

Reading Marriage as Cultural Text: A Geertzian Interpretation of the *do'sia* Marriage Ritual among the Garos of Northeast India

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Abstract: *Marriage rituals are important cultural institutions through which societies express social values, regulate kinship, and reinforce collective identity. This study interprets the traditional do'sia marriage ceremony of the Garos of Meghalaya through Clifford Geertz's theory of interpretive anthropology. Using qualitative documentary analysis of historical ethnographic sources, particularly Playfair (1909), the paper applies the concept of thick description to examine the symbolic meanings embedded within ritual practices. The analysis demonstrates that ritual elements such as the sacrifice of the cock and hen, divination, examination of entrails, and communal feasting functioned as symbolic expressions of kinship, prosperity, morality, and communal responsibility within a matrilineal social order. Rather than viewing these practices as isolated customs, the study interprets them as cultural texts through which social meanings were publicly communicated and reproduced. The paper contributes to sociological discussions on ritual symbolism, indigenous knowledge systems, and the interpretation of kinship institutions in Northeast India.*

Keywords: Garo, *do'sia* marriage, Clifford Geertz, interpretive anthropology, ritual, symbolism, matriliney, indigenous knowledge, Northeast India

1. Introduction

Marriage occupies a central place in many societies, not simply as a legal union between individuals but as a public institution that creates social relationships, regulates kinship, and reproduces collective values. Marriage ceremonies communicate culturally shared understandings of family, morality, continuity, and community (Durkheim, 1912/1995; Turner, 1969). Consequently, sociological inquiry into marriage extends beyond questions of alliance and inheritance to examine the symbolic systems through which societies legitimise social life.

Interpretive anthropology, particularly the work of Clifford Geertz (1973), shifted attention from explaining ritual through universal laws to understanding the meanings attached to symbolic action. Geertz argued that culture consists of “webs of significance” spun by human beings themselves and that anthropology is an interpretive discipline concerned with understanding these meanings. Rituals therefore become cultural texts whose significance can only be understood within the social context in which they are performed.

This perspective is particularly useful for understanding the traditional marriage practices of the Garos of Meghalaya. Historically organised around matrilineal descent, clan exogamy, and matrilocal residence (Playfair, 1909), Garo society viewed marriage as an alliance between clans rather than merely a union between two individuals. Among several recognised forms of marriage, the *do'sia* ceremony occupied the highest ceremonial status and involved elaborate rituals including the sacrifice of a cock and hen, divination through omens, examination of entrails, and communal feasting.

Previous ethnographic studies have documented the sequence of these rituals but have rarely analysed their symbolic

meanings. This paper addresses that gap by interpreting the *do'sia* ceremony through Geertz's interpretive framework. It argues that the ritual constituted a public performance through which Garo society expressed ideals of kinship, prosperity, harmony, and collective responsibility.

Ritual, symbolism and interpretive anthropology

Early sociological analyses viewed rituals primarily as mechanisms for maintaining social cohesion. Durkheim (1912/1995) argued that rituals reinforce collective consciousness by publicly reaffirming the moral bonds that unite society. Turner (1967; 1969) later emphasised ritual as symbolic performance through which societies negotiate transitions and reproduce social order. Douglas (1966) demonstrated that ritual classifications reflect broader systems of cultural order rather than irrational beliefs.

Among these scholars, Clifford Geertz offers perhaps the most influential framework for understanding ritual as symbolic communication. In *The Interpretation of Cultures* (1973), Geertz argued that culture is composed of historically transmitted patterns of meaning embodied in symbols. The task of anthropology is therefore not to discover universal laws but to interpret these symbolic systems.

Central to Geertz's methodology is the concept of thick description, which distinguishes between merely recording observable behaviour and interpreting the meanings attached to that behaviour. Human actions acquire significance only within their cultural context. Rituals therefore cannot be understood simply by describing their outward form; they must be interpreted as symbolic texts through which societies communicate shared values.

This approach differs from earlier structural-functional explanations by asking not merely what a ritual does but what it means to those who perform it. Applying this perspective to

Garo marriage enables us to understand ceremonial actions as meaningful expressions of social life rather than isolated customs.

Garo society, matriliney and marriage

The Garos are one of the principal indigenous communities of Northeast India, residing mainly in Meghalaya. Their society has historically been organised around matrilineal descent, clan exogamy, and matrilocal residence (Playfair, 1909; Burling, 1963). Descent and inheritance follow the female line, while membership in the *mahari* (clan) defines an individual's rights, obligations, and social identity.

Clan exogamy prohibited marriage within one's own *mahari* because clan members were regarded as descendants of a common ancestor. Marriage therefore created alliances between different clans, extending networks of reciprocity and cooperation across the community.

Another important institution was *a'kim*, through which marital alliances extended beyond the individual spouses themselves. Even when a marriage ended through death, relationships between the two clans could continue through subsequent marriages, illustrating that marriage represented a durable social alliance rather than a purely personal relationship.

Traditional Garo society recognised several forms of marriage, including *do'sia*, *tunapa*, *nokpante gaa*, *seka*, and *seke kata*. Among these, *do'sia* occupied the highest ceremonial status. Distinguished by elaborate rituals involving sacrificial fowls, divination, ritual specialists, and communal feasts, it publicly legitimised matrimonial alliances and reinforced clan relationships.

Understanding this broader social organisation is essential because the symbolic meanings of the *do'sia* ceremony derive directly from the institutional principles of matriliney, kinship, and communal responsibility.

2. Theoretical Framework and Methodology

This paper employs Clifford Geertz's interpretive anthropology as its theoretical framework. Geertz viewed culture as a symbolic order through which people interpret reality and organise social life. Rituals are therefore understood as systems of communication that both represent and reproduce shared meanings.

Methodologically, the study adopts a qualitative interpretive approach based on documentary analysis. Rather than collecting new ethnographic data, it reinterprets historical descriptions of the *do'sia* ceremony, especially those documented by Playfair (1909), through the lens of Geertz's concept of thick description.

The analysis does not seek to verify the empirical truth of ritual beliefs but to understand how ritual symbols communicated meanings concerning marriage, prosperity, kinship, and communal life within traditional Garo society.

This study relies primarily on historical ethnographic documents, particularly Playfair's (1909) account of Garo

society, supplemented by later scholarship on Garo kinship and culture. Such sources inevitably reflect the perspectives, intellectual assumptions, and colonial contexts within which they were produced. They may privilege the observations of outside ethnographers over the voices and lived experiences of Garo participants and cannot fully capture regional variation or subsequent transformations in ritual practice. Consequently, the present analysis does not claim to reconstruct the subjective experiences of historical actors or to provide a definitive account of the *do'sia* ceremony.

Rather, following Geertz's (1973) interpretive approach, the objective is to analyse the symbolic meanings embedded within the documented ritual practices by situating them within the wider social and cultural organisation of traditional Garo society. Interpretive analysis allows historical ethnographic records to be read not merely as descriptive accounts but as cultural texts that reveal underlying systems of meaning, kinship, and moral order. While recognising the limitations of documentary evidence, this approach offers a theoretically grounded reinterpretation of an important indigenous institution and provides a foundation for future research based on contemporary ethnographic fieldwork and indigenous oral histories.

Interpreting the *do'sia* marriage ritual

The symbolism of the cock and hen

The most distinctive feature of the *do'sia* ceremony is the ritual use of a cock and a hen. Superficially, the sacrifice of these birds may appear to be an act of divination or superstition. However, such an interpretation represents what Geertz would describe as a "thin description."

Within Garo culture, the birds symbolically represented the prospective marital relationship itself. Their ceremonial treatment transferred hopes, anxieties, and expectations concerning marriage onto tangible ritual objects. The ritual therefore transformed the uncertainty associated with marriage into a culturally interpretable event.

Geertz argued that symbols function simultaneously as "models of" reality and "models for" reality. The cock and hen thus represented not only omens concerning the future but also ideals of marital harmony, reciprocity, and social stability that the newly married couple was expected to uphold.

Omens and the interpretation of uncertainty

Following the sacrifice, ritual specialists observed whether the birds' beaks faced one another or pointed away. A favourable alignment suggested harmony, whereas an unfavourable position indicated possible discord (Playfair, 1909).

Rather than treating this practice merely as fortune-telling, interpretive anthropology understands omens as symbolic narratives that help communities organise uncertainty. Every marriage involves unknown futures concerning prosperity, fertility, and family life. The ritual did not eliminate uncertainty but transformed it into a collectively interpretable cultural event.

By involving relatives, ritual specialists, and clan representatives, the reading of omens reinforced the idea that marriage was a public institution whose future concerned the wider community rather than only the couple.

The examination of entrails

The *do'bik nia* ceremony involved examining the intestines of one sacrificial bird to interpret future prosperity, poverty, longevity, or separation (Playfair, 1909).

From a positivist perspective, such practices might be dismissed as superstition. Geertz's interpretive approach instead emphasises their symbolic significance. The entrails became ritual texts through which participants contemplated hopes concerning fertility, economic well-being, and social continuity.

Douglas (1966) argued that ritual classifications express coherent cultural systems rather than arbitrary beliefs. Similarly, the examination of entrails represented a culturally organised method of interpreting uncertainty and locating personal futures within a shared moral universe.

The Communal Feast

The ceremony concluded with a communal feast attended by relatives and members of both clans. While appearing simply celebratory, the feast performed important sociological functions. Shared meals have long symbolised solidarity and reciprocity (Durkheim, 1912/1995). Within the *do'sia* ceremony, communal feasting publicly incorporated the newly married couple into an expanded network of kinship relations.

The participation of both clans legitimised the marriage as a collectively recognised institution. Significantly, the birds used for divination were distributed among others rather than consumed by the bride and groom, reinforcing the distinction between ritual sacrifice and ordinary consumption.

3. Discussion

The *do'sia* ceremony demonstrates that rituals function not merely as reflections of society but as active processes through which social reality is constructed and maintained. Viewed through Geertz's interpretive framework, the ceremony represented a symbolic language expressing the moral foundations of Garo matrilineal society.

Marriage was understood not as a private agreement but as an alliance between clans carrying obligations across generations. Ritual participation by relatives, priests, and community members publicly legitimised these relationships and integrated the new household into wider networks of kinship.

The ritual also served as a mechanism for managing uncertainty. Questions concerning prosperity, fertility, compatibility, and continuity were addressed through symbolic performances that transformed unpredictable futures into culturally meaningful narratives. Divination thus served less as empirical prediction than as a social strategy for confronting anxiety.

Geertz's insight that symbols are simultaneously "models of" and "models for" reality is particularly relevant here. The *do'sia* ceremony represented ideals of harmony, reciprocity, and prosperity while simultaneously encouraging participants to embody those values in everyday life.

At the same time, ritual must be understood historically. The widespread adoption of Christianity, formal education, colonial administration, and modern legal institutions transformed Garo marriage practices during the twentieth century (Burling, 1963). Christian ceremonies gradually replaced customary rituals, including *do'sia*, and introduced new understandings of marriage and family.

Nevertheless, the decline of *do'sia* does not imply cultural disappearance. The ceremony survives in historical memory, oral traditions, ethnographic accounts, and discussions of indigenous heritage. It has shifted from a lived institution to a symbol of Garo cultural identity.

This transformation highlights the importance of documenting indigenous knowledge systems. Rituals preserve not only religious beliefs but also social philosophies concerning kinship, reciprocity, and communal responsibility. Even when no longer practised, they remain valuable sources for understanding the historical foundations of indigenous societies.

4. Conclusion

The *do'sia* marriage ceremony represents far more than a sequence of customary practices. It demonstrates that ritual functions as a symbolic system through which traditional Garo society expressed and reproduced its understanding of kinship, prosperity, morality, and communal responsibility. The ritual use of the cock and hen, the interpretation of omens, the examination of entrails, and the communal feast formed an integrated symbolic language. Their meanings derived not from isolated ritual acts but from the wider institutional context of matriliney, clan organisation, and collective responsibility.

Applying Geertz's concept of thick description demonstrates that rituals actively construct social reality by communicating shared values and organising uncertainty. The *do'sia* ceremony transformed marriage from a private relationship into a publicly recognised social institution that reaffirmed alliances between clans and strengthened communal solidarity.

Although Christianity and modern institutions have largely replaced traditional marriage rituals, *do'sia* remains an important cultural archive of Garo society. Its continued significance illustrates that ritual traditions continue to shape collective memory even after their practical disappearance.

Ultimately, this study demonstrates the continuing value of interpretive sociology for understanding indigenous institutions. By foregrounding meaning rather than merely behaviour, Geertz's framework reveals how rituals operate as sophisticated systems of social communication through which societies reproduce moral order and cultural identity. Future research combining historical interpretation with

contemporary ethnographic fieldwork may further illuminate how present-day Garo communities remember, reinterpret, and selectively revive customary traditions within changing social contexts.

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