Folktales

The Karbis have a store house of Folktales and these are handed down to the present generation with remarkable freshness. These are mostly preserved in the mouths of old people. The Karbis did not have the advantage of a written script. Hence the usual oral method is applied. The Rigvedic hymns are preserved for us in a similar fashion. Following are some of the Karbi folktales. The folktales are not simply the tales, Therese are the exhibitions of a reflective mind. Some Karbis added their own to the barest original taken from foreign sources. It is like swelling the main river by several streams.

Iru Kachen - The Original man - Hero of

Iru Kachen was accredited with the stories of the creation. He imported the name of the Hindu god 'Brahma' and also the idea of 'supreme god'. His songs are narrated in 'the Sok Keroi' festival. The tales are called 'the Hacha Kekan'. He was a narrator, singer and a composer. He is affectionately called even today 'Rokeka' or Iru, the uncle. His fame as a composer-singer was mentioned in 'Hong Kekim' - the songs on the village organisation.
The river Kopili (in the Karbi language it is Kopili) flows from the south east to the north-west direction and ultimately joins Brahmaputra. On the bank of the river of the Kopili, the Karbis lived in great strength and it was depicted in one of the songs.

On the bank of the River Kopili, there was a village which consisted of many families. The river bank was a lovely place where hundreds of young men and women flocked to make their love. In that beautiful village, Iru Kachen lived.

Kachen is best remembered as the teller of the story of 'origin' and the role of Brahma in it. The well-known story of eggs and the creation of the Karbis from it was composed by him. First man was Hemphu and from him slowly and gradually emerged 'man'.

The scattered stock of the Karbi stories is worth-mentioning here. These are varied.

Taran narrates some of the Folktales

(i) Indigenous and
(ii) Foreign.

The latter was transfused in the culture in such a manner that these are now indistinguishable. The stories are very often kept in the form of 'songs' which made the whole process much easier for preservation.

Karbi Folksongs

- Indigenous
- Foreign-accepted and remodelled

Songs narrating Cultural, Social rules including love songs and stores
which includes origin, birth death, marriage rituals

The indigenous source is quite large. The tales attributed to Iru Kachen are large. There is another song which narrates the history of the tribe in their sojourn in the western habitat. These were the narration of their torments under the Jaintia Kings. But the tribe was not dislodged from their moorings altogether. The story as follows:

'There was a great king of the Karbis. He was proud and dignified Rengbonghom. The country side was beautiful. He was friendly to the Jaintia King, there was no doubt about it. He was courageous and a warrior. The aliens were overawed'.

The song gave us an important piece of information that their king had friendship with the powerful Jaintia King. The origin of agriculture was described in another song which

is sung during the agricultural season. That festival is called 'Sok Keroi'. The text of the song is as follows,3

'Terang Rongchopo

Is the Karbi oldman.

His antecedents are known

He belongs to the Kuki-chin race.

He sang in praise of

Mother Lakshmi.

While wandering in a jungle

He saw the bank of a stream.

He discovered the paddy plant there.

Dandiar Sarpo with large number of men

reached the bank of the stream.

They brought back with due honour

the Mother Lakshmi.

Then they arranged a great festival

which was called 'Sok Keroi'.

All the races perform the harvest festivals with great gusto. The Karbis are no exception. Who composed the songs depicting the origin of agriculture was not known clearly but

3. The conception of Lakshmi is obviously a Hindu belief. The word 'Kuki-chin' cannot be very old. 'Chin' as said earlier is the corruption of the word 'Zen' from the Burmese and the word 'Kuki' has come from the Surma Valley usage. The two words are tagged together by the British monograph writers of the late 19th and the 20th centuries. Hence the song cannot be older than that period.
it is true that the tribe belongs to the Kuki-chin subgroup of the Tibeto-Burmanese group of tribes. It seems that the composer was aware of such classification.

'Musera Kehir'

During the chomangkan ceremony, the tale of 'Musera Kehir' is narrated to the people-assembled. Here the narrator reminds the people of their responsibility of knowing their past. The people assemble in groups each under a 'Jambili Athan'. The narration starts in the early morning of the third day. The wellknown 'egg story' is narrated here. The big 'Woplakpi' bird is the creator, her eggs are the creators and the big tree under which the bird laid the eggs is the symbol representing the material world. 'The Musera Kehir' is sacred and therefore it is told only during the chomangthan.

Kasarte

The ladies assemble in the house of the dead person and sing this song. The song which has the tragic import takes at least two hours. It describes the hopes and despair of the

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4. Probably it was a conscious introduction as an item in the Chomangkan festival. Thireng Wangreng contribution is widely acclaimed in enforcing the recitation of it in the festival.

5. The funeral ceremony is elaborated.
dead person which he had borne during his life time. It is the
mournful expression and it is told in song with sadness in
heart. The song is divided into many phases.

(a) Lang Panglu (the body wash)
(b) Ankepi (offering of food)
(c) Tovar 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 hill is high. The ladies describe
in 'Kasarme' how the dead crosses that hill. The crossing of
the Mukindan hills is symbolical. This hill is midway between
the hill and the 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 the heaven and the man who died an unnatu­
ral death takes the left side road leading to the hell. The
unnatural death is dreaded most in the Karbi society.

6. In the Hindu belief, there is the similar story - the
crossing of the imaginary Saitarani river. In actual
ceremony (Sraddha), there is a ritual where a calf is
offered believing that dead will travel to the heaven
by holding the tail of the calf.

7. Similarly the unnatural deaths are tabooed in the
Hindu society also.
Hacha Kakan Ceremony

As said earlier, 'The Sok Keroi festival is held when the paddy field is ripened to the fullest extent. Like the neighbouring Hindus, they also consider rice as the sign prosperity. Rice means solvency and prosperity. So they offer prayer to the goddess 'Lakhimi'.

The ripened paddy is cut and taken to a place specially cleared in the field. Then the paddy is dehusked on the floor and the paddy is collected. A large number of young men go and collect paddy in bags and carry it home.

There starts a great rejoicing and the young ones dance to their hearts content. 'Sok Keroi' means the carrying of the the paddy from the field. In the festival, one person is selected as the leader who provides the leadership in dancing and singing. He is called 'Lunse'. He is the director of singing and dancing.

The Hacha Kakan is not exactly based on the folktales. It is the festival of the harvest time and many tribes enjoy similar festivities. Every festival gives an opportunity to look into the tribe more fully and intimately and to determine its cultural profundity.

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8. Lakshmi is widely worshipped in eastern India as the goddess of wealth. 'Lakhimi' is the regional variation.
The Hachakekan festival was not mentioned by Stack and Lyall. In that study, the traditional 'Rongker' festival found a place where gods are invoked for the well being of the people, to ward off dreadful diseases, to save the villagers from the attack of wild animals.

But the Hachakekan is associated with the after harvest rejoicings. There is no fear element in it and there is no need to propitiate any god. It is not the pre-receipt prayer to god, it is rather the thanks giving ceremony where 'Lakhimi', the goddess of affluence was thanked for bestowing prosperity in form of rice.

Because of its sophistication and nearness to the similar festivals in the plains, it can be assumed that the festival is a comparatively new insertion. An unknown poet might have composed the poem for the Hachakekan festival. The poet must have heard the new debate on the origin of the tribe and the more intellectual and the technical term 'Kuki-chin'.

Hachakekan is secular in appearance and it substantially differs from another agricultural festival-Rongker. The latter needs the propitiation of god.

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9. 'Hacha Kekan' and 'Sok Keroi' are identical festivals.
Sabin Alun

The Karbi imagination is also engaged in procuring materials from foreign sources. The Hindu epic Ramayana has distinct appeal on the Karbi mind. They have a lengthy tale of all events connected with the Ramayana. The narrator 'Lunse' describes in music the whole epic. It required three days to complete the musical description. After describing the whole epic, the Lunse pays his obeisance to Lord Rama.

The story of Rama, Lakshmana and Sita exactly fit into the imagination of the Karbis. The crowd heartily chimes the steadfast devotion of Hanuman to Rama.

The narrator describes how Sita was reared up in the palace of the King Janaka and how Rama won the heart of Sita by lifting the bow which was too heavy for a single person to lift. The story is well known to the Indians but it is important to see that it is popular among the Karbis as well.

Oso Kebei Alun - The Cradle Songs

Like all mothers throughout the world, the Karbi mothers too use cradle songs to quieten the children. When the child is restless she imitates the sounds of animals and birds.

Following are some of the sentences the Karbi mother uses to pacify her child.

10. In Karbi 'R' is pronounced in the manner of Bengali 'গ', 'Lun' is song and 'a' is the prefix.
Fangkudong Udong - Look, look, a childlifter has come.

'Oso' an rotpong - Little child's earlobes are having holes.

'Oso amek horjok - The child is cock eyed.

The child comes out of the mother's lap and tries to discover the world for himself. He has wild interests. In the darkness of night he looks at the starlit sky. Fireflies are emitting light in the darkness. The mother sings.

Dampijuk Kar-bi Kar-ra-ra
(Oh! the flying fireflies)

Phelso Angdi Angda da
(You are as white as cotton)

We hem Ingty do do
(In my home, I have salt)

We hem Menthu do do
(In my home, I have dry fish)

Dampijuk Kar-ri Kar-ra-ra
(Oh! the flying flying fireflies)

No dungle wangtha - tha
(Come near to me).

Salt and dry fish are the two precious items which a poor Karbi can aspire after in his house. The fireflies are given allurement of these items,

The Karbi mother also sings -

Aphi Asok Mendang - Grand-mother's paddy

Field has ripened
When the child attains the age of three years, he is introduced to the more practical themes such as 'Zirkedam' and tilling in the field. It is only the idea. This is not 'the participation' that is set before the child. The child slowly and gradually grows into his teens and now he is in a position to give expression to the dreams of his childhood.

Karbi as a Story Teller

As noticed by stack, the Karbis are good story tellers. The stories are many and those are always punctuated with the typical indigenous colours.

Many stories were handed down to the present generation by this immaculatebend of story tellers. Some stories which were told to stack were common place and some of these were most probably borrowed from foreign sources. The indigenous stories are still better. 'Haimu Alun' and 'Rangchena Sarpo' are briefly described below -

Haimu Alun

'Haimu was a village damsel who was weded to Long Terang. Long was a strong and stout youngman who worked hard in the

12. Song of Haimu.
field. Haimu looked after the daily core of duties at home. In this way, the young couple prospered. They were the ideal couple and the village folk considered them as the best of examples. Some people grew jealous and were in look out to harm the couple. But they in their youthful exhuberance, ignored them all. Haimu had all the virtues of a heavenly dame. But she had one draw back. She was exquisitely beautiful and they never anticipated that this ravaging beauty would one day bring disaster to them.

Soon they were blessed with a child. The household core took most of her time. She had many types of duties, firewood collection, child rearing and looking after guests who were rather regular visitors.

Although it was quite taxing, she found the work rewarding. One day a Khapi trader came to their house on a market day. He immediately developed a passion for her. He stayed a few days in their house when he returned, he went to the Bordili at Socheng. The Bordili was enchanted by the description. He sent an emissary to Antarpong village where Haimu Long lived. The emissary in fact, came with a staggering proposal. It was Bordili's wish to marry Haimu. The couple was dum founded and the tension rose. The couple became furious.

13. An officer of the King.
The emissary tried to appease them but it was no avail. The emissary gave a threat but they were adamant.

The emissary returned and informed the Bordili about it. Secretly Bordili arranged a date and on that appointed date he came with a big party to Amtarpeng to take Haimu. But she was totally oblivious of the incoming danger. At first the Bordili tried to achieve the end by the application of force, but it did not succeed. Long challenged him with equal vehemence.

Observing the unforeseen intransigence on the part of Long, Bordili changed his method and now he adopts a diplomatic course. He requested the couple to accompany them to the capital Socheng. Sensing evil, they refused to go but the Bordili insisted with his request. When the whole party requested them with sweetest words, they relented and agreed to accompany the party to the capital. Their dark days are now looming large on the horizon.

They started the journey along with the party and more they approached the capital more there was laxity in polite behaviour on the part of the Bordili. The whole entourage joined him in insulting Long. Long protested but he soon realised 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.

The Bordili declared her as his queen but Haimu refused to accept that exalted position. She refused to take food in the palace of the 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.

The Bordili had no other option but to call back Long and this time with proper reception. But Haimu at that time reached the sad state of coma. When she saw Long, she requested him to cook food for her. Long complied and after a long interval, she ate food. She was immensely satisfied 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 but that memory now belongs to the 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.

Stories mentioned and narrated by stack are also quite popular (i) Harata Kunwar (ii) Story of a frog (iii) Story of an orphan and his uncles.

The story of Harata Kunwar is perhaps derived from a Bengali or Assamese source. The original word was obviously 'Sarat Kumar'. The story of a Frog (Chongholosa Atomo) seems
to have the indigenous origin. The third story (Jangreso Pen A-ong-Atum) has also found place among Kachari stories. It might have travelled into the language due to mutual contacts. The story mentioned below did not figure in the book written by stack and Lyall.

The Story of 'Rangchena Sarpo'

In the olden time, 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 'Zirkedam' and in that state, he kept them for eleven or twelve years.

The young people completed long years in the Zirkedam but as soon as they finished, 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 the Zirkedam 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. How to obtain that respite they thought. The unanimous decision with one dissent was to commit suicide by jumping down from the lofty heights of 'Chellang' hills. They simply carried out their plans.
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 Zirkedam still survived but the youth are now subject of veneration there. After every session of 'Zir-Kedam', the god of the youth 'Riso Arnas' is propitiated to commemorate the memory of those youngmen and young women who became immortals in death.

The place of river Kopili in the Karbi Society

The river Kopili flows from the Borail hills to the south west and joins the Brahmaputra. The river is an object of veneration for more than one tribe. The Karbis live in the lower reaches of the river and their stay in the trans-Kopili region is now the story of some centuries. Due to their long stay, they developed a bond with the river.

Iru Kachen Achipong
Kopili pelanghe Kolang
Chipong Don Churi plengchhung.

translated into English, it means, 'In the bank of Kopili and Kolong, there was a village which consisted of large number of families. The river bank was a lovely place where hundred of youngmen and women flocked to make their love. In that beautiful village, Iru Kachen lived'.
The river is a pleasant memory for the Kebis. The story of association with the river is now woven into the history of the tribe.

A small comparison can be drawn with the Jaintia attitude to the river. It is a veritable 'Kalapani' or black water for them. In good old days, the Jaintia people did not cross the river. They never carried any luggage from one bank of the river to the other. To them, the river was the mother goddess. To propitiate the mother, every year two humanbeings were sacrificed. It is not possible to ascertain clearly how this fear turned worship cult came to the Jaintias but the conviction was deep rooted among the tribe. Gurdon wrote 'many of the Syntengs regard the river Kopili even to this today with superstitious reverence. Some will not cross the river at all, others can do so after performing a sacrifice with goats and fowls'.

Was there any catastrophe associated with the Jaintias for which they abandoned the river? Nobody knows clearly. If there was any, it happened in the great past. The same river draws applause from one tribe and fear from another is really an interesting phenomenon.

Some Karbi legendary figures and the legends associated with them

1. Sot Reecho - Many say the Karbis transplanted the great king yudhisthira in their folktales and named him 'Sot Reecho' - meaning 'pure kind'. 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 the legends say he was there. It is quite possible that a good Karbi potentate was later on remembered as a pure king.

2. Thireng Wangreng - A Karbi lawgiver. 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.

3. Har Pokkang - He according to the legends, 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 in throne by his brother Kadangohiri.

4. Thong Hokbe - He was the hero of the Karbis. He was known for his bravery and courage. He was born during the crisis period of the tribe. The Kasharis up-rooted the tribe from the upper Kopili valley and they moved in the direction of west and north-west.

He belonged to the feran 'Kur'. The people called him Thong the brave. The Karbis at that time two hostile enemies one at the left - the Kasharis and the other at the right the Jaintias. Their pacific disposition prompted the Jaintias to
use them with impunity. Thong could not tolerate it. He was ready to set things right.

The Jaintia officials posted the numbers on the face of the Karbi workers employed by them. The workers reeked in plain but could not say anything. They lost their names and came to be known by the numbers on their face.

By that time, Thong rose to be the supreme commander of the Jaintia armed forces. Knowing the plight of his brethren, he one day joined the labour force incognito and the officials began to call the rolls. Thong came out and told the officials to go and began to call numbers in the Karbi language. Then he took hold of the officials and cut their heads. In this way, he took revenge on the offending officials.

But ultimately he had to pay dearly for enraging the Jaintias. The bad blood which was created between the Jaintias and the Karbis was difficult to be erased. The intrigues in the Jaintia high circle ultimately removed Thong from the scene. He was treacherously murdered by them. Even today, he is affectionately remembered. Thong was killed at a place called Sarat on the Meghalaya-Karbi Anglong border.

5. Hengtonghom - he was a king belonging to the Jaintia Sub-kur. He was a good and kindhearted king. He was also a law giver. During his time, Thong okbe was killed. He constructed the legendary capital 'Sochong'. The story of Hengtonghom has a good reference of Sochong.
He abolished the capital punishment and instead, established the custom of propitiation of god by sacrificing goat, fowl or pig. The present system of marriage was introduced by him. He consolidated, modified and added new rules to the system. For his manifold accomplishments, he came to be known as 'the Phu-Yongbong-hom' (Father Yongbonghom).

6. Yongkhang is the traditional seat of Government of the Burbs. There is no chronology of historical records and this is understandable. They were not endowed with the knowledge of letters and everything remained oral.

In that city there lived a king who had two daughters. They were married off and the sons-in-law were Inglong and Monghang. The older son-in-law Inglong was mean and treacherous and he had a lurking ambition to usurp the throne. The younger son-in-law Monghang was good and well meaning.

The machinations of the eldest son-in-law forced the king to vacate the capital and to take shelter in the neighbouring kingdom of the Muangs. This prompted the younger son-in-law to oppose the older. A bloody fight ensued and the younger son-in-law won the battle and he became the king of Yongkhang. From that time onwards the Monghang Sub-kur became all powerful and in the Yongkhang Indokship, Monghang Sub-kur rules i.e, the Lindokpo is chosen from this Sub-kur