

Chapter V

Folk Literature of the Karbis

Karbi Language and Literature, an overview:

5.1 Karbi Language

The Karbis have their own language and literature. Their language is also called Arleng. As a language, it belongs to the Tibeto-Burman language family. The language is sub grouped as ‘Mikir’ according to the latest classification.¹ The parent language family tree has been illustrated like this:

Language Family Trees

Sino-Tibeto-Burman, Mikir

Sino-Tibetan (403)

Tibeto-Burman (389)

Mikir (2)

Amri Karbi (Numbers in bracket represent the number of dialects of that particular level)²

The Karbis, however, do not have their own script as is the case with most hill tribes of the North East. They use the Roman alphabet. Sometimes they also use the Assamese script. The Christian

Missionaries, specially the American Baptist Mission and the Catholic Church, wrote the earliest texts in Karbi.

In the Karbi language one sharp dialect diversity is noticed in the Amri dialect, used by the plains Karbis. Except that there is little dialect difference among the Karbis.

The Karbi language has seven vowel sounds, namely, i(as in fit) e (as in bat), e (as in care), u (as in put), o (as in caught), a (as in pot), a (as in ask).³

The corresponding consonant sounds are twenty.

It has three personal pronouns with the plural forms.

The language is monosyllabic. It is noticed that most words are formed with the addition of affixes.⁴

Prof. Rongbong Terang was the first lexicographer in the language and his dictionary named 'Karbi Lamtasam' is a monumental work for the tribe.⁵

5.2 Karbi Literature

Modern Karbi literature is of recent origin and development. Till the last part of the twentieth century, the Karbis had only their oral literature, very rich in that. For generations, the Karbis transmitted their rich storehouse of literature through mouth. It was facilitated by the folk songs having good combination of rhyme, rhythm and subject matter.

Hence, while discussing the literature of the Karbis, their oral literature invariably comes up. It is amazing to note that the Karbis have a vast repertoire of oral literature preserved orally through centuries. Their folk literature has all elements of folklore- social rituals, myths, metaphors, legends, historical tales, ballads of love and separation, folksongs of Sabin Alun, love songs, fables, magic chants, proverbs etc. These have been kept alive through generations through mouth.

Karbi literature has begun to flourish in the recent decades. Apart from the celebrated Karbi writers who have been writing for years, the young Karbi generation also has taken to writing with new zeal. The flourish of modern Karbi literature can be traced only to the last one decade of the twentieth century and the fifteen years of the twenty first century. In this context the observation of Prof. Rong Bong Terang in the 1980's is noteworthy:

“...in the eight decades of the twentieth century, no remarkable creative literature has been written in the Karbi language. Though some rays of modern education have reached the Karbi society in the post-independence period an ambience for creating new literature has not yet ushered in. Assamese and English literature, to some extent, influenced the Karbi new generation who have been educated in schools and colleges. The tendency of creating new literature among a few of them may be termed to be a result of this. Though some poems, short stories,

essays, etc. are published in some school and college magazines, examples in book forms are very rare till now.”⁶

Nearly four decades are about to pass by since Prof. Terang made this observation in the 1980s and there has been a great change in the literary scenario for the Karbis. There has been an upsurge in creating literature, albeit with influences from other literature including basically Assamese and English, by the young Karbi writers. There have emerged a good number of talented writers who have created very commendable pieces of literature in all genres of literature. Some of them have taken the path of documenting the oral history, tradition, culture, sociology, economy, myths and legends, etc. through rigorous academic pursuits and research. One among them has even opened a very devoted blog for the purpose of disseminating all aspects of Karbi life, language, literature and culture to the interested global readers and researchers.

Going back to the history of Karbi literature, we see that written literature of the Karbis made its appearance only in the last two decades of the twentieth century. A propaganda newsletter named ***Karbi Catechism***, brought out in 1875 by the Christian Missionary press at Sivasagar was the first known written text in the Karbi language. It was followed by two primary school textbooks by Rev P. E. Moore, Sir J. M. Carwell and Rev W. R. Hutton in 1898, titled *Plipli* and *Kalakha*. Later on, the two books were published in Assamese. Two stalwarts in the Karbi academic field at that time, namely, Samsonsing Ingti and Basapi

Ingti, played the pivotal role in publishing these two books in Assamese. These books were taught in the schools for a cumulative period of nearly nine years.⁷

The Christian Missionaries did commendable jobs in enriching Karbi language and literature. Books like *Tomo Puru*, *Karbi-English Vocabulary*, *A Dictionary of the Mikir Language*, *Bituso Akitap*, *Arleng Alun Athui*, *Mikir Third Reader*, *Ning Arjan*, *Pilgrim's Progress*, etc. were brought out by them. A Karbi journal titled *Birta* was edited by Rev Hutton for a long period. He also wrote various religious books in Karbi.⁸

The development of Karbi language and literature in the pre-Independence period was not remarkable. During that time only a few Karbi writers like Bonglong Terang wrote and enriched Karbi literature. Terang is often duly regarded as the first Karbi folklorist. In 1937 he published three books in the Karbi language, namely, *Adam- Asar*, *Ha-E* and *Rukasen*. The first is a collection of traditional Karbi wedding songs. *Ha-e* contains a ballad of love celebrating the love of Haimu. The last is a description of Sarthe, the headman of a Karbi village. The book also contains descriptions as regards the origin of Karbi village organization and of paddy and the chilli.⁹

Bonglong Terang continued writing even after the birth of the Karbi Anglong district. During this time, he wrote the books-*Aran*

*Ateng, Karbi Kapusan, Dinmir, Sar Lamsam, Ser Hangtham and Ranglin.*¹⁰

Rabgunath Teron was one more distinguished Karbi writer who hailed from the plains during this time. He wrote the book *Karbi Po* and contributed towards enrichment of Karbi literature.¹¹

Kehai Bey is a noted writer of the same period who contributed towards the growth of Karbi literature. He is not so well-known, but nevertheless he is notable in the field of the then Karbi poetry that was at a very nascent stage. About him and his contribution Rong Bong Terang writes:

*“At one time romantic poems were about to fully bloom in the hands of Kehai Bey, once a student of Cotton College. This possibility was noticed in the collection of lyrics named Thoi avo Mongve, which he preferred to write under the pen name of Warton Kumar Bey. This book brought a new wave of consciousness to Karbi Anglong. This book can be regarded as the first step in the history of the publication of lyrics in Karbi. The hallmarks of the book were that it was an exception in rhyme and rhythm to Karbi traditional style of lyrics.”*¹²

Terang also showers his praises on the work thus:

“...the influence of romanticism is clearly visible (in Thoi avo Mongve) in imagery, diction, ideology, etc. of the lyricist Kehai Bey. In

case of rhyme and rhythm also, he has deviated from the traditional Karbi folk songs and has resorted to a new style.”¹³

Karbi literature got a new dimension of growth after Independence, most particularly after the formation of the Karbi Anglong district. This became a golden period for the growth and development of Karbi language and literature. Monthly magazine *Samfri Atur* and books like *Baibel Kangthir* and *Karbi Self-Thought* were published by the Christian Missionaries.

Besides, during and after this period, there was a good growth of Karbi journals and magazines. Special mention may be made of: *Longsar, Lokim Karbi, Klirdap, Nakwe Towar Kimi, Manjir, Lamde, Loti, Atur Kimi, Wojaru, etc.*¹⁴

The formation of the Karbi Lammet Amei in 1966 was an epoch-making and auspicious moment for the growth of Karbi language and literature. Longkam Teron and Padmashree Rongbong Terang were its first president and secretary respectively. Till now, the apex literary organization of the Karbis has done commendable works in encouraging and publishing literature in Karbi, taking due care to publish books on Karbi language as well. Notable books published by this organization include: “short story collection like *Lammet Esang, Samfri Apunsir, Kasanghang*; poetry collections like *Sengwe Amir Sigidupupe, Dampijuk Singdi, Ruptaine, Jengjeri, Kungriso Mirdan*; collection of tales like *Tomo Puru*; anthology of articles like *Khei Aharsi, Jutang Amung,*

Rongtheang Angtang, Ser Langsar, Lamjir Afar, Lamjir Kangdak; compilation of folksongs like *Pengsomir, Dimir Alun;* collection of biographies like *Langri Amelur;* dictionaries like *Akemi Karbi Lamthe Amarjang;* etcetera.”¹⁵

In shaping the foundation of modern Karbi literature, the contribution of Longkam Teron is undeniable. Through his deep insight Teron has composed literature which has left its ‘indelible footmarks in modern Karbi literature’. Rongbong Terang remarks further that these writers have, to some extent, contributed towards building the foundation of modern Karbi literature.¹⁶

Apart from these celebrated writers of modern Karbi literature, there are other Karbi writers who contributed to the growth of their language and literature. There has been the growth of a number of Karbi socio-cultural and literary organizations which have also published their newsletters in Karbi propagating the cause of Karbi language, culture and literature.

Even though not very large in numbers, a few Karbi journals and magazines have been in publication after the formation of Karbi Lammet Amei. Special mention may be made of: *Owe Kimi, Karbi, Klirdap, Towar Kimi, Nakwe, Manjir, Lamde, Loti, Atur Kimi, Longsar, Lokim, Wojaru,* and so on.¹⁷

In the recent times, writers who have contributed to the development of Karbi literature include Prof. Rong Bong Terang,

Dharamsingh Teron, Suren Kramsa, Dr. Phukan Chandra Phangcho, Morningkeey Phangcho, Sikari Tisso, Bidarsing Kro, Sabrasi Timung, Lunche Timung, Longbiram Ingti Kathar, Bidarsing Rangpi, Bidyasing Rangpi, Khayasing Hanse, Bapuram Teron, Ananda Rangfar, Jit Kumar Rangpi, Pari Rangpi, Gandhi Takbi, Sarklim Taro, Langkamar Timung, Deben Timung, Rongbong Terang, Arun Teron, Jarsing Bey, Mandalsing Bey, Sarkrat Hanse, Sing Kro, Logkam Teron, Samsing Teron, Khirla Teronpi, Ruplan Ingtipi, Sadhana Rangpipi, Rina Patarpi, Ruhini Teronpi, among others.¹⁸

In brief, modern or new Karbi literature has seen an era of slow but steady and remarkable development in the hands of a group of Karbi writers who are extremely conscious of and devoted to their rich legacy, national feeling and unity, importance of preserving their language and literature and exerting their cultural and linguistic identity amidst a thousand hurdles that generally characterize Karbi Anglong, the homeland to the largest number of the Karbis in Assam. Even amidst the otherwise gloomy environment perpetrated by hordes of extremists in Karbi Anglong, these writers have devoted themselves to writing, showcasing the rich heritage the Karbis have and silently pushing forth the idea that the extremism alone does not characterize Karbi Anglong.

5.3 Karbi Folk Literature

The Karbis did not have any written script till the last two decades of the twentieth century, even though they have been creating literary

gems and kept them alive orally for centuries. The spontaneous feelings of the Karbi fore-fathers got unlocked through the media of songs which provided the basis of Karbi folk literature. In fact, the very basis of Karbi folk literature is this genre of folk songs. The tribe created songs taking the varied experiences of the agrarian life centered round the jhum cultivation. The tribe has lived geographically an insular life amidst nature. Various phenomena of nature, various forms, colours and contours of the countryside, its flora and fauna, tranquility of nature, the jhum cultivation, the pleasures and experiences of doing it, the pleasures of pro-creation, diseases and misfortunes, fear for the inexplicable, etc. form the basis of the folk literature of the tribe. They created their literature in song form. Their folk memory has kept all these songs alive through generations. They have all elements of folk literature such as social customs, historical memoirs, ballads like the Hai-ii, Sabin Alun- the miniature version of the Ramayana, love songs, folk tales, magic and sorcery, proverbs and idioms, riddles, incantations, invocations, lullabies, magical chants, etc. Many anonymous poets and litterateurs have depicted the feelings of happiness and sorrow, hope and despair, aspirations, sufferings and ordeals of migration and settlement, pleasures and pains of an agrarian life in the hills and have placed these amid nature and society like any other literature. The modern Karbi literature has grown on the foundation provided by these folk elements of literature which have been collected and published in the recent years.

Though the literate new generation has started concentrating on writing modern literature, the practice of creation and respect to folk literature is still current among the illiterate people. This is however, applicable to all folk literature across the world.

In matters of Karbi folk songs, authors like Bonglong Terang, Kehai Bey, Samsing Hanse, etc. have compiled a number of books which are compilations of these folk songs. But as is expected, there is no mention of the authorship of the folk songs included in these collections. So is the case with the love songs collected by Premkanta Mahanta. They have, however, done one praiseworthy thing in these collections by incorporating names of some persons with age along with the place names. Cues have been taken to gather some idea as regards the time of composition or transmission of these songs. From an analysis of the specimen of the folk songs collected so far, conclusions have been drawn by researchers that these songs were the gifts of the Kapili-Dhansiri valley. In the course of time, the folk songs transmitted from the Kuki-Chin ethnic group got lost. They are no longer available among the living memory of the Karbis. But though these mainstream Kuki Chin folk songs are lost from the collective Karbi memory, their existence in the past cannot be denied. The folk tales may provide valuable supporting materials about establishing a relationship with the remote past, particularly with the Kuki-Chin group of folk songs. But till now, with the available materials at hand, it has been concluded that the great expanse of the Assam valley might be the originating ground of

Karbi folk literature where the Karbis have lived for long centering round the fields for jhum cultivation. Their pleasures and pains of the agrarian life might have been the fertile ground for unlocking their heart through songs, tales, ballads of love and separation, fears, folk medicine, ways of propitiating gods and demons, etc.

Among the various genres of Karbi folk literature, folk song is the richest of all and the Karbis regard these folk songs to be the coveted treasures. An intricate relationship of the natural aesthetics with the social folk customs of the agrarian people is expressed in these folk songs. The vivid pictures of true emotions are found in the folk songs in a vibrant way.

Noted Karbi folklorist Bonglong Terang was the first one to collect, organise and publish the rare materials of Karbi folk literature. His collections include materials from the pre-second World War times. He published these collected materials in the form of books. First he published two books titled *Rukasen* and *Adam Asar*. The book titled *Aron Ateng* contained these two published books along with the additions of a few songs and customs of the Karbi society. As has been stated, the book has been considered the very foundation of Karbi literature. The most notable contribution of the book to Karbi literature and society was that it included subjects that truthfully delineated the Karbi society. Among others, the book contained the descriptions of the customs of Karbi wedding system.

5.4 Subjects of Karbi Folk Literature

The scope of the Karbi folk literature is very broad, stretched to the horizon. The Karbis are deep believers in re-birth. They believe that when a person of a particular family dies, his soul takes rebirth in the same family. Thus their folk literature too is not confined only with the life of its folk life from birth to death; rather it is stretched from one life to another, through lives indeed. These beliefs find their due place in Karbi folk literature. From an analysis of the Karbi folk literature, its genres can be classified as follows¹⁹:

- i. Pirthe Keplang (Origin of the earth)
- ii. Karbi Keplang (Origin of the Karbi Tribe)
- iii. Hemphu Keplang (Origin of the incarnation of god Hemphu)
- iv. Kur Keplang (Origin of Karbi clans)
- v. Rongkikim (Origin of the first Karbi village organization)
- vi. Sarkebat (Origin and initiation of Karbi village head called Sarthe or Gaonburha)
- vii. Lakhi Keplang (Origin of Paddy)
- viii. Birik Keplang (Origin of chillies)
- ix. Hanso Keplang (Origin of ginger)
- x. Bongoi Alun (Pastoral Songs)
- xi. Tu-aa-a (Lullabies)
- xii. Ritnongsandi developed in the Zirkedam (songs sung during starting of cultivation)

- xiii. Dengrali (Songs of the relation between man and trees)
- xiv. Songs of wailing during the death of a person and dirge songs
- xv. Songs having sensual undertones sung during death rituals
- xvi. Incantations
- xvii. Riddles and proverbs

Karbi Folktales

Among these subjects or genres of Karbi folk literature, the folk songs and the folktales are the richest. Among the few writers who have tried to enlist the Karbi folk tales in English, special mention may be made of Dharamsingh Teron and Sikari Tisso. In their ‘Karbi Studies’ Vol. 3, they have compiled a good number of Karbi folktales translated from original Karbi language with Karbi texts. The stories have translated and documented with illustrations.²⁰

The folktales incorporated in the book:

1. A Hen and her Lazy friends (Vopi Ejon Lapen Asangho Atum)
2. How the Dongo Got its Racket Tail (Voraju Ani)
3. The Hog Deer of Pantisang (Pantisang Aoqhinuqrang)
4. A lazy spider (Ijon Kaselet Asangman)
5. Sita Kamar (Sita Kamar)
6. Ghalakghatak (Ghalakghatak)
7. The Mongoose (Phelangjule)
8. The Legend of Binongvopo (Binongvopo)

9. The Sleeping Cat (Mengkalu Thurthe)
10. The Mad Adventures of Loponbirik and Arphek Achu (Longbirik Lapen Arphek Achu)
11. The origin of two-shore (Kengphi Keplang)
12. The 'winter-summer way' (Chung-Phang:ok Atovar)
13. A dog, a hyena and a she-elephant (Methan, Mahar lapen Ingnarpi)
14. The pious orphan and Dalimet Kungri (Jangreso Ningme lapen Dalimet Kungri)
15. Kings Kongso and Bongso (Kongso pen Bongso recho)
16. The origin of bottle gourd (Bong)
17. How the Buffaloes were Domesticated (Chelong Keplang)
18. The Tortoise and the Monkey (Chitungpo pen Kipipo)
19. Vokronso (Vokronso)
20. The Orphan and the Earth Princess (Jangreso Lapen Purthimi Kungripi)
21. How the Hornbills originated (Vo:ingkek lapen Voterang)
22. A Frog and a Tiger (Teke Lapen Chongho)
23. The Tigers' *Rongker* (Teke Rongker)
24. The Prince and the Prime Minister's Son (Recho Lapen Chakri Kethe asopo)
25. Ingru Tulapi (Ingru Tulapi)
26. Songsar Recho (Songsar Recho)
27. The Hingchong Twins (Hingchong Musoso)

28. A Black ant and a Frog (Misorongpo Lapen Chonghokaloso)
29. The Legend of All Women Village (Arloso Arong Alamo)
30. The orphan and the Vulture's feather (Takun Arveng)
31. Two Orphan Brothers (Jangreso Kortete)
32. The orphan and the Giant (Jangreso lapen Hi:isirke)
33. The Sunbird and His Wife (Voso Lindok)
34. The Sun and the Moon (Chiklo lapen Arni)
35. The Tiger's Revenge (Teke Aseme)
36. The Legend of Baby Hill (Osothi:i Anglong)
37. The Tiger and His Human Twin (Teke Recho)
38. Mangbon the Brute (Ingnam Amangbon)
39. Molongkoi, the Fortune-Teller (Molongkoi Asang Kelang)
40. An orphan and a vulture (Jangreso pen Takun)
41. Sumsali and the origin of Fish (Sumsali lapen ok keplang)
42. The Legend of Karpong the King (Karpong Recho)
43. The Jackal and the Quail (Sirung Pen Vo:ut)
44. The Orphans and their cruel Parents (Pichenek-Pichenek)
45. Never Leave a Promised Tale Untold (Tomo Thanji Pule
Thanthedet Kertang)

These folktales show the simple life of the Karbis, their beliefs, the things they hold dear, their worldly wisdom, their world of imagination and world view, and so on.

5.5 Features of Karbi Folk Literature

a. Creation and reflection of the folk life

It is an accepted fact that folk literature is the creation and reflection of the folk life of the people. It is also equally applicable to Karbi folk literature. The Karbi folk narratives have their inextricable relations with their folk life to the bone. It is because the Karbis observe their social rites and rituals, marriage, death rituals, social administrative framework etc. following these folk narratives and songs. It will not untrue to add that some aspects of the Karbi folk literature have helped maintaining the rules and regulations in the Karbi society.

b. The timelessness or the transcendental quality

The timelessness or the transcendental quality of any folk literature is also a characteristic feature of the Karbis' folk literature too. Through generations the folk literature of the tribe has survived to its present form depicting its life, aspirations, trials and tribulations, national feeling and integrity; woes of an agrarian life; its labour, conflicts and struggle; love and expressions of longing and separation; philanthropy and heroism; religious and communal feelings etc.

c. Orality

Another notable feature of the Karbi folk literature, as those of others, is that it is primarily oral. The oral history of the Karbis is associated or

hidden in many of their folk songs. These songs contain narrations regarding the state of their primitive economy, routes of their migration, names of tribes and communities with whom they had had contacts and cultural exchanges, conflicts, etc. in symbolical references. Much valuable material regarding the ordeals of the tribe, the pleasures, aspirations, whim whams, passions, concepts of heroism, ideals of love, trials and tribulations in the hands of various kings while migrating and having settlements, etc. are found in their oral traditions of folk literature.

d. Tradition of a singer called ‘Lunsepo’

It is notable that in every Karbi village, there is the tradition of a singer called ‘Lunsepo’ who memorise a number of songs from their folk literature. In their social events they sing songs if necessary. In their marriage institution, the discussions take place through songs from both sides of the bride and the groom. These songs are sung by definite singers only.

5.6 Karbi Folk Songs: An Analysis

Among the genres of Karbi folklore, their folk songs are the richest. These folk songs depict their folk life truthfully and in a spontaneous way. Songs are the spontaneous outbursts of peoples’ emotions, passions, etc. They flow out like the stream. The Karbi folk songs also truthfully delineate the tribe’s folk life. The folk life as we see in their folk songs is the one created on the banks of the rivers Kolong

and Kopili. The songs talk us of an area fed by the waters of these two rivers. The rivers are the life blood of Karbi civilization and hence the rivers also find their due place in the folk songs. It is against this backdrop that an assertion has generally been made: Karbi folk literature as we get today grew in the valleys of these rivers and is of local origin and development on the banks of these rivers. The original Kuki Chin mainstream might have been lost earlier. The existence of the link, however, is not denied.

It is this reason why Karbi folk songs speak us of the streams, rivers and rivulets, serpents, animals, various birds and fishes, trees, etc. These pictures are very familiar to the Karbis as they live surrounded by these. The exotic beauty of the Kolong and Kopili never ceased to attract the Karbis and their folk life was soaked in it. Apart from nature, their folklore also mentions about various ethnic groups who live in the close vicinity with the tribe. The additions of these groups have increased the charm of the folk songs.

5.7 Past Recounting and Migration Memories through Karbi folk song Kecharhe and Mosera Kihir

Another notable feature of the Karbi folk literature is that if a person dies in Karbi society, his departed soul is traditionally remembered through some wailing songs. These songs are called 'Kecharhe' and the singer of these songs is called 'Sarhepi' or 'Uchepi'. These Sarhepis have still kept the songs alive which have passed from

generation to generation. The tradition of singing such songs is an exclusively female affair.

Mosera Kihir

Mosera Kihir is one of the most remarkable genres of Karbi folk narratives and is an integral part of Karbi funeral ceremony. It literally means 'recounting the past from memories'.

Chomangkan or Thi-Karhi is the ceremony Karbis perform after death of a person. The narrative of Mosera Kihir is recited during this occasion. It is an inseparable part of this death ceremony. It is in the form of a recital during this Karbi funerary ceremony. Mosera Kihir is also recited on the occasion of the Riso Chojun, which is a 'collective youth ritual'.

As Karbi tradition demands, it is a custom for the host of Chomangkan to formally welcome the visiting guests and dignitaries, represented by youths, from neighbouring villages. It is also imperative to bid them goodbye at the end of the ceremony. The hosts formally express their sense of gratitude and thankfulness to the guests for their help and cooperation in making the occasion complete successfully. The host also begs their excuses for any inadvertent mistakes, lapses, irregularities or commissions and commissions in performing the ceremony or in dealing with them.

During this occasion, the ‘heads of village youths’, known by their traditional titles of ‘*klengsarpò*’, chant the ‘Mosera’. The ritual is that it is chanted in the manner of a long ‘question and answer’ session. Here the history and past of the tribe’s migration through various phases is recounted. It also recounts the various trying periods and troubles the tribe had to pass through.

The verses of the Mosera are long. These verses are chanted breathlessly but ceremonially. The verses are also chanted during the concluding session of the Zirkadem, which is the co-operative of Karbi unmarried youths.

The Karbis have a particular belief behind observing this ritual during Chomangkan. The Karbis are ardent believers in rebirth. It is their firm faith that a dead person takes rebirth in the same family. The Karbi epithets ‘Return to village’ or ‘*arong kachevoi*’ is a euphemism for death. Hence they hold the view that when a person dies he is believed to have returned to his ancestors’ village. It is because of another of their beliefs that “...journeys of the soul often retraces the routes of migration from an imagined homeland....”²¹

Kecharhe

Among the rich repertoire of Karbi folk narratives, their dirge song called ‘*Kecharhe*’, is a very important genre. The speciality of this genre of folk narrative is that it describes the out of the world journey of

the soul into the *-chom rongme, chom rongso*, i.e., and which they believe, 'land of eternal happiness'.

Kecharhe is also an integral part of the Karbi funerary ritual Chomangkan or Thi-Karhi. This dirge singing is an exclusively female affair. There is no part, whatsoever, for the males. In this funeral ceremony the central figure is the '*Sarhepi*' or '*uchepi*', the female dirge singer who is also the priestess. In Karbi society it is taboo for a male to sing this dirge or wailing song. Remarkably, it is also forbidden for even the '*Sarhepi*' to chant the dirge song on other occasions within the boundary of a village.

During Chomangkan, the appointed '*Sarhepi*' or a group of them sing the dirge song. The Sarhepi or a group takes upon herself the role of a guide of the soul. They believe that the soul thus has its final journey into the land of eternal bliss. They also believe that the soul must pass through 'pre-ordained resting places'. Their belief is that the soul cannot reach the final destination without the chant and the heart-rending wails of the dirge by the Sarhepi. The path through which the soul has to pass is believed to be difficult terrains, 'thorny and rocky-mountains covered with thick clouds of mist and big rivers.'²²

Regarding the recital of Kecharhe, Tanmay Bhattacharjee writes:

"In Kecharhe the ladies assemble in the house of the dead person and sing this song. The song which has a tragic import takes at least two hours for its full recital. It describes the hopes and despair of the dead

person which he had borne during his life time. It is a mournful expression in song with a heavy heart. The song is divided into many phases:

- a. Lang Panglu (the body wash)
- b. Ankepi (offering of food)
- c. Towar kethan (the road through which the body will pass)

All the three functions are done by women. On the way to the other world, the route through which the dead person must pass is imagined. There is a belief that the dead passes through Mukindan Hills. The hills are high. The ladies describe in Kecharhe how the dead crosses the hill. The crossing of the Mukindan hill is symbolical. These hills are midway between Heaven and Earth. It is also the end of the road from where it is branched off in two directions-heaven and hell. The pure soul who did not die an unnatural death takes the right hand route to Heaven and the man who died an unnatural death takes the left side road leading to Hell. The unnatural death is dreaded most in Karbi society.”²³

5.8 Karbi as story tellers: Their Folktales

The Karbis are great story tellers. They can tell stories with complete elan. Their stories are always invariably coloured by their locale. As noticed by Stack, the stories of the Karbis are always punctuated with the typical indigenous colours.

Karbi folk literature has been made rich by these folk tales. If we look at the subject matters, we see that the grandmother, the grandchild, various animals and birds, demons, orphans, love and cruelty, etc. find frequent places in Karbi folktales. Many Karbi folk tales came down to the present generation through an 'immaculate band of story tellers'. Tanmay Bhattacharjee tells us further that some of the stories which were told to Stack were commonplace and some of these were most probably borrowed from foreign sources. The indigenous stories are still better.

The foreign elements of the stories were transfused in the culture in such a manner that these have now become indistinguishable parts of the Karbi folktales. The stories are very often kept in the form of songs which made the whole process much easier for preservation.

5.9 Heroes and heroism in Karbi folk literature

The Karbi folk memory has kept alive a number of local heroes. These heroes are still afresh in the Karbi folk memory due to their bravery, great community service and sacrifice for the cause of the people and the nation. Some of these Karbi heroes have become legends. Some others have been lost because of the lack of written record.

Among the heroes Karbis adore till today mention may be made of the following²⁴:

a. Thong Nokbe Teron:

Believed to be the captain and bodyguard of Jayanta Narang, the Jaintia king, the Karbis regard him to be one among the celebrated heroes. They believe that, had Thong not been there, the Jaintias would still have persecuted the Karbis. He is believed to have killed the king of Ghilani, Recho-Ikpo who could not be defeated by the Jaintia King. Thong was killed by the Jaintia soldiers out of jealousy. It was because he was greatly honoured by the king and the Jaintia soldiers could not tolerate this.

b. Vaisong:

Well-built and handsome, Vaisong was deeply loved by his people. He pursued everything that he believed to be right. The Jaintias did not like him since he was very sincere. They sought opportunities to trap him and once he fell into one. They enslaved him for 12 years. He fought a number of important battles and is still remembered as a national hero.

c. Sir Vomu Tokbi:

Vomu Tokbi, another Karbi hero, is believed to be associated with the slaying of a predator called Vomu (Eagle) that once tormented the Karbis with frequent attacks. He is said to have given the Karbis a new lease of life by slaying the eagle.

d. Jabara Timung:

He was a dear friend and companion of Thong Nokbe Teron, the great Karbi hero. Jabara too lived for the common good of the people like his friend Nokbe.

e. Rongpharpi Rongbe:

It needs special mention that in the history of the Karbis there is the mention only of one Karbi woman leader or heroine. Her name is Kareng (Runja) Rongpharpi. Wife of On Teron, she was the proud mother of the Karbi hero Thong Nokbe Teron. Karbi folk memory has it that she hacked the Dimasa king's soldiers to death with an axe because they asked her after the king's order to produce milk for tiger cubs. During her leadership days, the Dimasa king is said to feed human milk to the tiger cubs which the king reared as pets. Later on, she advised the people to escape the scene since she was sure that the Dimasas would seek revenge and her strength was limited to withstand the combined forces. Thus she was successful in evading the attack of the enemies and protecting her people.

f. Bikha Tokbi:

Bikha Tokbi was with the Ahom army when he fought the Man tribe. The battle ended in a peace treaty. After the battle, he gave away a few Karbi girls to the Man tribe as a token of understanding. He was conferred the title of Barua for his valour, but his giving away of the few Karbi girls to the tribe did not find favour with the people. The people held the view that Bikha had actually sold the girls. So they hatched a conspiracy against him and killed him.

Tanmay Bhattacharjee's book '**Sociology of the Karbis**' enlists some other Karbi heroes who are²⁵-

- a. Sot Recho:** Many say the Karbis transplanted the great king Yudhisthira in their folk tales and named him 'Sot Recho'- meaning 'pure king'. He was according to legends, a deeply religious man and he looked after his subjects quite well. He ruled from the present site of Rongkhang. The king whether lived actually is difficult to say but legends say he was there. It is quite possible that a good Karbi potentate was later on remembered as 'pure king'.
- b. Thireng Wangreng:** A Karbi law-giver, he was said to have started the Chomangkan festival and framed rules for it. He is still believed to be a link between the kingdom of 'Jama' (heaven) and this earth. He is specially invoked during the time of the festival and the people seek his best wishes. He conveys to the people on earth that the souls in heaven accepted their offerings.
- c. Har Pokkang:** According to the legends, he ruled in the neighbourhood of Rongkhang under the Jaintia king. He was a good king and the subjects were happy under him. He was succeeded to the throne by his brother Kadangchiri.

5.10 Love in Karbi folk literature

Folk life of every race is incomplete without love and stories of love. Courtship and wooing, yearnings of the love-lorn

hearts, union of lovers at different places of the village and near rivers, exchanges of looks and glances, yearning for union after separation, etc. are life blood of every folk literature. The Karbis too have a rich storehouse of love songs. A number of such songs have been collected and compiled by Samsing Hanse under the title 'Karbi Pranayee Geet'. The Karbi youths have their own ideals of true, immortal love in the love story of *Haimu Alun* which celebrates love in its true colour with the message that love cannot be bought by kings, mansions and by luxuries and that love is not something money can buy.

5.11 Songs regarding origin of songs by Rangina in Karbi Literature

The Karbis believe that songs and music are gifts of Rangina in their society. Without him there would not have been any song and music in Karbi society. He is considered the musical and cultural doyen in Karbi society. It is remarkable to note that the Karbis are not simply satisfied to believe that Rangina had gifted songs and music to the tribe, rather there are songs regarding the origin of songs by Rangina. These are called meta-folklore in literature. This is very uncommon in folk literature of other tribes. The Karbis invariably memorise Rangina as the heavenly person who gifted the tribe with music and enabled them to see light of the world

5.12 Keplang or creation stories in Karbi folk literature

The Karbis have various stories and folk narratives regarding the origin of the world, the Karbi tribe, the Kurs or clans, the ginger, chillies, paddy, and so on. Some of these Keplangs are-

- a. Pirthe Keplang (Origin of the earth)
- b. Karbi Keplang (Origin of the Karbi Tribe)
- c. Hemphu Keplang (Origin of the incarnation of god Hemphu)
- d. Kur Keplang (Origin of Karbi clans)
- e. Rongkikim (Origin of the first Karbi village organization)
- f. Sarkebat (Origin and initiation of Karbi village head called Sarthe or Gaonburha)
- g. Lakhi Keplang (Origin of Paddy)
- h. Birik Keplang (Origin of chillies)
- i. Hanso Keplang (Origin of ginger)

These Keplangs or creation stories are invaluable jewels of Karbi folk literature. The stories tell a lot about the life, belief, mind, worldview and psyche of the tribe. They also give us valuable hints on the things the tribe hold valuable and essential in their folk life.

5.13 Oso Kebei Alun or cradle song in Karbi folk literature

Like the mothers of all other races, the Karbis too have their cradle songs called Oso Kebei Alun. The Karbi mothers also use lullabies to make her child sleep or to pacify or quieten it. For that she sings a number of songs. These songs speak volumes about a Karbi mother's real world around her. Simple, easy going and agrarian as Karbi mothers are, their cradle songs portray before us a world of mundane affairs like the ripening of the paddy, taking dry fish and salt, etc. When the child is restless, she imitates the sounds of animals and birds.

From the contents of the lullabies it seems that the Karbi mother composes her lullabies keeping in view the corresponding age of the child. This conclusion can be arrived at from the Karbi mother's choice of diction, selection of images from nature and the didactic style of composition and narration. A close perusal of the lullabies will bring to light that Karbi mothers have great responsibilities both at home and the jhum field. The illiterate Karbi mother's depth of feelings expressed in these lullabies is amazing.

5.14 Haimu Alun –Gem of Karbi Love Song

The text of the storyline of this immortal Karbi love story has been taken from the book '**Sociology of the Karbis**' by Tanmay Bhattacharjee. This love story celebrates the theme of love between two Karbi lovers where in the scene there appears

Bordili, a king having his kingdom nearby. Bordili proposes to marry Haimu who is already married. As fate would have it, Haimu died, leaving Long, her beloved and the King astounded. The heart-rending love story is still afresh in the Karbi folk memory and it continues to remind them of the essence of love.

As narrated in the said book, Haimu was from a village and was wedded to a youth named Long Terang. He was young, strong and stout. They were happily married. While he labored hard in the jhum field, Haimu looked after the daily chores at home. The young couple prospered this way with labour. The villagers considered them as an ideal couple and in fact they thought them to be the best example. As is natural, some people, however, were jealous of their happiness and prosperity. They secretly contemplated to harm the couple. Young and exuberant as they were, Long and Haimu ignored these people.

As a girl, Haimu was exquisitely beautiful with all other virtues. Neither Long nor Haimu ever imagined that her bewitching beauty would bring disaster to the family one day.

As time passed on, the couple was blessed with a child. Haimu got busier-the daily domestic chores took most of her time. Like all other Karbi women she too had many types of duties-firewood collection, child rearing and looking after guests who were rather regular visitors.

Though Haimu's time and energy were tested by this busy schedule, she enjoyed her work and was happy. One particular market day, a Khasi trader came to their house. He saw and met Haimu. He immediately developed a passion for her. He stayed a few days in their house. On his return, he went to Bordili at Socheng. Bordili was enchanted by the description given by the trader. He sent an emissary to Amtarpeng, the village where Haimu and Long lived. The emissary came with an embarrassing and shocking proposal. Bordili wished to marry Haimu. The couple was struck founded. The tension rose. The couple became furious. The emissary tried to appease them but it was of no avail. The emissary gave a threat but the couple remained adamant.

The emissary returned and informed Bordili about it. He contemplated and arranged a date secretly. On that appointed date he came with a big party to Amtarpeng to take Haimu. She was totally ignorant of the impending danger. At first Bordili tried to take Haimu forcibly but he failed in so doing. Long challenged him with equal vehemence.

Having seen the fierceness and resolve in Long, Bordili changed his tactics and adopted a diplomatic course. Adopting a softer tone, he requested the couple to accompany them to his capital Socheng. The couple sensed danger and so declined the request. Bordili insisted with his request. This was followed by the

entire group with sweet words. Finally they agreed to accompany the party to the capital. Their dark days began looming large on the horizon.

They started the journey along with the party. The nearer they approached the capital, the more impolite Bordili grew in his behavior to Long. The whole party joined him in insulting Long. He protested but soon he realized that it was a hopeless protest. When they reached the capital's gate, Haimu was suddenly whisked away into the capital. Long cried but he was forcibly huddled into a separate quarter. Long returned home fuming and cursing his fate. Haimu too cried and felt terribly depressed in the absence of her beloved Long.

Very soon, Bordili declared Haimu as his queen. However, Haimu refused to accept that exalted position. She even refused to take food in the palace of Bordili. She was visibly emaciated by long starvation and anxiety. She was almost lost without her beloved Long. She drilled herself to die for a cause.

Bordili had no other option but to call Long. This time he had to welcome Long with proper reception. But Haimu at that time reached the pitiable state of comma. She saw Long and requested him to cook food for her. After a long interval, she ate food cooked by Long. She was immensely satisfied and smiled. But it was the last flicker of a dying lamp. Haimu after a short

while died in the lap of her consort Long. He returned to Amtarpeng with a sad memory.

The memory of Long now belongs to the entire Karbi tribe as a whole. Even today, the love story of Haimu and Long reverberates in the air and it created the most tragic melody of ever-lasting penetration.²⁶

5.15 The story of Rangchena Sarpo

The text of this story too has been taken from Tanmay Bhattacharjee's book '**Sociology of the Karbis**'.

Once there lived a powerful king named 'Rangchena Sarpo'. He was powerful in the sense that he commanded everybody to do a job without caring for the comfort or discomfort of the people. He forced young men and women to join 'Zirkedem'. He used to keep these youths in that state for eleven or twelve years.

The young people spent the forced long years in Zirkedem but as soon as the period ended, Rangchena Sarpo again ordered them to go back to the dormitory. They hardly got any time to look into their own affairs. They were always doing somebody's work as Zirkadem was meant for the community and not for the individual.

At last the command of Rangchena Sarpo became a torture to the young souls and they needed respite. They began thinking ways how to get respite from this autocratic and torturous king. The unanimous

decision with one dissent was to commit suicide by jumping down from the lofty heights of Challeng hills. They carried out their plans. All died except the one who differed. He reported the tragic end of the whole party to the people. In this way, they took revenge on the oppressive village chief.

Today the institution of Zirkedem still survived but the youth are now subject of veneration there. After every session of Zirkedem, the god of the youth 'Riso Arnam' is propitiated to commemorate the memory of those young men and young women who became immortal through death.²⁷

5.16 The river Kapili in Karbi folk literature

The valleys of Kapili have been the happy breeding ground of Karbi life and literature. It has found place in all Karbi folklore, folk memory, myths and legends.

The river Kapili flows from the Borail Hills to the south west before joining the Brahmaputra. The river has given life and succor to more than one tribe and hence it is an object of reverence for all those tribes. The Karbis live in the lower reaches of the river and their stay in the trans-Kapili region is now the story of some centuries. Due to their long stay they have developed a bond with the river. Their folk songs say thus:

Iru kachen Achipong

Kopili pelanghe Kolong

Chipong Don Churi plenchhung.

Meaning: On the banks of Kapili and Kolong, there was a village which consisted of large numbers of families. The river banks were a lovely place where hundreds of young men and women flocked to make their love. In that beautiful village Iru Kachen lived.

The river is so inextricably related to the Karbis' corporate life that it is 'now woven into the history of the tribe.'

But it is interesting to note the Jaintia attitude to the river. Their attitude towards Kapili is one of 'superstitious reverence' and cult of worshipping originating from an all-pervading fear. They consider the waters of the river as 'Kalapani' or black water (kola=black, pani=water in Assamese). In the ancient days, they also did not cross the river. Records say that once they never carried any luggage from one bank of the river to the other. For them Kapili was the mother goddess. They sacrificed two human beings each year in order to propitiate the mother. It is really a matter of inquisition how the fear of the tribe changed into a worship cult or why the same river is revered by the Karbis and feared by the Jaintias.²⁸

5.17 The Karbi Ramayana or Sabin Alun with its regional characteristics

Among the various stories a Karbi grandmother tells her grandchildren, the stories of Rama and Sita from Sabin Alun also figure. Sabin Alun is the Karbi version of the Hindu epic Ramayana. It is noticeable how the epic and the story of Ram and Sita made their entry to the tribe's social life. It is also remarkable how the story has been adapted to meet the locale of the tribe's geographically insular corporate life, the culture of which is tribal. The Karbi version of the Ramayana gives us a realistic picture of the actual life situations of the tribe.

Prof. Rong Bong Terang says that in the Sabin Alun collected by Sri Premkanta Mahanta, we find the realistic pictures of Karbi life.²⁹

The possible influence of the Assamese literature and culture on the literature and culture of the tribes of Assam cannot be denied. Alternately, one also cannot deny the influence of other communities on the society, religious beliefs, rites and rituals, verbal art, etc. of the greater Assamese society as well. The influence is reciprocal in ways. Prof. Terang further opines:

*'The Assamese society and culture is estimated to be dearer to the psyche of the Karbis in their general life than any other tribe living in the hills .such an influence might be there behind the creation of the Sabin Alun.'*³⁰

There are reasons for these regional characteristics in Sabin Alun. It is recorded that the Kachari king Mahamanikya ruled the area comprising of the Kolong-Kapili valley when Madhava Kandali completed the translation of the Ramayana under the patronage of this king. This king of the fourteenth century is known to having great regards for the Ramayana which might have played an important inspiring role and congenial atmosphere for the subjects under him for the spread of Ramakatha. Sufficient grounds exist of believing that the story of Sabin Alun transmitted orally among the Karbis was an influence of this king. There is another aspect to believing the influence. It is that Madhav Kandali hailed from the vicinity of the Kandali hills in the district of Nagaon. Hence it is possible that his genius might have influenced the lives of the Karbis. That is why it can be said that Ramakatha contained in the Sabin Alun is the echo of the Ramayana translated by Madhava Kandali. That is why the heritage of the Karbi Ramayana also can date back only up to the fourteenth century.³¹

It needs mention here that for the authentic text of the Sabin Alun still we have to depend on the text collected and printed by Premkanta Mahanta who is an authority on Karbi literature.

As regards the local elements and the regional characteristics evident in the Sabin Alun, it can be said that there existed sufficient material surrounding and influences for these regional variations. The singers of Sabin Alun had to entertain the local audience and they might

have included local materials to make the story-line more realistic. Besides, since the text remained in mouth for a long time, parts of it might have been interpolated, while some other parts might have been lost. Even the collection and compilation by Mahanta was also from a poet of the Dillain area of Karbi Anglong. Hence, we see a clear picture of that area as the setting.³²

True to these interpolations and later date inclusions to portray local needs, Rama in the Sabin Alun has been sent on exile to the Narajon (Narayan) Hills. Besides, the cremation ground of the bird Womu (Jatayu), maternal uncle of Rama, is also shown to be the Narayan hills. The Rama of Sabin Alun tried to end his life by jumping in the funeral pyre. In such a critical moment, Lakshmana brought water from the river Deopani in a *polo*, a fishing implement, and doused the fire of the funeral pyre. When Rama's life was saved both the brothers took bath in the river Deopani and set out to rescue Sita.³³

Another notable regional character noticed in the Sabin Alun is that after beheading the Mahiravana his head was thrown towards the Khasi hills. This also implies that new facts were added by the poet at later dates. Inclusion of English terms like *minute in afi do minit (minute) isi* also clearly signifies the modern impact in the Karbi version. If it is so in a text collected from one area of Karbi Anglong, it might be that some other regional differences will also be found in other versions collected from various places.³⁴

There were well founded reasons too for the inclusion of these local and regional elements in Sabin Alun. The Karbi poet had to be true to its local situation and needs. The regional variations are evident in Sabin Alun in matters of social settings, characterization, folk beliefs and distortion of the basic story. The Karbi poet had to keep in mind the demands of the audience so as to make it popular. Hence, through the inclusion of these elements, Rama became familiar to the Karbi people. The song could thus give 'wholesome pleasure as a folk entertainment'.³⁵

The 'house' (rather than a palace) of Janaka in Sabin Alun is a hut. There is no difference of the hut of Janaka with those of the houses of common Karbi cultivators. The life of the society has been truthfully presented in Sabin Alun. Janaka in Sabin Alun works hard in the jhum field, watches crops from a *tongi*, a makeshift hut built on branches of a tree. He also takes rice and country beer. So Janaka is familiar to the Karbis.³⁶

Janaka's wife Hemphi is also a simple Karbi woman. Being even a king, Janaka has no barren or treasury even to hide the egg of the peahen. Janak's wife Hemphi keeps them in a *khaloi* (a container made of bamboo for keeping fish while fishing). She keeps it hanging on the wall. This image is common in every Karbi household.³⁷

The palace of king Dasaratha is also a common, familiar Karbi house made of local materials like thatch, bamboo, mud, etc. It is like the house of king Janaka.

Sita also has been depicted as an ideal Karbi woman in the Sabin Alun who performs her daily domestic chores including carrying food for her father working in the jhum field, serves food and drinks to the guests, does embroidery and looks after the household properly.³⁸

In all these ways, the Karbi poet has enlivened the Karbi society in narrating the stories of Rama. The Karbi poet has done it with a view to coming closer to the hearts and imagination of the people. The images are in conformity with the society familiar to the Karbis.

The Karbi poet has even gone beyond that to make the story dear and realistic to the Karbi people. He takes care to select relevant, appropriate and related folk beliefs from the Karbi society. Such beliefs and selection includes the influence of the moon, magical beliefs in Karbi society, the regarding of a strange creature to be a symbol of destruction, etc. Because of all these local elements and due to being very close to their social life, Sabin Alun has become dear to the Karbis. It has also survived as an immortal creation among the Karbis of both the hills and the plains. It is one of the most notable genres of Karbi folk literature.³⁹

5.18 Karbi Flok Literature and *Lamlir*

One of the most notable aspects of Karbi folk literature is Lamlir. By this word the Karbis refer to certain literary ornamental words which are exclusively used in songs, worship, chants and incantations. These protected groups of words are called Lamlir which are not generally used in spoken Karbi. These words have no similarities with written form, structure and tone of the words used in speaking. Such protected words are rare in other tribal folk literature. Some examples of Lamlir are⁴⁰:

<u>Assamese</u>	<u>Spoken Karbi</u>	<u>Lamlir Karbi</u>
Deuta (Father)	Po	Roo
Maa (Mother)	Pai	Ri
Surjya (Sun)	Aaroni	Samphri
Gabhoru (young girl)	Aakorjang	Sami
Bhaat (Rice)	Aan	Choran
Lakhuti (stick)	Cin	Kintu
Botah (Wind)	Taman	Urmi

5.19 Proverbs in Karbi Folk Literature

The Karbi forefathers observed the happenings of nature very minutely. They developed a very close relation with various objects of nature like trees, birds, change of season, weather, etc. These natural phenomena had their impact on their mind. There grew a tendency

among them to make the difficult situations of life easy. They took help of these phenomena or happenings and these examples became proverbs. These made the subject matter easier to understand. On the other hand, if they certain similarities of a person in matters of conduct, they took help of these proverbs.

One such example is:

Aweng Kongle lokrop chita

Wojaru acho

Kaang reng dunke koi koi pusi pu

Meaning: Even if you break the wings of the siblings of the bird Bhimraj, it will chirp its own voice. The hidden meaning is that son of a king will never cease his character even if he becomes a beggar.)

These proverbs speak about the intrinsic relationship of the Karbi society with nature. An in-depth study is needed to collect and compile these proverbs along with riddles, etc.

5.20 Karbi ballads

The Karbi ballads, which have enriched Karbi folk literature and added glory to it, are still not fully collected and compiled. The Karbi ballads are great store house of the tribe's folk life, their world-view, the struggles of agrarian life, idea of love, tragedy brought about by love and beauty of women, struggles between the rulers and the rules, rapacious

attitude of those in power towards lesser human beings, etc. It is natural that the Karbis, who love nature to its core, whose folk life can never imagine a life devoid of the natural surroundings, who love the 'rhythmic jingling sound of the meandering streams through the hillocks' should create many immortal ballads. It is sad however to note that all these ballads have not been collected and compiled till now. The situation has reached a stage where some of these ballads have been on the verge of getting lost, while some others can now be found only in fragments. Its full forms are probably lost with the passing away of the older generation of Karbis.

Among available ballads of the Karbis, two most notable are Hai-i and Romir. Bonglong Terang and Samsing Hanse have published these two ballads respectively in book forms. They have thus enriched Karbi folk literature. One more notable Karbi literary person, Kehai Bey also collected a number of fragmented ballads. His collection included ballads in fragments like Mir Tahin, Dengsamet, etc.

The ballad of Hai-i is a matchless creation in the Karbi language. Among the most remarkable aspects of the ballad, the first aspect must be that of its art and mode of expression. Prof. Rong Bong Terang calls it 'unparalleled'⁴¹ and that there has been no parallel to this mode of expression in the Karbi language. Other remarkable and praiseworthy aspects in the ballad include-“coherence of narration of the story, clarity of description, natural expression of realistic characters, accurately

depicted Karbi society, the gloom of tragedy looming large over a pure conjugal life, the shameless depiction of crime against women, exquisite description of folk beliefs and the beauty of nature and vibrant expression of the philosophy of life. The depiction of terror and sorrow that was brought in by the uncalled for thrashing by the powerful Long Dili can bring tears to any person.’’⁴²

In Hai-i we see the poetic prowess and dexterity and artistic qualities of the anonymous Karbi poet. In developing the story-line of the ballad, the poet has not resorted to any supernatural power. Rather than that, to enable the story reach the hearts of the common Karbi people, he stuck to giving a vivid, realistic description of the pleasures and sorrows, anguish and passions of the simple human beings with complete artistry.

Such is the artistry of the anonymous Karbi poet that though he remains unseen from the human eye, his presence is felt from the way Hai-i is addressed, providing the listeners the idea for presuming that the composer is a person sharing the same fate as that of Hai-i.

The ballad of Hai-i collected by Bonglong Terang has a total of eleven chapters. There is no incoherence at all in arrangement of the chapters. Realistic picture of human life is depicted in every chapter very coherently. The narrator of the ballad of Hai-I has attempted to put forward the true form of the societal structure of the Karbi society by drawing a pen picture of the society in the initial chapter. The charge of looking after the aspects of a village such as social, economic, cultural,

etc. is vested upon the headman of the village. The future of a village depends upon the village headman or the Sarvasa. As the years passed by, Sarlonki Terang, headman of the Rong Tharve village discussed with the people.

La rong tharve phongjang (ke)

Ram tarchhing doypflan

Li chiphon olonang.

Meaning: This beautiful Rong Tharve village has turned white with coarse grass, let us shift the village to a different location.

The covering of the village with Tonga, a tall coarse grass, indicates the decrease of fertility of the land. The main reason of the constant shifting of the Karbi villages from one place to another is their method of cultivation and decrease of the fertility of the land. The narrator of the song provided this picture of the Karbi society in the pretext of giving an introduction of the ancestors of Hai-I and Long.

Before shifting a village the village priest decides whether the place is suitable for new settlement or not with the help of augury. The creator of this ballad has not forgotten this aspect of the society also:

Reksuti tungjang (si)

Durmi sang palang

Kotari besang pen

Durmi siri jan.

Meaning: They asked the priest of the Timung clan to augur; he performed augury by drawing lines on the grounds with a knife with a beautiful handle.

After completing the auspicious rites, Sar Longki shifted the village towards the upstreams of the river Amterpeng. At that time the fathers of Hai-I and Long were youths in jirsong. After reaching the new village, Hai-I's father Sai Ronghang married Kache Timungpi, the daughter of Reksuti. Long Teron's father On Teron married Kareng Ronghanpi, the sister of his friend of the same Jirsong. Both Kareng and Kache became very close by dint of matrimonial alliance.

In due course of time, both of them were pregnant. One day both of them went out to search for leafy vegetable from the jungle. As it rained all of a sudden, they took shelter in a hut in the jhum field, untied their locks of hair to dry and were engrossed in dreaming about their future. On Teron's wife Kareng Ronghanpi said:

Ne jang ne sarjeng (le)

Sopinso nang plang ra

Nangjang nangserjang

So arlo nagplang

Janpan therapdang (te)

Pachiren weknang

Meaning: If I give birth to a son and you give birth to a daughter, and if they grow up then we shall definitely get them married.

One can feel the depth of thinking of the anonymous Karbi poet from the picture he depicted of the two expecting mothers. The pictures that have emerged are symbolical. The mixing of a shower of rain with the pleasant dream of these two ladies signifies the new possibilities of creation. Moreover, a heart rending sensation is associated with this picture of Hai-I who finally turns into the weather goddess.

The picture of birth of Hai-I and Long is also very significant. They are born at the time of the rising sun. The picture of birth is as follows:

Hai-I wang paphrang

Wang tisso rongwang

Long teron kronjang

Wang samphri phudang

Somindar kewang

Lo charvisi wang.

Meaning: Hai-i is born in the auspicious dawn. Long Teron is also born as soon as the sun rose. As if, both of them have come to this world like husband and wife.

Thus they grew up into childhood through adolescent to adulthood. The Karbi poet has given very realistic picture of the diverse situations of their growth through various imageries. These two children played and grew up together sharing all beautiful and important moments doing everything that children of the Karbi society do. The contact of their mothers before their birth facilitated a number of things to take place naturally since both of them shared important moments together.

The children grew into adults. Their bud of love too began to blossom. The friendship between the mothers, their fondness for each other, etc. made the villagers make agreeable comments about Long and Hai-i. They fell in love, very passionately. To immortalize their love, Long Teron brought out a silver ring from his bag and put it in Hai-I's finger. The description given by the poet is like this:

Thare long kronjang

Amona chetaang

Senka rup arnan

Hai-I ahongjang

Thon pahiwik phlan

Meaning: The young Long Teron put his hand in his bag. He enhanced her beauty by putting on the silver ring in her finger.

Time passed by swiftly. Time brings in youth to one's life on the one hand and the heavy responsibilities of being a citizen too. The responsibility of being the headman of the Jirsong had to be borne by Long Teron along with falling in love with Hai-i. He requested his parents to send proposal of marriage to Hai-I's parents. They did so with the customary offering of wine. As per Hai-I's wish the marriage was solemnized with the same wine offered by Long's parents. A time of happiness prevailed for both the families.

The rest is history and a myth. The happiness was very short lasting. Hai-I was proposed by Long Dili and she had to pass through the gloomiest period of her life. She became a spinster soon. Because she could not accept Long Dili as her husband.

The Karbi poet has immortalized this love story by dint of his genius. Raising the stature of this tragedy to that of a classic is also the expression of the great creative talent of that anonymous poet.⁴³

Romir

It is one of the most pleasant ballads created in the twentieth century. There is similarity between Romir and Hai-I in respect of the narrative as the story in it also centres round the theme of love. The contents of most of the ballads composed in the Karbi language are women centric. The tone of tragedy is very clear in these ballads. Romir is also a girl who grew up in a traditional Karbi house in a raised platform. She led a

purely traditional life, had many longings and dreams in life. She met Sam Longki and as they came of age, they fell in love with each other like Hai-I and Long. Romir's parents did not know anything about this love affair. At one time, the village headman ordered Sam Longki to take charge of the Jirsong which brought in separation from Romir, for the period in the Jirsong was to be a long one. Sam Longki could not return soon. On the other hand Romir's father wanted to marry off his daughter soon as he was growing old. This made Romir abandon food and this ultimately brought in her premature, pathetic death.

The death of Romir brought in great pains for Sam Longki. He became wary of life. He joined the army and went to the battlefield of Ladakh. But that also could not give him peace of mind. He met Romir in his dreams and promised her that he would not think of anybody else than Romir during his life-time.

Thus, Romir is another brilliant piece of poetic gem in Karbi ballad genre. These ballads have depicted the Karbi concept of love, the yearning, the pleasures and pangs of love besides the purity and immortality of true love.⁴⁴

From the brief discussion above, it can be concluded that the Karbis have a rich legacy and repertoire of their folk literature. Their folk life is integrally associated and inextricably related to this folk literature and culture. They did not have a written script and have been creating songs with different experiences of life acquired through jhum

cultivation or from the experiences, ordeals, sufferings, pleasures and pains, etc of an agrarian life. Their folk memory has kept alive their numerous forms of folk literature such as social customs, historical memoirs, ballads like the Hai-I, Sabin Alun-the miniature version of the Ramayana, love songs, folk tales, magic and sorcery, proverbs and idioms, riddles, incantations, invocations, lullabies, magical chants, etc. Many anonymous poets and literateurs have depicted the feelings of happiness and sorrow, hope and despair, aspirations, sufferings and ordeals of migration and settlement, changes of fortunes and the resultant changes of mind in an agrarian life in the hills and have placed these amid nature and society like any other literature. The Karbis preserved them orally for which the new generation could collect these orchid-like specimens and publish them in book form.

Though the literate new generation has started concentrating on writing modern literature, the practice of creation and respect to folk literature is still current among the illiterate people. There is no mention of the authorship of the folk songs included in the collections compiled by Bonglong Terang, Kehai Bey, Samsing Hanse, Premkanta Mahanta, etc. But the mention of the age or place of certain people is praiseworthy. With the help of the words used and the places and persons mentioned in the songs, one can have some idea about the antiquity of the songs. Considering these facts, we can conclude about the specimens of folk literature collected so far, that these are the gifts of the Kapili-Dhansiri valley. The folk songs brought from the mainstream

Kuki-Chin ethnic group are no longer to be found among the Karbi folk songs. They are lost from memory though their existence cannot be denied in the past. There may be a faint indication about this relationship in the folk tales. Only a comparative analysis of the present folk material can bring out a clear picture.

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