CHAPTER I

Introduction

The Karbis are a major tribe of the Brahmaputra valley. Next to the Bodos and the Misings, the Karbis are the third largest tribe in terms of population in the state of Assam. They belong to the Mongoloid group and speak a dialect of the Tibeto-Burman family of the Kuki-Chin sub-group of languages. Available research suggests that the Karbis, erstwhile called Mikirs, migrated from the Kuki-Chin area of the Chindwin river valley in Western Myanmar (Stack & Lyall: 1908, Bhattacharjee:1986). The physical features of the Karbis betray their Mongoloid origin and serve as important boundary marker as do their foodways, costume and way of life in general. The habitat of the Karbis comprises mainly of the two districts of Karbi Anglong and Dima Hasao. But the population is spread across the districts of Golaghat, Sonitpur, Nagaon, Morigaon and both Kamrup metro and rural districts, the Ribhoi district of the neighbouring state of Meghalaya and the West Kameng district of Arunachal Pradesh. The Census Report of the Government of India: 2001 puts the number of Karbi population at 3,53,513. The Indian Constitution recognizes the Karbis as belonging to the Scheduled Tribes (Hills).

The Karbi Belief System

The Karbi belief system is marked by nature worship and a pantheon consisting of a supreme creator called Sonsar Recho, gods and goddesses, deities and spirits collectively contained within a religious form called the Sangsari or Honghari, ancestral worship and rites of passages. These beliefs, invariably informed and defined by rituals are based on a body of oral
traditions. These oral traditions have also generated a huge corpus of legends and tales which constitute the mythic consciousness in the Karbi mind. These oral traditions are mainly accounts of the origins of various fauna, flora, clan organization, kinship, routes and stories of migration, items of material culture as well as oral texts of conducting religious rituals, ancestral worship and rites of passage. Oral traditions also see to it that clan organizations and traditional laws and customs complete with a traditional hierarchical social organization of a king and his subordinate officers down to the village level is maintained in a ritualistically ordained manner. Besides, oral traditions encompass secular themes reflecting the universal human emotions in times of birth, marriage, death, farming, fishing, hunting, weaving and other quotidian activities as well as primary emotions related to union, separation, love, hatred etc.

For the Karbis, worship of nature is a way of life in terms of their interrelationship with the physical environment as well as with the world of gods, goddesses, spirits and deities whose response to the deeds and actions of people is palpable, and instantaneous. Concepts of soul, spirits and deities together with the concept of energy or ‘power’ also form the belief system of the Karbi. The supernatural beings can be benevolent, and if so, they reward the faithful. They can also be angry and wrathful, bringing in destruction to an entire crop and making a whole community sick as a form of punishment. The gods can be forgiving at the same time, by helping identify a particular reason responsible for a malaise or by accepting appropriate sacrifice by a repentant faithful. Lack of a permanent place of worship is also notable suggesting a common past marked by agrarianism and a particular mode of agricultural practice – shifting cultivation. The use of fish, fowl, goats, ducks, pigeons, eggs, grains, rice powder, water, alcoholic beverage and vegetable leaves as sacrificial items indicates how closely bound and intimate are the physical and spiritual entities in the Karbi mind. Even in terms of physical environment alone, the Karbis relate to the ecology as an arbiter of their way of life. The
material culture implicit in their foodways, household organization and costume is
determined by the access to, and utilization of, natural resources available in the
physical environment.

Karbi Cultural Practice in Modern Times

An investigation into the history of Karbi cultural practice in modern times
reveals that the primary oral culture of the Karbis had its first encounter with the
technology of writing and printing in 1875 when American Baptist Missionaries
brought out a religious book “Dharam Arnam Afram Ikithan” in the Karbi
language written in Assamese Script. Ever since, the technology of writing and
print saw to it that a body of work related to subjects ranging from religion,
language, grammar, dictionaries and monographs and reports on various aspects of
Karbi way of life was brought to light. In a memorandum submitted to the then
Governor of Assam, Sir Robert Neil, in 1940, ‘the Loyal Mikir Subjects’ pleaded
for ‘improving the status of their tribe’ against a backdrop of ‘perpetual
subordination by their progressive neighbours’ (Rongphar: 2005: 345). The Karbis
formed their first secular social institution, ‘Karbi Adorbar’ in 1946. On 23 June
1952, the Karbis were granted an autonomous district with an arrangement to
preserve the body of traditional laws and customs within the autonomous district
apart from allowing them to pursue various levels of development befitting a
modern society. On 14 October, 1976, the Karbis got the name of the district
changed from Mikir Hills to Karbi Anglong as it is known today. In the
succeeding decades, the Karbis have been grappling with the issues of cultural
identity formation and consolidation, of politics of identity and developmental
discourse often leading to extreme ramifications (The Hindu: 2010).

Construction of the Concept of ‘Tribe’ and the Karbis

The anthropological construction of the Karbis projects them as a ‘tribe’
that draws its sustenance from nature with agriculture, particularly shifting
cultivation, being the mainstay of their occupation. In such a construction, when a community is labelled as a tribe, its relationship with nature is taken for granted. Conventionally, tribes are conceived of as people who have an organic relationship with nature. Construction of a category such as 'tribe' also suggests rootedness of the community in the physical environment resulting in immobility and fixity. By contrast, however, as described in the preceding paragraph, there are stark variations in the Karbi society today with a considerable number of its members pursuing different levels of development, achieving remarkable mobility and constructing potent symbols of political power resulting in ethnic identity formation and political autonomy within the modern nation state, i.e. the Republic of India. While the traditional way of life has accommodated rapid changes in everyday reality, the anthropological and folkloristic constructions have not really changed much. This search for a pure and fixed culture is a study in contrast.

The Ecological World of the Karbis

Inherent in such a perception of purity and fixity of culture is the essentialising belief that tribes in general are upholders and repositories of traditional or indigenous knowledge drawn from their folk knowledge of the management of the ecology. Research indicates that tribes in North East India have excellent traditional wisdom vis-à-vis natural resources (Agarwal, Narain and Sen: 1982). The agrarian way of life for the Karbis has undergone a lot of changes. However, the physical perception of the world is still well defined by their rootedness in the ecology of forests, hills, rivers and flatlands from which the majority of them still eke out their living. It is through the physical environment that the Karbis negotiate their encounters with the larger world. The ecological world for the Karbis is inseparable from the spiritual and social world. For a traditionally-minded Karbi, the physical environment is not just physical with spatial-temporal features but also spiritual as various gods,
goddesses, spirits and deities co-habit in the household, courtyard, farmland, forest and hill. Human beings are members of the community rather than individualized entities in relation to their physical and spiritual worlds. Their notion of health, wellbeing and prosperity is dependent on the pleasure and whim of the household and territorial deities.

Statement of the Problem

Fact remains that rampant destruction of the forest, rapid growth in urbanization, adoption of modern modes of agriculture and host of other factors of modernity have severely affected the environment resulting in the depletion of the ecology and the shrinking of the natural resources. Once a person's engagement with the forest weakens, his/her traditional knowledge-base also undergoes significant erosion. As a result, the continuation of the folk and traditional aspects of the ways of life depends much more on folk memory contained in oral traditions, of both primary and secondary oral orientations, rather than on a vibrant symbiosis of man and nature. The folk forms of oral literature and verbal arts, together with the forms of belief systems and material culture need to be investigated with aesthetic considerations. It is against this backdrop of anthropological stasis and purity vis-à-vis their memory in the folk consciousness in contrast with the winds of change affecting the Karbi traditional way of life that this dissertation is problematized.

Objectives of the Study

This dissertation has two goals: Firstly, to offer an ethnographic material on Karbi folklore based on the methodology of folklore studies on four areas of enquiry, namely, oral traditions, food and foodways, social folk customs and forms of performance acts. Secondly, the study also aims to apply the category of aesthetics to the presented ethnographic material: forms and genres of oral texts of literary and cultural production in order to examine the contexts of the
aesthetic experience of the oral and material forms as well as performances which are re-enacted out of a de-contextualized, agrarian past. The argument that the study will advance is that aesthetics with its origins in Western philosophy and liberal arts must be reconsidered in order to be applied to a non-Western cultural experience, and its appraisal, particularly when the experience happens to be essentially folk such as in the case of Karbi folklore, must be based on context-sensitive inferences.

Motivation for Study

Students of literary studies are often drawn towards the epistemological phenomenon of aesthetics, the concepts of beauty and the evaluation of beauty. As a counterpoint to this cerebral exercise lies the experience of perceiving a beautiful object leading to sensory stimulation. The fact that one has to be trained in order to appreciate a work of art often militates against the pure enjoyment of experiencing it. This paradox of appreciation and enjoyment of beauty is one of the motivating factors of the present study.

Secondly, the history of the institutionalization of aesthetics as an evaluative category is quite fascinating as a motivating factor. The rise of aesthetics as a branch of knowledge in Western epistemology and the serious challenge posed by post-colonial discourse to its universal appeal also yields a compelling narrative in terms of its relationship with philosophy, sociology, anthropology and folklore study.

Finally, the rich corpus of Karbi oral texts in the form of songs, myths, ballads, proverbs, folktales as well as the specimens of material culture open up the possibility of a sustained investigation based on the methods of folklore research. The prospect of combining the category of aesthetics with Karbi folklore in order to look for an aesthetic appraisal is another motivating factor of the present study.
Since aesthetics and folklore both require considerable theoretical grounding, offered below, pursuant on the motivation for the study, is an account of the formation of perspective for this dissertation research. This perspective-building is forwarded in the following sections, each addressing a critique of the theoretical issues at hand. Aesthetics is a cross-disciplinary concept and the critique of each of these disciplines, namely, philosophy, sociology, anthropology and folklore are framed as narratives in the following sections so that there is clarity of perspective.

**Theoretical Perspectives: Aesthetics and its Philosophical Origins**

Aesthetics as a discipline and discourse originated in the eighteenth century in the works of German philosophers, namely, Baumgarten, Kant and Schiller. It was, in fact, Baumgarten, the continental rationalist philosopher, who coined the term in his ‘Reflections on Poetry, 1735’. Since that time it has been construed and pursued as a branch of philosophy and has been variously conceived of as ontology, epistemology or analytic philosophy. It has centrally been concerned with the nature of art and of aesthetic experience and the question of aesthetic judgement. "One dictionary gives the terms linguistic root as from the Greek: aisthetikos-‘perceptible by the senses’, from aisthēsthai ‘to perceive’. Therefore, it may be understood from the outset that aesthetics embodies the notion of perception; to thoroughly grasp or comprehend; to recognize a thing through the senses especially the sense of sight" (Bennett:1993:85).

**Aesthetics and Kant’s ‘Critique of Judgement’**

Aesthetics received the most comprehensive treatment in the writings of Immanuel Kant, particularly in ‘The Critique of Judgement’ which begins with an account of beauty (Kant:1952). Kant argues that aesthetic judgments, which he calls ‘judgments of taste’, must have four key distinguishing features.
Firstly, they are disinterested, meaning that we take pleasure in something because we judge it beautiful, rather than judging it beautiful because we find it pleasurable. Secondly, such judgments are universal, in other words, aesthetic taste is all pervasive. Thirdly, such judgements are necessary. This means roughly that it is an intrinsic part of the activity of such a judgment to expect others to agree with us. Although we may say 'beauty is subjective' that is not how we act. Instead, we debate and argue about our aesthetic judgments – and especially about works of art - and we tend to believe that such debates and arguments have a space in public discourse. Indeed, for many purposes, 'beauty' behaves as if it were a real property of an object, like its weight or volume or chemical composition. But Kant insists that universality and necessity are in fact a product of features of the human mind (Kant calls these features 'common sense'), and that there is no objective property of a thing that makes it beautiful. Fourthly, through aesthetic judgments, beautiful objects appear to be 'purposive without purpose' (sometimes translated as 'final without end'). An object’s purpose is the concept according to which it was made (the concept of a chair in the mind of the carpenter, for example); an object is purposive if it appears to have such a purpose, if, in other words, it appears to have been made or designed.

Kantian Notion of Aesthetic Judgement

Having identified the major features of aesthetic judgment, Kant then needs to ask the question as to how such judgments are possible, and how such judgments in any way are valid (that is, are they really universal and necessary?). According to Kant, then, aesthetic judgements or 'judgements of taste' are born with four defining features: namely, disinterestedness, universality, necessity, and 'purposiveness without purpose'. Kant insists that it is part of the experience of beautiful objects that they affect us as if they have a purpose, although no purpose can be attached to them.
Kantian Notion of ‘Beauty in Art’

In section 43 of the *Critique*, Kant raises the issue of beauty in art, particularly fine art by shifting his focus from beauty in nature. In Kant, fine art seems to ‘borrow’ its beauty from nature thereby rendering fine art as a secondary concept drawing on its primary examples of beauty. From questions such as ‘what is art?’ to ‘how is it possible to make art?’ Kant offers an explanation of art. As a general term, art refers to the activity of making according to a preceding notion. Art is distinguishable from labour or craft because it is a disinterested activity, free from any interest in the existence of the product itself. Even in the viewing and appreciation of a work of art, Kant states, we must be aware of it as art. At the same time, we must appreciate that it appears natural. Finally, in Section 46, Kant invokes the notion of the genius: genius is the talent that gives rule to art. Since talent is an innate productive ability of the artist, it can be summed up as ‘the innate mental predisposition through which nature gives the rule to art’ (Kant:1952).

Aesthetics and the Sociological Critique

Kant’s work on the notion of art, the artist and the genius has profoundly contributed to the rise of the artist, the objectivity of the appreciation of art and literary criticism. Kant’s work also generated the inculcation of the cult of the genius in the 18th and the 19th century. In the ‘Social History of Art’, Arnold Hauser traces the rise of the ‘artist’ as the inspired genius, the sole producer or creator of a work as opposed to the craftsperson or collective worker (Hauser:1968). In an insightful observation, Raymond Williams maintains that the concept of ‘literature’ is historically contingent and it only emerged in the eighteenth century, and was fully developed in the nineteenth century (Williams:1981).
Wittgenstein’s on ‘Beautiful’ and ‘Fine’ versus ‘Right’ and ‘Correct’

Wittgenstein once remarked that, “...in real life, when aesthetic judgments are made, aesthetic adjectives such as ‘beautiful’, ‘fine’, etc. play hardly any role at all” (Wittgenstein: 1967:3). Wittgenstein further stated that ‘right’, ‘correct’ and ‘precise’ are more likely to be used as aesthetic praises. It is quite obvious that Wittgenstein’s notions of ‘right’, ‘correct’ and ‘precise’ are culturally-bound even if they denote proper expressions of aesthetic value. Thus the sense of the aesthetic for a Limba huntsman of Sierra Leone or an Apache of North America may not conform to the notions of ‘correctness’ or ‘precision’ in matters of taste with regards to cultural products of the European of the metropolis. This feature of the culture-specific nature of aesthetic judgement was brought to bear on much of the discourse till the mid-20th Century largely due to the contribution of the discipline of anthropology to the production of knowledge.

Kantian Aesthetics and Traditional Criticism

Alongside literature grew the discipline of literary criticism, literary history and literary ideology, much in the same way as did art criticism, art history and various schools of art in the Western society. Kantian aesthetics formed the basis of traditional criticism in the literary and art world in the Western society. It discriminated art from non-art, the literary from the non-literary and facilitated canon-formation in the discernment of literary and artistic production. The rise and consolidation of the social history of art, however, has had far-reaching consequences for the philosophy of art, especially in the high-modernist era of the 20th century. Traditional aesthetics was seriously questioned in the writings of critics like Williams, Eagleton and others who introduced the concepts of history, class and ideology (Eagleton: 1976).
Taste, Judgement and Elitism

History of art, literature, and the discipline of art and literary criticism are all subject to the history of the fluctuation in taste and judgement. Taste and judgement have been largely standardized by academics, intellectuals, patrons, artists, critics and a specially situated group of privileged people celebrated in art and literary circles as *connoisseurs*, *aficionados* or elites. A large number of the population may have quite different taste and judgement with regard to the aesthetic experience and may not be ‘educated’ in terms of developing a sense of disinterestedness in matters of aesthetic judgement (Bourdieu:1984).

Pierre Bourdieu’s ‘Popular Aesthetics’

As against the ‘arbitrary’ category of Kantian aesthetics, Bourdieu advocates ‘popular aesthetics’ which seeks to include the functional and extrinsic aspects in the aesthetic disposition. According to Bourdieu, for the working class, form is always subordinate to function and substance, and “the work is only seen as fully justified if the thing represented is worthy of being represented, if the representative function is subordinated to a higher function, such as that of capturing and exalting a reality that is worthy of being made eternal.” (Bourdieu:1980:246). It is true that the ‘pure’ and ‘disinterested’ disposition in aesthetic judgement is a class-bound category and is part of the universalizing tendency of traditional aesthetics paving the way for such notions as ‘high’ and ‘low’ art.

Marxist View on Aesthetics

Even a confirmed Marxist like Herbert Marcuse is of the view that art is largely autonomous vis-à-vis the given social relations and that the aesthetic dimension transcends the process of the production of art. (Marcuse:1978:ix). In a passage that seeks to defend both the autonomy of art and the criteria for aesthetic judgement, Marcuse says: “Aesthetic
formation proceeds under the law of the Beautiful, and the dialectic of affirmation and negation, consolation and sorrow is the dialectic of the Beautiful.” (Marcuse:1978:62). Terry Eagleton, however, refuses to accept the fact that traditional criticism is an ‘innocent discipline’ that promotes some conception of non-ideological criticism. As Eagleton says:

“Criticism does not arise as a spontaneous riposte to the existential fact of the text, organically coupled with the object it illuminates. It has its own relatively autonomous life, its own laws and structures: it forms an internally complex system articulated with the literary system rather than merely reflexive of it.” (Eagleton:1978:81).

Notions of Pure and High vs. Popular and Low Art

The discourse of art criticism excludes the possibility of the multiplicity of perceptions and promotes a pure space for ‘art’ (high art as opposed to mass culture, popular culture, kitsch and craft). It is this point that the anthropologist Joana Overing makes when she strongly asserts that “...the category of aesthetics is specific to the modernist era...far from having universal appeal, the meaning of aesthetics is intrinsically historical. As Eagleton remarks, the ‘aesthetic’ is a bourgeois and elitist concept in the most literal historical sense, hatched and nurtured in the rationalist Enlightenment.” (Overing:1996:210).

Anthropological Discourse and Aesthetics

Ethnographically orientated studies in the discipline sought to challenge the Eurocentric approach of most disciplines of academia in the 19th century through the monographs of the tribes of North America, Africa, Polynesia and Asia through the works of Malinowski, Boas, Levi-Strauss, Geertz and others. Most of the cultures being studied were primarily oral societies defined by their own sets of customs and beliefs and circumscribed by myths, legends, tales, chants and magic spells, offering a totally different world-view from the
Eurocentric perspective of Western Europe. Intensive fieldwork involving one to two years’ of sustained participation with the tribal community under study together with vigorous data collection and note-taking in order to produce a body of work that understood social life from within in terms of values and meanings attributed to it by the people themselves were standardized in the ethnographic research. “Those standards were first established by Malinowski and his pupils at the London School of Economics in the 20s, 30s and 40s, and by the 50s, they had been adopted by professional anthropologists the world over. (Beteille:1996:233-4)

The Modern versus the Primitive, Native or Exotic

From trans-Himalayan tribes to native Indians of North America, from small-scale Slavic societies to sub-Saharan tribes of Sierra Leone, the anthropologist travelled far and wide in order to report to the academic folks back home that there exists a staggering variety of human societies with their own sets of culture and belief systems, and possibly, with their own set of aesthetic judgements. Notions like primitive, exotic and native began to spring in Western discourse which seemed to fall outside the pale of the project of modernity that the West so ardently championed. In myths, rituals, legends, tales, charms, spells, witch-craft, shamans and so on, the anthropologist encountered a whole new world of concrete notions in his field experience away from the metropolitan centre from which he came. Although he was warranted only to compare and contrast and not to judge, he nevertheless could not resist labeling the field he studied as non-literate, oral, native or primitive.

The Native as ‘Scientist of the Concrete’

Appadurai calls this phenomenon a construct of the anthropologist: “This is .... an old and deep theme in the history of anthropological thought...”. The anthropologist saw in the native of the non-European site, to
borrow Levi-Strauss’ term, ‘the scientist of the concrete’. According to Appadurai, the concreteness of the native derives from the ‘specifics of flora, fauna, topology, settlement patterns, and the like; in a word, it is the concreteness of place’ (Appadurai: 1988). The important point that emerges from this brief account of anthropology begs a key question vis-à-vis aesthetics: is traditional aesthetics applicable to native categories?

Aesthetics in the Post-Modernist Era

Late 20th century witnessed an unprecedented attack being mounted on traditional aesthetics from various sociological factors. The present writer proposes to mention only two of the many factors involved in the attack. Firstly, the emergence of mass, globalized media with its enticing visual forms has truly unsettled our ways of viewing and witnessing cultural events. According to Weiner, “We experience a suppression of time, a phenomenon made more pronounced by the ease with which artefacts, practices, languages and events from varying historical and temporal frames are now juxtaposed in our everyday life....The combination of this universalization of televised representation of the world with one dominant global political motif, nationalism, has powerfully enhanced the aestheticization of politics which has been a key component of twentieth century modernism of Europe and north America” (Weiner: 1996:204).

Aesthetics and the Media

One way in which the aestheticization of politics operates is through the large-scale presence of the forms of media in contemporary times. The Latin verb, mediare, means to be in the middle, to interpose between parties in order to reconcile them. Used as a singular noun, the word ‘media’ originated in the fields of advertising and mass communication in the 1920’s (Merriam-Webster Dictionary 2001). One meaning of ‘mediatize’ is to render subject to
interpretation or exploitation by the mass media (Oxford English Dictionary:2001). The word, media, still carries connotations of hegemonic power, shallowness, and phoniness. But now that individuals can mediatize -- and, to a lesser extent, now that producers of big media increasingly strive for some sort of interactivity with individual audience members, there is an urgent need to recognize the scholarly role that media can play in disseminating knowledge. This new shift of the scope of the media to encompass the representation of individual and group identities in the globalized context has opened up new possibilities of communication. These possibilities include the capacity of people who historically have been marginalized from institutional power to create self-representations of their groups. This capacity for self-representation and self-referentiality offers interesting riposte to the existing body of knowledge produced during the project of enlightenment in the modernist era in the fields of philosophy and art including traditional aesthetics, sociology, ontology, anthropology and folklore studies.

Aesthetics and Postcolonial Criticism

The factor which is instrumental in challenging traditional aesthetics is the emergence of post-colonial discourse. As Janet Wolff suggests, “Postcolonial criticism challenges traditional aesthetics on a number of grounds. First, critical analysis of literature and visual arts in the West has exposed ethnocentric ideologies at work in the text……. The display of ‘treasures’ from non-Western societies has systematically obscured the colonial relations of oppression and expropriation which lie behind the transfer of those objects to museums……. In general, the aesthetic here is further deconstructed by recent work in this field.” (Wolff:1993:111-112).
Aesthetics and Folklore

Aesthetic practices and discourses in the non-Western societies are marked by certain kind of situatedness in cultural and social praxis, where the artfulness of the way of life and the status of the art object are inseparable from other forms of everyday activity, especially in the tribal societies. Neither is there a separation of the artist from the craftsperson or the collective worker, except in the case of the practitioners of modern art. All societies across the globe have a sense of what is beautiful and what is sublime and surely there are ways of dealing with the sense of the beautiful. Perhaps the best way to deal with the problem is to acknowledge the fact that specificity of cultures across the globe in terms of production and appreciation must be respected in approaching the issue of aesthetics. Charlotte Townsend-Gault powerfully articulates an argument for cultural relativism: "In the end, cultural difference is expressed not by attempting to find common ground, common words, common symbols across cultures. It is finally dignified by protecting all sides from zealous over-simplification, by acknowledging a final untranslatability of certain concepts and subtleties from one culture to another." (Townsend-Gault: 1992:100-101).

Aesthetics and the Shifting Paradigms in Folklore

The naturalistic view of tradition as a finite body of knowledge transmitted across generations in a society has been severely challenged in the post-modern condition of today. The conception of folklore as the form and content of the collective, ready-made, stereo-typed field of enquiry that displays intergenerational transmission, continuity and customary authority has made tradition the centre-piece of folklore research and discourse right till the late 20th century. Up to this period, we even have an almost idealized, prescriptive notion of how a folk society and folk material should be like: a non-literate, small group of people bound by a strong sense of solidarity and
informed by a traditional and uncritical behavior. Peasantry, rural artisans and tribal populace have been brought under analyzable frames of reference in such a conception of folklore. Such an idealized conception of folklore has now been called to question. These changes have to do with the way we view language and its dynamics in the society. These changes also take into account the human consciousness and its underlying structures, the social organization and its power structures.

Dundes’ Notion of Folk Idea

The changes include the discursive practices with which we approach texts and discourses. Dundes’ emphatic views in this regard are of critical importance if folkloristics as an engaging area of inquiry were to be relevant in the contemporary fields of discourse: “If folklorists are interested only in collecting and preserving the heirlooms of the past so as to produce a permanent, antiquarian ‘museum of the mind’, then they need not concern themselves with the possibility of studying folk ideas. However, if folklorists view folklore as raw material for the study of human thought, then they might wish to seriously consider adopting this concept …. Folk ideas are not limited to folklore and they can surely be found in movies, television, and the mass media generally… Anyone therefore truly interested in folk ideas—as opposed to being interested only in proverbs or in jokes—will have to cast his net widely enough to include popular or literary culture as well.” (Bronnen & Dundes:2007:194).

The centrality accorded to traditionality and oral transmission has set the parameters of much of folklore research in recent times with attendant issues like the flexibility of oral communication as against the stasis and fixity of written texts as well as the contextualization of the texts of verbal and performing art in the social situatedness. Richard Bauman’s views are relevant here: “There is an emergent reorientation taking place among students of
tradition as a cultural inheritance rooted in the past and toward an understanding of tradition as symbolically constituted in the present. Tradition, so reconceptualized, is seen as a selective, interpretive construction, the social and symbolic creation of a connection between aspects of the present and an interpretation of the past.” (Bauman:1992:32).

**Concluding Remarks**

The discussion offered in the preceding sections indicates an accommodation of a multi-disciplinary approach to the study of Karbi folklore with the added dimension of the category of the aesthetic in its appraisal. While the ethnographic material will be culled from the field of enquiry employing the methodological schemata of standard folkloristic protocols, the appraisal will be informed by insights gained from theoretical issues introduced above. As this research will indicate, collecting and collating data from the vast resources of Karbi folklore is quite a task. No claims of exhaustive and comprehensive treatment of the folklore material available in the field are being made here in this study. The focus of the study is to combine ethnographic material with theoretical analysis by closely examining the visible and palpable forms of folk expressive genres, belief systems, material culture and performative acts of the Karbis. In order to achieve the aim of the study, the most salient and symptomatic aspects of the forms, functions and meanings of Karbi folklore are taken up for detailed treatment vis-a-vis the overriding criterion of aesthetics while certain other aspects are briefly touched upon. The criterion for doing so is basically decided by the applicability of the category of the aesthetic to the ethnographic material. It is hoped that the present study will add to the field of folklore research in Assam and the North Eastern India with its avowed exploration of aesthetics in Karbi folklore.