

From Rituals to Stage: The Journey of *A·chik* Folk Theatre

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Abstract

The *A·chiks* are one of the major tribes of Meghalaya and is basically an oral community. Though the *A·chiks* are not aware of the concept of theatre, the elements of folk theatre are to be found in their various performances, from rituals to the present day stage plays. The rituals associated with traditional religion of the *A·chiks*, that is *Songsarek* comprise sacrifices of animals, libation and chanting of prayers and myths. They also have a rich repository of epic narrations known as *Katta Agana* and folk songs of various kinds. Dance, comprising ritual dances, warrior dances and community dances form part of rituals and festivals of the *A·chik* community. Today majority of *A·chiks* have become Christians and it is seen that theatrical elements have made inroads into Christian devotion in the forms of *kirtans*, *songkristans*, etc. In addition to these, folk plays were performed by the community as early as 1937-38. The seasonal plays have allowed themselves to grow and be influenced by the performances of neighbouring states and communities. Today *A·chik* theatre has arrived in the true sense in the forms of stage-plays like *A·chik A·song* and *Du·kon*.

Keywords: *A·chik*, oral performance, dance, *kirtan*, plays.

The *A·chiks* or the *Garos* are one of the three major indigenous tribes of Meghalaya. The tribe is distributed in the five districts of Garo Hills - North, East, South, West and South West - that lie in the West of the state of Meghalaya, bordering Assam and Bangladesh. *A·chik* (Garo) population is also found in certain pockets of Assam – in Darrang, Lakhimpur, Sibsagar and Karbi Anglong districts and in the areas around Guwahati along the north and south banks of the Brahmaputra, at Dimapur in Nagaland, and in North Bengal, Tripura and Bangladesh.

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***A·chiks* and Oral Tradition**

The *A·chik* community is basically an oral community. William Carey in his *The Garo Jungle Book* writes that it can be said of the *A·chiks* that “Their language is their history”. This oral tradition is a veritable vehicle for passing on historical accounts, myths, tales told both in prose and verse, folk songs, incantations, epic narrations, lamentations, lullabies, sayings, riddles, proverbs, raillery, games, etc. to succeeding generations.

The oral tradition, along with rituals, ceremonies and festivals, has always attracted people’s participation. Llewellyn R. Marak, a noted *A·chik* author, in the *Aganchengani* (Prologue) to his play *Metongbolni Gittim*, recalls the old story-telling days. There was a time when *A·chiks* in the villages had to travel days to reach the weekly markets. They used to set up temporary sheds, cook and spend the long evenings telling stories. Stories were also narrated while in the *jhum*-fields, on the joyous occasions of house-warming and when keeping watch over the dead. L.R. Marak says that he had sat among people on such occasions and picked up the strands of his stories directly from the mouth of the people. Here it is appropriate to refer to what Zarrili and others wrote with reference to ‘Oral Performance’ in *Theatre Histories: An Introduction*:

Primary oral cultures are “episodic” locations of listening, hearing, and voicing where “mythic” worlds are created. The hearer does not attempt to analyse, understand or interpret what is heard, but experiences and absorbs the musicality of the voice – its timbre, tone, amplitude, pitch, resonance, vibration, and shape as the voice moves between sounding and silence(s) – the pauses of varying lengths that help mark, set off, and/or accentuate what is voiced. Reception is perception, not “meaning” (21).

Thus in primary oral cultures, the perceptions and actions fundamental to early human survival remain central to things that are known and how they are known. What is known is learned through direct participation or apprenticeship rather than through abstract study. In primary oral cultures human beings are the only potential repository for traditional oral narratives, myths, tales, proverbs, classificatory names and information on how to perform a ritual, tell or sing a monumental epic story.

Viola S. B. Sangma, in her essay “Garo Folk Literature” in *Hill Societies: Their Modernisation* (Milton S. Sangma ed. 1995: 156), has

stated that the rich oral tradition of the *Garos* passed on from generation to generation. Narrations of myths, legends, songs and secular chanting were done by a select few who used to perform for groups in various informal and formal gatherings.

A·chiks in general are not aware of the concept of theatre. For many of them theatre stands for well-structured auditoriums where dramas are staged. Hence it may come as a surprise to many *A·chiks* to realize that they are living in the midst of theatre. Ngugi Wa Thiong'o stated that "Theatre is not a building. People make theatre. Their life is the very stuff of drama." Today a good number of *A·chiks* are Christians. However, the age-old indigenous religion, that is *Songsarek*, is still practiced by a large number of those who are non-Christians and the rituals associated with farming and cultivation of crops are, therefore, still prevalent. Thus the *A·chik* Folk Theatre is associated with their old religion that still exists.

In his book *Folk Theatre: Beyond Boundaries* Bharat Bhusan Mohanty says that the folk theatre of Odisha can be divided into three different types. They are: (i) Song-specific, (ii) Dance-specific and (iii) Combination of both song and dance along with dialogues and acting. He also wrote that the folk theatre of Assam can be broadly divided into three different types: (i) Dance and Song Specific, (ii) Quasi-theatre, and (iii) Yatra. Similarly, *A·chik* theatre can be divided into (i) Prayer and incantations-oriented, (ii) Song-oriented, (iii) Narration-oriented, (iv) Dirge-oriented, (v) Dance-oriented, (vi) Combination of both song and dance along with dialogues and acting and (vii) Christian Devotional forms.

(i) Prayer-Oriented A·chik Theatre

Prayer-oriented *A·chik* theatre comprises various forms of songs and prayers connected with various occasions. This category constitutes incantations and hymns connected with *jhum* cultivation, prayers chanted during other rituals, hymn at the time of inaugurating a house, etc. Incantations and prayers are passed on orally by the *A·chiks*. *A·chik* priests employ particular gestures, tone of voice, style of language, speed of delivery for incantations. This is what makes the hearers distinguish incantations from other utterances.

(ii) Song-oriented *A·chik* Theatre

The *A·chik* folk songs are light-hearted lyrics, sung to tease each other during festivals and other gatherings. They comprise of a large number of songs such as *Ahaoea*, *Ajea*, *Araowaka*, *Boel Ring-a*, *Chera Sola*, *Dimdimdimchong*, *Dime Ring-a*, *Doroa* or *Doro Ra-a*, *Gonda Doka*, *Gosai Ring-a*, *Harara*, *Him Angai!*, *Howa Sul* or *Ring-a*, *Kore Doka* or *Kore Ring-a*, *Ku-rama Sala*, *Nanggorere Goserong*, *Ohomai Ring-a*, *Rere Ring-a*, *Serejing*, *Sonatchi Sul*, *Tantanni Sul*, and *Bi-sa Mumua/Dingdinga* or Lullabies. Two of the most popular folk songs among the *A·chiks* are *Dimdim dimchong* and *Nanggorere Goserong*. They are sung on many occasions with a lot of improvisations in the stanzas. A few of the stanzas are shown below:

Dimdim Dimchong Dadichong

<i>A·chikku</i> (<i>Garo</i> language)	English
<i>Dimdim dimchong dadichong</i> <i>Dama dokato</i> <i>Nomil pante mesaa</i> <i>An·ching wangalao.</i> <i>Dama bangsi sikana</i> <i>An·ching mesana.</i>	<i>Dimdim Dimchong Dadichong</i> (Sound of drum beats) When thus drum beats start Maidens and young men dance In our <i>Wangala</i> festival To the beat of drums and tune of flutes Let us dance heartily.
<i>Kotip gital ra-ako kae nipana</i> <i>Bilsi gisep changsasan an·senge</i> <i>nina.</i>	Let me try the new <i>pagri</i> on my head And dance at least once during the year.
<i>Matchu chara milako jengo gatako,</i> <i>Cha-e mesa an·sengna an·ching</i> <i>wangalao.</i> ⁷	We shall have a feast of the fattened ox And dance and make merry in our <i>Wangala</i> .

Nanggorere Goserong

<i>A·chikku</i> (<i>Garo</i> language)	English
<i>Nanggorere Goserong!</i>	It is so, oh yes it is so!

<i>O·e nanggo Goserong!</i>	It is truly so!
<i>Pante: A·baoni jalikko, maina minchichotata, Nomil nambegipako da·nang mikchi ong·ata.</i>	Boy: Why do you allow the chilly in the jhum-field to over ripe? Alas, you have allowed the lovely damsel to shed tears.
<i>Metra: Me·gong baljok an·sengjok, a·rak sokjok an·sengjok.</i>	Girl: <i>Me·gong</i> has blossomed, dry season has come and brought cheer,
<i>Chame nang·ko niko, aiao ka·a tim·timjok.⁸</i>	The moment I beheld you darling, my heart began to flutter.

(iii) Narration-oriented *A·chik* Theatre

Epic story narration is known as *Katta Agana* or *Katta Doka* and among the *A·chiks* the narrator is known as *Katta Agangipa*. It is not a prosaic narration but a poetic chanting of the mighty deeds and grand life lived by heroes like *Dikki*, *Bandi*, and heroines like *Giting* and *Sore*. *Katta Agana* is of different types and each type is marked by a specific tone and voice modulation. Different varieties of *Katta Agana* are: *Dokkotchua*, *Ring·badria*, *Katchi Doka* or *Katchi Ring·a*, *Dokmandea* or *A·beng Katta*, *Ruga Katta*, *A·we Katta*, *Saling Ring·a* or *Chisak Katta* and *Ring·dikgila*. Referring to the epic songs above, Dewansing Rongmitu states in his book *The Epic Lore of the Garos*:

All these *A·chik* folk songs, which are by no means composed extempore, but have been handed down by word of mouth from generation to generation, with their simple tunes, reveal much of the true spirit of *A·chik* land.

In the *Katta Agana* or epic lore, the land of *matchadus* or tigermen is described thus:

<i>A·chikku</i> (<i>Garos</i> language)	English
<i>Meredik Songkima, Bildomit Kalengpat, Helbrim Ronggilsim Niondim Songchamil,</i>	It is the land of Meredik Songkima, It is the land of Bildomit Kalengpat, It is the land of Helbrim the dark adamantine rocks,

<p><i>Songkalu Songkalang,</i> <i>Acharu Miksipeng,</i> <i>Songmatcha Sawilging,</i> <i>Chikilling Borechong</i> <i>Ranggera Domisal Asong;</i> <i>Eruchel Gittimjok,</i> <i>Racha Rekong Adingjok,</i> <i>Chisimak Ronggalmakjok;</i> <i>Dram Anoksikae,</i> <i>Chisam Samnatikae,</i> <i>Chiring Ronggrimae,</i> <i>Bima bolgrimae</i> (Rongmitu <i>ELG</i> 28).</p>	<p>It is the land of Songchamil, The valley seen from the heights, It is the land of Songkalu Songkalang, And of Acharu Miksipeng, Sawilgong, the Tigerland, Borechong, home to deep pools, It's the land of Ranggera Domisal; It's the village of Eruchel, That's the hillock of Racha Rekong, That's the stream where flow black waters, Steep gorges form the corners, And greenery sprawls its way into the river bank, It's a stream filled with huge rocks, And is canopied over by thick growth of trees (Rongmitu <i>ELG</i> 28-29).</p>
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The *Katta Agangipa* is the 'virtuoso' who chants the *Katta Agana* or *Katta Doka* on topics of a highly romantic, heroic or tragic nature, sometimes breaking new ground in the matter of story, theme and locale. In the pre-British days in every *A-chik* village there was at least one good *Katta Agangipa*. The author attests that *Katta Agana* is a genuine *A-chik* art. *Katta Agana* inspires joy as it celebrates by-gone days, exalts the present and projects the future. Filled as it is with stories and instances of war and valour, call of the wild, adventure and daring, riches and magnificence, it is appreciated and loved by the *A-chik* people from time immemorial. *Katta Agana* and *Katta Agangipa* belong to that genre, of which Zarrilli and others quoting D. Tedlock in *Theatre Histories* (2006), said:

Here speaks the storyteller, telling by voice what was learned by ear. Here speaks a poet who did not learn language structure from one teacher and language meaning from another, not plot structure from one and characterization from another, nor ever an art of story-telling from one and an art of hermeneutics from another, but always heard all these things working together in the stories of other story-tellers. And this poet, or mythopoet, not only narrates what characters do, but speaks when they speak, chant when they chant, and sing when they sing.

An excellent storyteller can take the story beyond simple narration and mere listening. Such a narrator can create an ambience for both listening and seeing and thus help create a “mythic” world. Such a teller makes the story a “spectacle” in that it is visible through the story teller’s dramatization, and the spectator visualizes it further in his mind’s eye.

(iv) *Kabe* or Dirge-based *A-chik* Theatre

According to the myth recorded by Mihir N. Sangma in his book *Pagitchamni Kubisring* (1982), man learnt *Kabe* or the song of lamentation or keening from a female hornbill that was found mourning for her dead mate. The dirge of the bird moved him so much that he not only learnt the song of lamentation but also taught the same to his wife and instructed her to sing it in the same manner on his death. The *Kabe* myth tells us that from that time onwards the *A-chiks* began singing *Kabe* at the time of death. The term *Kabe* is derived from two *A-chik* words: *Ka* from *ka-tong*, meaning ‘heart’ and *be* from *be-a*, meaning ‘to break’. The complete meaning would mean ‘heart-break’. It follows that *Kabe* is a song of mourning by someone who is heart-broken by the passing away of a loved one. The *A-chiks* sing *kabe* to mourn the dead. The singing of *kabe* is a continuous process, where singer or singers recall the life and deed of the dear departed, in the process unravelling the life of the deceased to the hearers. The mourning for the dead involves: (a) dirge sung over the dead body of a man at a time when his female relatives - his mother, sisters, aunts, etc., approach the house. (b) Song of lamentation specifically at the death of a married man. This is sung by the mother, sisters and other female relatives of the dead. (c) *Mangna Chu Kano Kabe Ring-ani*: Dirge sung when the dead is given a bath by his female relatives with undiluted rice-beer and is offered the same drink for one last time. (d) A dirge sung when the *Tokkari* is split. When a father of the house dies, a receptacle made of bamboo, known as *tokkari*, is placed towards the head of the corpse. A sword and a frond of a variety of cane known as *so-ka* is placed in it. The *tokkari* is split and the string where the dead one used to hang his clothes is snapped with a sword to show that the one who used the sword and the clothes line is not with them anymore. A dirge is sung at this time. (e) Dirge sung when the dead is taken outside for cremation. (f) Dirge sung at the time when the bones embodying the spirit of the dead are carried into the house, etc.

A few lines of the dirge sung for a married man at the arrival of his mother, sisters and other female relatives known in *A·chikku* as *ma·nok* is being shown below:

<i>A·chikku</i> (Garo language)	English
<i>Aiha! Nang·ni ba·rima ino donga</i> <i>Ku·aganboda nang·mana</i> <i>Aiha! Gana bipake neng·gipani</i> <i>re·baengode</i> <i>Depante ku·aganboda.</i>	<i>Aiha!</i> Your siblings are here, Open your mouth and say something to your mother. <i>Aiha!</i> When the one who went through travails to bring you forth has come Open your mouth, son of the house.

Kabe may be said to be “perlocutionary act,” where circumstances determine how the speech act affects the listener’s feelings, thoughts, or actions. The meaning of the communication (from the perspective of both the speaker and the listener) varies depending on how the speaker delivers the words and gestures. In *A·chik Kabe* or keening or singing of dirges one finds the effective delivery of words and gestures. Through the employment of mournful tune, the *Kabe* singer often moves the listeners to tears. In *Kabe*, like in any other form of speech performance, one of the driving forces is choice of words. *Kabe* singers recall the life and deeds of the dead person and with the use of appropriate voice modulation, tune and correct pauses, are able to render a fitting *requiem* and move people to tears. Like theatre, speech acts take place in both time and space. Dance, mime and music are also communication. Depending on rhythm and movement qualities, a dance may be a dance of joy or a dance of lamentation; drum beats might encourage a feeling of dread or elation. Similarly, people gathered for a funeral ceremony perform gestures and words that are appropriate to the situation. Even without intending to, they are clearly communicating by performing “speech acts.”

(v) Dance-oriented *A·chik* Theatre

The *A·chiks* share in the pan-Indian dance tradition. The dance forms of the *A·chiks* comprise Ritual Dance, *Grika* (warrior dance) and Community Dance. In *History and Culture of the Garos* (1981), M. S. Sangma writes that the *A·chiks* live mainly by *jhum* cultivation and they attach great importance to the worship of the presiding deities of the seasons and crops.

Of all the festivals celebrated by the *A-chiks* in connection with *jhum* cultivation, the *Wangala*, a post-harvest festival stands out as the biggest and the most solemn one. According to Dewansing Rongmitu Sangma in *Traditional Dances of the Garos*, the *Wangala* literally means Festal Ceremony or hearty send-off. The ceremony marks the end of the agricultural year for the *jhumming A-chiks*.

The *Wangala* festival begins with *Rugala* or ritual of Libation and is followed by *Chachat So.a* or Incense Ceremony. On this day, after lunch, the whole village gathers in the *Nokma*'s house. Cooked rice is strewn all over inside the house of the *Nokma*. The quantity of rice thus strewn is in proportion to the quantity of hailstones that visited that particular region that year. The *Nokma* performs the *grika* or the warrior dance, holding a spear and shield in each hand, and dances atop the strewn rice, stamping on it. Thereafter, the *Nokma* burns the incense near the main post of the house known as *Maljuri* and fumigates the whole house. This is also symbolic of the whole volume of dark clouds that heralded the rain in that particular year. If the incense smoke blows past the main post and blows following the ridge of the roof, it is believed that good harvest is in store in the next *jhumming* season.

After the worship of the deities for the annual harvest, everyone partakes of the rice-ale specially brewed for the *Wangala*. Soon after, the priest dresses himself in *gando* (a strip of cloth worn girded around the waist, reaching to the knee or mid-thigh), a *kotip* (a strip of cloth folded roughly and worn around the head and secured at the tied bun of hair), a ring of metal-bells at elbows and a ring of metal-bells at the wrist. He then first dances around the hearth inside the house of the *Nokma* and is followed by the similarly attired *Nokma*. The two are later followed by the whole village and the dance and merry-making go on till very late in the night.

There is also among the *A-chiks* the tradition of performing *grika* or warrior dance when a warrior or hero experiences victory or wins an impossible feat. Aldrich Momin in his book *A-chikni Kuandik* (1985) states that in this dance the victor dancer proclaims and exults at what he has achieved for the land, the clan and for his mother and sisters. He proclaims his mental strength, physical prowess and extols himself as the warrior of the land. *Grika* is a self eulogy. This often entails belittling others, provocation and incitement and finally contest and combat. Such a warrior is thought to be an asset to the clan.

During the *Grika* dance the musical instruments used are *kram*, *natik* and *rang*. The warrior dances with the *mil-am* (sword) and *spi* (shield) in his hands; he gestures in a wild and threatening way and matches his actions with his words. As he dances he yells out a eulogy like the following, as recorded by Aldrich Momin in *A-chikni Kuandik*:

<i>A-chikku</i> (Garo language)	English
<i>Ka Goera Ka Chalang (a-ako ba wa-seko ga-tima)</i>	Hail, I am <i>Goera</i> , Hail I am the warrior
<i>Ka Sangma / Marak,</i>	(Stamps hard on the floor)
<i>Raka bitchri kimka a-jri</i>	Hail <i>Sangma/Marak</i> .
<i>Dake nigipa change nkgipa</i>	I am the seed, the core
<i>Krongjokona sing-kamjokona</i>	Undying like the <i>kimka</i> from the <i>a-jri</i>
<i>Ka Goera, ka chalang (a-ako/ wa-seko ga-timtima)</i>	I am the leader who initiates things
	I am the pillar and the support
	Hail, I am <i>Goera</i> , Hail I am the warrior.
	(Stamps hard on the floor)

Wangala dance can be divided into ritual and secular sections. The ritual version of the *Wangala* ceremony has remained within the sanctum sanctorum of the *A-chiks* practising the indigenous religion, while the secular dance version has travelled to public entertainment halls and public functions.

Dewansing Rongmitu enumerates forty-seven dance items in connection with the annual agriculture festival of the *Wangala* while Mihir N. Sangma lists a total of fifty dance items. Major A. Playfair, in his book *The Garos*, mentions that “sometimes men and women dance together, and sometimes separately.” He adds that the men usually dance with their sword and shield in their hand. Dewansing Rongmitu gives more specific descriptions. He writes that the *Wangala* dance is led by the *A-king Nokma* who performs the *grika*, doubtless reminiscent of the old fighting days, when on occasions of public rejoicing the warriors were wont to dance and recount their deeds of valour to admiring audiences. Their self exaltation is immediately followed by *Grong Doka* or starting drum beats, signalling open invitation to all present to join in the dance.

The lead-dancer, the *A-king Nokma*, goes on with his exaltations, while men and women, young and old, and even boys and girls go on

dancing together with rhythmic feet movements and gentle, graceful movements of hands and body. The dance is performed in rhythmic response to the orchestra of drums, gongs, flutes and stringed instruments of native origin. The first item of dance is followed by many others, night after night, so long as the food and drinks apportioned for the *Wangala* lasts (Burling 67).

It is believed that *Wangala* is a time when human beings and gods and goddesses connected with the *A·chik* agricultural cycle come together and the gods and goddesses are entertained and felicitated by the people. It is the most apt time for the people to exhibit their performance skills. It is to the god who gave them the seed of sustenance and the goddess who blessed the fields with fruits that they burn incense, pour out drinks and dance to. The dance items are all enactments of various actions of men as they engage themselves in warfare, agriculture and also imitations of the actions of nature like those of birds, bears, etc.

H.S Shiva Prakash writes in *Traditional Theatres* that all over the world rituals contain the seeds of theatre and that the greatest theatres of the world were evolved from rituals (Prakash). The *Wangala* dance with its grand display of so many aspects of life contains many elements of drama. *Wangala* begins as a thanksgiving ritual but ends in festivity which includes imitative dances. In *The Traditional Dances of the Garos*, D. R. Sangma terms *Wangala* as “dance acts” and writes that of all the ceremonial performances in connection with *A·chik* agriculture, *Wangala* offers the widest scope for dance activities and for singing of folk-songs of great variety. It is also a time when various *A·chik* folk musical instruments are used.

(vi) Combination of both Song and Dance alongwith Dialogue and Acting

There are written *A·chik* plays that revolve around *A·chik* myths and legends like *Metongbolni Gittim* and *Dikki I*. While *Muga Dingsepani Katta* is a historical account, *Serejing aro Waljan* and *Kalsin aro Sonatchi* are woven around romantic stories.

Two very popular *A·chik* folk plays of romantic nature are *Serejing aro Waljan* and *Kalsin aro Sonatchi*. Both these plays were given the written form by Julius L. R. Marak. *Serejing aro Waljan* can be claimed to be the first recorded *A·chik* play. The playwright, in the ‘Introduction’

to *Serejing aro Waljan*, gives a lengthy description of the origin and time and place of the first performances of *Serejing aro Waljan*. He records that *Serejing aro Waljan* as a play was first performed around the years 1937-38 and became greatly popular in Dambo-Rongjeng in East Garo Hills district.

Kalsin aro Sonatchi (1998) is the other play rendered into the written form by Julius L. R. Marak. There is a novel by the same title purportedly written by Redin Momin. In the 'Foreword' to the play *Kalsin aro Sonatchi* the playwright records Ramesor Sangma, an early producer of the play, saying that he had procured the play of Sonatchi-Kalsin originally in a verse form in a diary by Bupen Momin around 1942-43. He had edited and improved the material in that diary so that by 1955 he was able to stage the 'Kalsin aro Sonatchi' play in Moskuli in Goalpara district of Assam. M. S. Sangma, an eminent *A-chik* historian, attested that it was around the year 1940 that he heard for the first time of the play *Kalsin aro Sonatchi* being staged in the village Moskuli in Goalpara district of Assam. Both *Kalsin aro Sonatchi* and *Serejing aro Waljan* enjoyed the patronage of *A-chiks* in Garo Hills and in Assam till the early 1980s. Even though the plays' popularity has diminished, they still are being performed by the team in Moskuli under the leadership of Nolistone. K. Marak.

(vii) Christian Devotional Forms

In addition to *Wangala* and *Gahon*, there is also the practice of singing of *kirtan* and *songkristan* with dances accompanying them. It is interesting to find that Bengali *kirtan* had come to Garo Hills via the erstwhile East Pakistan, now Bangladesh, while the *A-chik sankirtan* had evolved through the influence of Assam and was first practiced by the *A-chiks* in the Assam border. *Kirtan* is practiced predominantly by the *A-chiks* and their off-springs who had migrated from East Pakistan in the 1960s. Today *kirtan* practice is seen in Nidanpur, near Tikrikilla, Balachanda and A-bima villages in Rajabala and in many other places inhabited predominantly by the Bangladeshi *A-chik* migrants.

The *A-chik-Bengali Kirtan* can have any number of performers, but necessarily it includes the lead singer, the drummer, the cymbal player and the one beating the gong. The *kirtan* performers enter the 'stage' in line in

a very devout manner. The lead singer, whom they refer to as *gaiok*, and the instrument-players form a small inner circle, while the respondents, known as *dowari*, form a bigger outer circle. Once the circle is formed, they pause and a silent invocation is made. This is followed by a slow rhythmic beating of the *khol*, *chengchop* or *kakwa* and the *konta*, and the *gaiok* starts the song simultaneously and the *dowari* repeat the lines. Lines like the following are sung:

Bengali	English
<i>Eso hoi doyami Prabhu, Eso mon mondhire.</i>	Come merciful Lord, Come into the temple of my heart.

A very simple but remarkably rhythmic foot movement marks the *kirtan* performance. The foot movement of the *dowari* is accompanied by a stylized, controlled clapping of hands and the dance is performed in a circular form. The whole show is suffused with devotion and religious fervour. The playing of musical instruments and the singing start in a slow tempo, pick up speed as they proceed and finally reach a crescendo. Thereafter, it is diminuendo, the volume, speed and rhythm diminishing slowly, until it comes to a final stop with jubilant intonation of *Jisu bol*. Just like its starting, *kirtan* ends in a very devout and profound manner. *Kirtan* singing and dancing is a whole night process.

In addition, there is also the practice of what is known as *Songkristan* among the *A-chik* Christians of Garo Hills. In the second half of the 15th century Shri Chaitanya founded the complete form of *kirtan* in Bengal and since then it has been widely popular. In Assam *kirtan* came through Sankardeva, much before Chaitanya Gurudeva movement. In the areas bordering Bengal, Chaitanya Gurudeva's Vaishnavism made significant impact. However, it is interesting to find that Bengali *kirtan* sung by *A-chik* Christians had come to Garo Hills via Bangladesh; while the *A-chik songkristan* has evolved through the influence of Assam and was first practiced by the *A-chiks* in the Assam border. C. R. Marak records that this term (*songkristan*) is applied to popular religious songs sung during Christmas and New Year season. It appears to be a borrowing of the words '*kirtan*' and '*sankirtan*' and modified to suit the needs of the community for particular type of songs. The themes of the *A-chik Songkristan* are religious in nature; the songs sung by a congregation of villagers as they dance are about the birth of Christ and the traditions relating to it.

The New Year songs centre on the message of God's boundless love for human beings.

Dawn of Modern *A·chik* Theatre

A·chiks have no established visible theatre structure; but the base for theatre was always there in the incantations, epic narrations, dances, etc. This is why it is no surprise that *A·chik* theatre has made a subdued graduation towards modernity. It is true that there is cultural distancing with the younger generation having lost interest in the archaic lore but now it appears that there is a re-awakening of interest in native practices. The outcome is the emergence of interest groups like *A·chik Theatre*. It is an amateur theatre group, associated with *Dapon, the Mirror*, based at Tangla, Assam. *A·chik Theatre* is based in Garo Hills districts of Meghalaya and the group has produced two very significant and popular plays, namely *A·chik A·song* and *Du·kon* and staged the same in Garo Hills as well as in several other parts of the country under the aegis of *National School of Drama*.

The primary objective of the group is social service through the medium of theatre. The off-shoot of this objective is to create a space for the articulation of the talent amongst the youth so that they have a space for positive creativity and recreation even in the times characterized by traditional anxieties.

The play, *A·chik A·song* (The *A·chik* Land) was first conceived by the Purakhasia Development Committee (in West Garo Hills District) under the leadership of its chairman, Tarun Saikia and jointly produced by *Dapon, the Mirror*, (Tangla, Assam). The original script of the play was in Assamese and the translation was done by Saikia, with the help of some of his Committee members. The play is based on the socio-political history of the Garo Hills between 1870-1872 with special reference to the glorious first and the last arms struggle of the *A·chiks* against the British. It starts with a traditional, cultural and social activities, rituals and beliefs of the remote hilly *A·chik* village. Then it shows how the British gradually entered into the interior of the *A·chik* village, compelling the Garo villagers to revolt against the British invasion. The hero of the episode was Togan Nengminza, a valiant youth of the region, who organized and trained a group of young *A·chiks*. They attacked the British camp and

fought for the freedom of Garo Hills. Togan sacrificed his life for the cause of the freedom of his motherland. The *A·chiks* still remember him with great respect as the first national hero and martyr of the *A·chiks*. The play *A·chik A·song*, covering one hour and twenty minutes, was staged for the first time in Babelapara village, Purakhasia on 1st and 2nd of February, 2005. Since then the *A·chik Theatre* had staged the play in several places of India.

Du·kon is the second play by the *A·chik Theatre Group*. The group defined it as an evolved play since the play evolved through a month-long workshop and the performance text preceded the written. The play was directed by Pabitra Rabha and was first staged in Tura District Auditorium, the head quarter of West Garo Hills District. Thereafter it was staged in several places outside Meghalaya. The play, *Du·kon*, spanning over one hour and twenty minutes, depicts the crisis of contemporary social environment. Trends of modernization and globalization lead to dehumanization of emotions and qualities like love, brotherhood, friendship, kindness, etc. are replaced by bitterness, violence and cruelty. Everyone becomes greedy. The young generation in particular is affected the most as they find themselves in a complex environment that is neither acceptable nor avoidable, while older people are nostalgic about times gone by. Younger people clamour towards modernization, thereby deepening the gap between generations.

The word *du·kon* in *A·chikku* refers to a species of invisible (magical) plant. The *A·chiks* believe that if anyone accidentally stepped on this plant he or she would wander round and round, always returning to the spot where he or she had stepped on the *du·kon* plant. This circular wandering about would go on until somebody physically touches the person under the spell of *du·kon*; the person would then come to consciousness. The play metaphorically uses the idea of *du·kon* to depict how in the contemporary world there are many reasons that could make one lose one's way and drift about aimlessly and the challenge is to be able to differentiate between what is right and what is wrong. Pabitra Rabha, the director of the play, notes that the earth keeps moving on its own way but the lives of human beings are marked by confusion and destruction. We, as humans cannot ignore the fact that if we disturb the equilibrium of life, both human existence as well as human sensibility suffer. In the journey

of life, knowingly or unknowingly, we sometimes ignore incidents that determine our ability to care for others. The theme of this play is based on human existence beset with various conflicts, confusions and different choices that one makes and the manner in which those choices determine our fate.³⁰

Thus, from rituals to *Du-kon*, the *A-chik* theatre is seen making its evolutionary journey through incantations, prayers, ritual dances, secular songs and ritual dances which later morphed into secular entertainment. *A-chik* theatre is all the more enriched with borrowings from neighbouring places and other religions.

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Field Work:

Live Performance of the plays *A-chik A-song* in Purakhasia and *Du-kon* in Tura.

Kirtan: Boldampitbari, Tikrikilla, W. Garo Hills, Meghalaya: 01-01-2011.

Gahon (Sonatchi aro Kalsin) and *Gure Wata* Ceremony: Moskuli, Goalpara-Assam: 21-01-2012.

Gahon (Serejing: Lover), Kangkolpara, P.O. Tikrikilla: 01-12-2012.

Gahon (Serejing aro Waljan), Rongchadenggre Serejing Party, (Betasing Block), at Balonggre, 14-12-2012.