

# Shape-shifting or Transformation Myth in Garo Culture

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‘Transformation Myth’ or Shape shifting or *Therianthropy* as it is referred to in English Literature is the transformation of human beings into any animal form either through conscious exercise of the psyche or through unconscious experiences of the mind, body and soul. *Therianthropy* is the mythological ability of human beings to metamorphose into animals by means of shapeshifting. The term *Therianthropy* comes from the Greek word *therion* meaning “wild animal” or “beast” and *anthrôpos* meaning “human-being”.

Frank Hammel in his work ‘Human animals’ asserts that the belief that men can change into animals and animals into men is as old as life itself.

Meghalaya one of the eight sister states of Northeast India, also known as the ‘abode of clouds’, consists of three culturally rich tribes, the Khasis of the Khasi hills, the Garos of the Garo hills and the Jaintias of the Jaintia hills region of the state. The Garos also known as the A’chik Mande (meaning Hill man) are the second largest tribe in Meghalaya after the Khasis of the Khasi Hills region. Garo Hills lies to the Southwest of Assam, 25.9° and 26.1° North Latitude and between 89.49° and 90° of East longitude. It was formed into a district in 1866 and is now part of the state of Meghalaya. It is bounded by the districts of Goalpara of Assam on the North and West; Khasi Hills on the East and the Mymensing district of Bangladesh on the South.

Although majority of the Garo community are now Christian, before the advent of Christianity; the religion of the Garos was mostly pantheistic and animistic with a belief in a multitude of beneficent and malevolent spirits. Different gods are attributed to as the Creator of the world, God of Natural Phenomena, gods of the destinies of man from birth till death, all of whom must be appeased by way of sacrifice. Even with the advent of Christianity in Garo Hills, the people of this region still preserve their culture and beliefs and the non-Christians still perform the rituals they had practiced before Christianity made its presence felt. Garos are a culturally rich tribe with a host of oral narratives that has been handed down from generation to generation. Among the many myths that are narrated by the Garos, the Transformation myth also known as Shape-shifting is a common cultural myth. Transformation myth means the transformation of humans into animals and other forms.

Transformation or shapeshifting of human beings into animals has been prevalent among many cultures across the world. The Garo or A’chik culture is also not unknown to this kind of phenomena. In Garo dialect this kind of ability to physically transform into different animal forms is referred to as *Jasrea*. The term *Jasrea* means ‘exchange of spirit or soul’ and comes from the Garo word *Janggi* meaning ‘spirit or soul’ and *srea* meaning ‘exchange’. *Jasrea* therefore refers to the ability of an individual who has gained psychic powers for his soul to get engrafted into the soul of an animal.

This type of transformation is not confined only to certain regions of Garo Hills but it is believed to have existed among the Garo culture itself. Even to this day stories relating to the transformation of a human to an animal form are told making it a part of an oral literature.

*Mande-matchapila* (transformation into tiger), *mande- chipupila* (transformation into snakes), and *mande- mesepila* (transformation into rats) are some of the animal transformation that are common. This cultural experience has been prevalent among the people of Garo Hills for a very long time and one comes to learn of such phenomena or practices through the oral narration of the people who have either had personal experiences or have heard stories pertaining to such transformations. Many such occurrences have been documented by people who are interested and some have found a space in the handful written literature of the Garos.

Experiencing another life outside the life of a normal human being is something difficult to comprehend. What a person goes through in the moments of transformation is something which requires further study and documentation. It is firmly believed among the Garos that the people who have the ability to turn or transform themselves have a strong resemblance to their animal counterpart. It is either their physical features like the eyes or facial structure that bears a strong similarity to the animal form or their characteristic features like feeling the need to sleep excessively or if a person takes the form of a bear he or she would like to constantly get their backs scratched. It is interesting to take a note of how these details actually determine the kind of animal form that a person transforms into.

Usually for a normal human being when a person is sleeping the body goes into a temporary state of trance, but in the case of people who can transform themselves, they are usually known to experience such a phenomena mostly when they are asleep and their body is at a temporary moment of rest. The soul of the person gets engrafted into the soul of their animal counterpart, and while the human self-lies in a mode of rest, the animal form gets active at the same time.

People who experienced such phenomena are also considered to be good at predicting what they foresee in the future, especially of natural calamities like earthquake, flood and landslides. It has been said that there were numerous accounts wherein people's lives had been saved as a result of the early predictions given by these people. An example of this is of an aged woman who could transform herself to a giant water serpent known in the local dialect as *Sangkni*. This woman would constantly warn the inhabitants of a particular region in Garo Hills that had constructed their dwellings in the hilly slopes, of the probable natural calamity at the onset of monsoons. Her reason for the warning was that the water snakes or *Sangknis* were travelling in groups through that area, thereby posing a possible danger to the inhabitants of that area. Many took caution and shifted to another location, but some who did not pay heed to the warning had to pay the price with their precious lives. The heavy rainfall had washed the soil thereby leading to mass landslides and widespread devastation.

Another story is of a woman who had taken the form of a tiger in her sleep and had accidentally clawed her own infant child to death not realising that she had taken her animal form whereas in her subconscious self the woman was trying to soothe her crying child.

There is also a story of a middle-aged man who had complained of a severe backache and had become bed ridden for several days. Different kinds of treatment

were given to him but he never recovered and his suffering only increased. It was only when he could not tolerate the pain anymore that he revealed to his family that he had transformed into a snake and a boulder had fallen on top of him. He requested his family to go and lift the boulder off and relieve him from his pain. He gave the exact location on which the snake was and when the family members reached the spot they had found the snake almost dying with the load of the boulder. Having lifted the boulder off the snake, the man survived and recovered after several days to tell his tale.

The Garos believe that there existed a community of people who could transform into tigers known as the *Matchaduor Dudurong*. Every day as night falls, each member of the *matchadu* community would get ready to undergo the routine transformation into a tiger. How the physical metamorphosis of the *matchadus* into tigers takes place is difficult to explain. In the unearthly hours of the night, each *matchadu* physically transforms into a tiger, prowls about in the deep jungles and hunts for wild pigs, deer, bison and other animals and also catches fishes in the streams, rivers, ponds and lakes. However, before the break of dawn they transform themselves back into their human form again.

Most of the people who can transform themselves usually do not reveal their identity for fear of being ostracized and also for the fear of losing their power of transformation. It is usually the family members who therefore become the source of information since they have first-hand knowledge of what the person has experienced in his dreams through his revelation to them.

Although there are no substantial evidences to prove this type of cultural phenomena among the Garos, the possibility of its existence can also not be ignored. The Garos or *A'chiks* have with them many stories, myths and folktales related to the spirit world and the incomprehensible power of nature in its entire splendor. They believe in a multitude of spirits and each spirit was known by different names. The spirits which the Garos refer to as *Mite* have their existence in almost all elements that are air, land and water. They also attach great importance to the worship of the spirits which govern the seasons, and practice certain rituals to appease the spirits to obtain their blessings in the form of a good harvest.

From the above stories it becomes easy to interpret the relation, or the connection between humans, animals and spirits. The Garos have a strong affinity with nature, and this close connection with nature, perhaps, allows humans and animals to share their spirits and souls with each other. Though this is a myth from the Garo Hills region, other countries and nations also have myths that are similar in narration and form. Acquiring the animal spirit is hereditary but it can be also resisted, and since Christianity started spreading, people also started to view this as a demon possession and thus more and more people started resisting it, and people with animal souls are now becoming extinct and we don't hear of them as much now as we used to.

### Works Cited

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