Christianity owes as much to the contingent history of which mission society took up the field as to any general colonial religious policy applied uniformly across Northeast India.

Finally, the continued, organised presence of Songsarek observance through bodies such as Rishi Jilma indicates that the Garo case should not be read as a completed transition from one religious system to another, but as an ongoing and still-contested field of religious and cultural identity, in which a large Christian majority, a small organised Songsarek minority, and a shared, increasingly secularised festival culture centred on Wangala coexist within a single kinship system that religious change has left largely intact. The documentation gap identified above is not merely a technical limitation on future research; it also bears on how confidently the indigenous-agency thesis advanced in this paper can be generalised. Because so much of the surviving record was itself produced and preserved by mission and denominational institutions rather than by the Rajasimla congregation or its immediate successors independently, the prominence of Omed and Ramke Watre Momin in the sources may partly reflect what missionary record-keepers chose to preserve and commemorate, as well as what actually occurred. This does not undermine the paper's central argument — the specific, dated actions attributed to Omed, Ramke and the Rajasimla colporteurs are too concrete and too consistently corroborated across independent denominational and documentary sources to be dismissed as retrospective invention — but it does counsel some caution in extending the indigenous-agency reading uncritically to every stage of the mission's subsequent institutional history, where foreign missionary personnel and colonial administrative timetables are more clearly determinative, as the decade-long gap between Stoddard's 1868 proposal and the 1878 Tura station illustrates.

CONCLUSION

The advent and expansion of Christianity among the Garo of Meghalaya represents a distinctive chapter in the religious history of Northeast India: a movement that began not with a resident foreign missionary but with the 1863 baptism of two Garo men, Omed and Ramke Watre Momin, and their subsequent evangelism, which culminated in the founding of the first Garo congregation at Rajasimla in 1867, and that was thereafter consolidated, over the following half-century, through a permanent mission station at Tura, an organised native Baptist convention, a substantial investment in female education and vernacular literacy, and the training of a native ministry at the Harding Theological College. Within a further generation, Garo converts were themselves carrying the faith to neighbouring tribal communities, underscoring the depth of indigenous participation in what is too often narrated simply as missionary success. The later, distinct arrival of Catholic, Adventist and other missions further complicates any account of a single, uniform “Garo Christianity,” as does the comparison with the differently denominated Christianity of the neighbouring Khasi Hills. Yet this transformation has not erased the pre-Christian Garo world: the matrilineal kinship system of chatchi, machong and akim

and the Wangala harvest festival persist, the latter now embraced across the Christian–Songsarek divide as an expression of Garo identity, while a small organised Songsarek revival continues alongside the Christian majority. The Garo case, in short, is best understood not as the replacement of one religious system by another but as a negotiated transformation in which indigenous agency, missionary and denominational institution-building, and cultural continuity have each played a constitutive part.

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

This study is a documentary and literature-based exploratory synthesis rather than a primary field investigation; no independent visit to the Garo Hills, interviews with Garo Baptist Convention, Diocese of Tura or Rishi Jilma informants, or examination of mission or diocesan archives were undertaken, and the analysis is accordingly dependent on the accuracy and completeness of the secondary and institutional sources consulted, several of which offer slightly differing dates for the same events (for instance, the exact day of the Rajasimla founding). The six figures included in the paper are original schematic diagrams and charts prepared by the author from the documentary material discussed in the text; they are not photographs, are explicitly not drawn to scale, and should be read as visual summaries of the cited sources rather than as cartographic or ethnographic records. Future research would benefit from archival work in the records of the Garo Baptist Convention, the Diocese of Tura and the American Baptist Mission, oral-historical work among contemporary Songsarek and Rishi Jilma communities, and comparative study of the differing accommodations reached between Songsarek custom and Baptist, Catholic and Pentecostal Christianity respectively, as well as from original photographic documentation of the sites discussed here, none of which could be undertaken within the scope of the present literature-based study.

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