Erik de Maaker. 2021. *Reworking Culture: Relatedness, Rites, and Resources in Garo Hills, North East India*. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press. 328 pp. Maps, glossary, figures, notes, references, index. Rs 1695 (hardback - ISBN: 9788194831693)

The book under review is an intimate ethnographic portrait of everyday social relations and the rules governing them in the West Garo Hills of Northeast India. The author avoids taking ‘culture’ or ‘custom’ as givens, or worse, practising a form of salvage anthropology that claims to recover lost social mores. Instead, Erik de Maaker has taken a patient approach of listening to and observing his interlocutors over two decades of fieldwork in and around the Garo village of Sadolpara, close to the Indo–Bangladesh border. In de Maaker’s nuanced portrayal of Garo village life, everyday sociality, governed by malleable norms (*niam*) between women and men of different matrilineal clans, lies at the heart of the community and their relationship with their lived environment. Niam is, therefore, far from the archaic, unchanging body of customary law, but as modern as states and markets that shape the political and economic lives of Garos today.

As the adopted son of Jiji Sigma, an elderly widow in Sadolpara, de Maaker navigates Garo niam deftly in his own everyday interactions with villagers. He gradually comes to terms with his own position within Jiji’s matrilineal lineage as well as the wider cosmos of *songsarek* (‘indigenous’) and Christian Garos. He recognises that class distinctions among Garos are becoming more apparent not only in Sadolpara but also more prominently in the nearby town of Tura with its sizeable Garo middle class. He sees how, over successive generations, matrilineal clans take in new grooms via daughters, but men, regardless of their social rank within the receiving clan, enjoy considerable control over their wives’ land and household assets. Garo women, especially older ones, are hardly silent or reticent to express themselves at home or in their clan affairs, but they are constrained too by niam or the rules of propriety in managing social relations. In this mutual web of duties, obligations, rights, and privileges, de Maaker explains, Garo personhood is shaped by relationality in more ways than one (Chapters 2 and 3).

Garos are not just, however, defined with respect to each other. They are also defined by their relationship to spirits inside the household and in the jungle, and by extension, by shifting dynamics between swidden and fixed-field agriculture. Even Christian Garos, who do not profess belief in spirits, see nature’s bounty as a gift from God or Jesus, offering a share of their agricultural produce to the church. Much like spirits, the dead exert considerable influence on the ways of the living, whether as ghosts or as reincarnated beings. When a person dies in Sadolpara, others visit and offer gift transactions as per their relationship within the matrilineal group to the deceased. Prospective grooms are, in turn, offered gifts in exchange, obliging them to marry later. At the same time, the kin of the deceased person are obliged to find a new spouse for the widow or widower. The community of the living, in other words, is renewed and reworked at every funeral and in relation to the dead. The niam of funerals is inherently flexible to adapt to the empirical specificities of households, clans, and circumstances as they arise (chapters 4 to 6).

More recently, the growing influence of the Indian state and the market economy has encouraged new norms or niam to emerge among Garos. Homegrown politicians, who represent the region in Shillong and New Delhi, are asked for specific favours such as water works or access to new government schemes based on prior personal connections. Petty bureaucrats and other government officials are also brought into a new relational framework in which everyday transactions take place across the blurred state–society divide. Markets, too, are domesticated by adapting to the norms by which men gain access to land through marriage and depending on the status of the receiving matrilineal group. High social status does not simply mean owning a lot of land, a saleable commodity, but giving extensively to others in ways that meet social expectations. Households with high disposable incomes, particularly among Christian Garos in urban centres, pay in cash for the education of their children or the construction of new brick houses as opposed to traditional Garo houses. Such households of ‘big men’ are particularly expected to provide for less fortunate kin. As swidden cultivation declines and old swidden lands held in common are privatised by households, new social relations of community life are thus negotiated via the flexibility of niam (Chapters 7 and 8).

Undoubtedly, the strength of de Maaker’s monograph lies in his painstaking, empathetic reconstruction of the inner logics animating Garo village life over 20 years of fieldwork. He accomplishes this immense task without resorting to high theory, tortuous prose, or arcane jargon. Yet this insightful study is less than clear on its theoretical ambition. The claim that ‘traditions’ are invented or re-imagined in modern times is not exactly novel. Nor is it clear why we should expect such localised studies of community life to reveal either static social structures or communities devastated by modernisation. As Garos remake old ways of life and incorporate new knowhow and social relations into their lifeworlds, they remain unmistakably Garo. What might the modernity of niam mean for the study of tribal India today? More generally, how does this book speak to ongoing debates over indigenous peoples’ rights and livelihoods worldwide? If there is a minor criticism I might advance here, it is that the author has been too bashful in telling readers what his Garo interlocutors might tell us about wider concerns among sociologists and social anthropologists of contemporary India and beyond. In my view at least, readers have much to learn in terms of theory and method from such long-term ethnographic studies that, over time, become primary historical sources in their own right.

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