

Chapter VI

Analysis of Karbi life and culture as reflected in their Folk Literature

The Karbi folk life and culture are mirrored truthfully in their folk literature. In fact, the folk life and folk literature of the Karbis, like any other tribe or community, are integrally related. A fair and comprehensive idea regarding the various aspects of the Karbi folk life can be had from a perusal of the various genres of Karbi folk literature. The real nature of the Karbis, their mental and spiritual world, their world view, their folk religion, ethnic medicines, beliefs and mores, pleasures and pains in the life agricultural life, concepts of heroism, love and separation, festivities and modes of celebration, the land system, mental world of a Karbi mother, etc. all come up alive through the various genres of their folk literature. The Karbis have a rich and unique storehouse of folktales, folksongs, legends, love songs, keplangs or stories regarding genesis of various agri products, demons and deities, the race itself, their clans, etc. These genres of Karbi folk literature have been handed over to the Karbis only orally till very recently, as written records of literature of the Karbis is of recent development.

The Karbi folk life and culture are primarily reflected through their life-centric folk literature. The primitive Karbi society was centred round jhum cultivation. Their life-centric folk literature is that which tells us of the pleasures of cultivation, harvesting, boundless pleasures derived by the Karbi boys and girls in courtship and mating

and their spontaneous expression, etc. In these genres there is no importance of the god centric ideals. These songs are Haimu Alun, Bongoi Alun (ballad), Hanri Alun Love songs of Hanri), Bor et Alun (love songs of young girls Bor et), Tu-aa-a and Ladung Ladung (Lullabies), Jili Alun (songs having sexual undertones sung during the Nimso Kerung Dance), Apati Alun (Songs having slang), Hanups Alun (songs sung while going to collect bamboo shoot) and various other love songs.¹

The Karbi folk songs are the greatest in number and these songs truthfully reflect Karbi life and culture in various aspects. Below is a brief discussion on how Karbi life is reflected in their folk songs as also in other genres of their folk literature.

6.2 Life of the Karbis as Reflected in their Folk Songs

No other genre of Karbi folk literature perhaps reflects Karbi life so intimately and truthfully as the folk songs. It is the speciality of the Karbi folk songs that they realistically and truthfully reflect the nature and the scenery of the jhum fields, the huts built on the tree branches called *tongi-ghar*, undulating hills, the rushing streams running through the hills, birds, trees and creepers, the sun and the moon, etc. which are part and parcel of Karbi folk life. The Karbis lead a down-to-earth life and there is no artificiality in their folk-life. Their relationship with nature is so intrinsic and inseparable that nature gets depicted unknowingly and spontaneously in any of the imagination of the tribe. Hence, the lover in Bongoi Alun has sung thus:

Mongbepi Nangle

Pharkong pan Pharse

Kangthu sibate

Lasi ni sengwe

Ing jaji mann a

Sengsiber unn a

Near meaning: The spring season is approaching. The blood-red flowers have blossomed in the silk-cotton and the coral trees. My mind has become excited with pleasure and has become restless. I have not been able to control my mind.²

The lover sings further-

...nangson thot keme

Aawe daak pirthe

Ithak manaike

Banta nang raj eke

Dolang aaprin pray

Aawe aaprin pray

Near meaning: There is no one like you. Even the moon cannot be a comparison to you. For, though the moon is beautiful there is spot on it; you are spotless and flawless.³

In the Haimu songs we see the reflection of the sense of beauty of the Karbis. These songs have withstood the tastes of time and have always shone bright in Karbi folk literature.

The ballad song of Haimu is one of the most notable poetic compositions of Karbi folk literature. The song is based on the deep love between a pair of lovers and the resultant conflicts on the way of their love. The heart rending love song between these lovers is like the reflection of the creative genius of the Karbi folk life. The life of Haimu was suddenly overshadowed by a piece of dark cloud brought about by a lusty king, and the pair of lovers had to suffer a lot. Haimu had to die, leaving a pall of gloom still fresh in Karbi folk memory.⁴

Karbi Life in their lullabies

The Karbi folk life is very beautifully depicted in the Karbi lullabies or cradle songs called Ose Kebe Alun. The creative and reflective mind of a Karbi mother, her world of mundane affairs, her expectations, the burden of domestic chores, the duties in the jhum fields, her love and concerns for the child, etc. are very creatively depicted in these lullabies. A few representative lullabies are reproduced here to show as to how these cradle songs reflect Karbi folk life.

Karbi Lullaby *Chiklopi Pen Chikloso*

O!chiklopi pen chikloso!

Nangso nangponpi tanglo

'Pepon aling pepon nang

Alar nondum pavan nang.
Chokle Chokdetri
Thengle thengdetri
Lang kar omle dong dong
Lang kangsamle dong dong.'
Beyhem atikup tikup
Sak nangtok pangduk pangduk;
'Tepolama harsun aduk?'
'Tepote lang phe e ang pang.'
Kenglongpo vangphlut
Methan chekor dut
Hotn beleng parkupphlup
Osomar bephlung.

Near meaning: O! Moon! O! Stars. Your child has been taken away. “Let them take wherever they want. Bring ball of thread instead. Do not beat him .Take care of his legs with hot and cold water.” They are husking paddy in full swings in the courtyard of the Beys. “Have they been powdered like garlic?” “The husks of the paddy have not yet been powdered.” Kenglongpo (an imaginary animal like the yeti) arrived. The dogs started barking and biting .The basket and the sieve all fell down. The boys also ran away.⁵

This is an ideal example of a Karbi lullaby. Here, a Karbi mother tries to lull the child to sleep in the evening sitting in the front of her

homestead with the images of the sun and the moon. This also depicts a very real picture of a common Karbi household.

Another example is:

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

The mother sings:

Dampijuk Kar-bi kar-ra-ra

Phelso Angdi Anda da

Ne hem Ingty do do

Ne hem Menthu do do

Dampijuk Kar-ri Kar-ra-ra

No dungle wangtha-tha

Near meaning: Oh! The flying fireflies! You are as white as cotton. In my home, I have salt. In my home I have dry fish. Oh! The flying fireflies! Come near me.⁶

The picture of a common agrarian Karbi household is very clearly depicted in this lullaby. It is notable that a poor Karbi household has only the barest minimum necessities. Salt and dry fish are two of such precious necessities for a poor Karbi household. The Karbi mother is offering this allurements to the fireflies so that they can pacify and lull the restless child to sleep.

Another example:

Ejang po mandung (ta)

Malong aafulum

Deng dong pang reng krom (ra)

Surir roidun (nang)

Near meaning: My child has cleared jungles and cut trees, climbed mountains, he will reap thousand kilograms of crops in the jhum field.⁷

The simple expectation of a Karbi mother for her child to grow, to go to jirsong and cultivate there bringing good crops to the household is a true reflection of a poor Karbi household. There expectation is limited to this only.

Picture of Karbi life and nature depicted in the folk songs

The Karbi folk songs invariably talks of nature. In fact without the mention of nature Karbi folk songs are always incomplete. It is an acknowledged fact that Karbi folk life is integrally related to the two rivers-Kolong and Kapili-the life blood of Karbi civilization. Hence, the Karbi folk songs always invariably talks of nature on the banks of these two rivers. Moreover, the nature depicted in the folk songs is one having the images of the hills, flowers, streams, the rivulets, fishes, trees, birds, etc. which are very familiar to the Karbis. The exquisite beauty of the two rivers is never forgotten in the folk songs.

The folk songs while talking of nature and natural surrounding also talks of the names of various ethnic tribes and communities who live in the close vicinity of the Karbis. This aspect in the folk songs has helped in expressing the melody and the rhythm in a more colourful way.⁸

The following folk song depicts the picture of fish and pebbles in a hilly stream all Karbis are familiar with:

Keng sarti nuboi

Kangroi ma kangroi

Longkoiso oyroy

Meaning: It seems that you might have rubbed your calf of the leg like the shape of a carp (a fish) very attentively. The pebbles that lie nearby indicate this.⁹

Birds also inspire the life of the Karbis. Birds are an integral part of Karbi folk life and culture. The Karbis believe in the egg origin and their national symbol Jambili Athon too has a bird in it. Regarding the place and importance of birds in Karbi folk songs, Prof. Rong Bong Terang comments:

“...The birds also have contributed a lot towards building the foundation of the Karbi literature and culture. From the domestic fowl to the wild bird of paradise, all are inseparable from the Karbi cultural life. The dove is also like a bridge at times of separation. The Karbis regard the dove to be the symbol of a soul, which signifies sorrow.”¹⁰

Trees, flowers and creepers etc. find frequent place in many Karbi folk songs. The trees which have found mention in the folk songs are the silk-cotton tree and the coral tree. There are mentions about the sensation created by the blooming of the blood red flowers of the silk cotton and coral tree in a number of folk songs.

Reflection of folk life in the Karbi Love Songs

Love between a young Karbi boy and a girl is a common theme of many of Karbi folk songs. In fact, without love as a theme, most of the Karbi folk songs will remain incomplete. Karbi young boys and girls begin to unlock their hearts as soon as the spring time comes. The following descriptions by Prof. Rong Bong Terang regarding Karbi love song during spring is reproduced here.

“As the coming of the spring brings in sweet songs to the throats of the cuckoo and the oriole, so does, the onslaught of youth brings in the unmatched vibration of songs to the Karbi youths. Thousands of love songs are composed centering ones lover or the beloved. The touch, the smell and the sight of nature emerge in the form of words in the mind of the poet who is in love and take the form of the poet’s own ideals of life. The agrarian society cannot easily defy the influence of the paddy field. The jhum field is like the life of the Karbi society and culture. That is why the lovers cannot forget the jhum field even in their profound desire to be united with each other. The jhum field reminds one of one’s beloved.”¹¹

Ne jaidi rit ling

Wangdong theng muchin

Monjir wang aling

Monimso clanjin

Jine nang ingkrim

Meaning: There is *thengmuchin* tree just below the jhum field. Its sweet fragrance is emitted in the air as soon as the breeze blows. As if, it is the fragrance of your body.¹²

Overpowering feelings of love of a young Karbi boy ploughing the jhum field has been very beautifully expressed in the following folk song:

Ne sangpuvet jakve

Nangkangvai jove

Ne tinkok nangse

Karjuton neke

Charchaklok ku-be.

Meaning: When I was tilling the fields alone, a bee was flying around me. I thought the humming of the bee in my ears to be your voice. Resting on the hoe, I listened to the song of the bee attentively.¹³

The song depicts the agrarian life of the Karbis amidst nature through the use of apt imagery.

A stream with pebbles where fishes come up and girls wash clothes is a familiar picture for the Karbis. The Karbi lover wishes to have the fragrance of his lady-love washing clothes on the bank of the stream forever in his memory. He sings-

Longsokso denglim

Samimet dalim

Jipu chok adim

Dalim nag ingkrin

Virun e klanjin.

Meaning: O my love, the fragrance you left on the beautiful rock when you washed clothes is still afresh in the *ghat*.

There is a great impact of the festivities like Chojun and Chomangkan in the folk life the Karbis. The Karbi lovers exchange their hearts during these occasions as well. There are folk songs on love which beautifully and truthfully depict the love life of the Karbi youths. Besides, these songs also depict the social life of the Karbis. Karbi lovers have a special liking for these festivities which provide them ample opportunities for easy mix up and to sing and dance. This aspect of the Karbi love life of the young lovers has been beautifully portrayed in the following song:

Non iboi alasa kan

Lasa kan neseng oilam

Wai theklonge nangphan

Meaning: All my enthusiasm died down this year. It is because I did not see you in the Chomangkan.¹⁴

6.4 Karbi folk memory regarding Migration and settlement as reflected in Mosera Kihir

The Karbi folk narrative genre called ‘Mosera Kihir’ depicts the Karbis’ traditional belief regarding their past, their migration, ordeals of migration, death, union with the forefathers after death, helping the soul of the diseased to migrate to the original place of migration, traditional system of bereavement, etc.

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 formally 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*’ are euphemisms 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 their belief that “...journeys of the soul often retraces the routes of migration from an imagined homeland....”¹⁵

‘*Kecharhe*’ or ‘dirge’ singing is another very important genre in Karbi folk narratives. This genre reflects the Karbi belief of the ‘out of the world journey of the soul’ into the ‘land of eternal happiness’ (*chom rongme, chom rongso*). This is an unavoidable part of the Karbi funerary ritual— ‘*Chomangkan*’. The Karbi funeral

ceremony which generally lasts for three to five days,¹ is a very elaborate and expensive affair where the central figure is the ‘*charhepi*’ or ‘*uchepi*’, the female dirge singer cum priestess. It is remarkable that ‘*Kecharhe*’ is an exclusively female affair and it is regarded a taboo for a male to do so. It is otherwise taboo for even the ‘*charhepi*’ to chant the dirge in other occasions within the boundary of a village. The ‘*charhepi*’ or a group of them acts as the guide of the soul in its final journey into the land of ‘eternal happiness’ through pre-ordained resting places. Without the chant and the heart-rending wails of the dirge, it is believed that the soul cannot reach its final destination. This route to this destination is believed to pass through arduous terrains, thorny and rocky-mountains covered with thick clouds of mist and big rivers.

Morningkeey Phangcho opines that the existing ‘*mosera*’ traditions in various regions of Karbi Anglong show basically a uniform theme of the origin of the tribe and the peculiar narrative style. The *Chinthong* version, however, seems to have retained more detailed and interesting explanations of the ordeal of the tribe’s migration from the “earth’s navel” or “*longle achete*” through diverse lands and endless persecution to its present habitat.

It says-

...

Ansi Sum aso tangte lepu, Sang aso tangte lepu

Ili ta recho chome lepu, kethe chome lepu

Lasi recho chebatlonang lepu, kethe chebatlonang lepu

Richo atheng rinang lepu, kethe atheng rinang lepu

Richo atheng nang-ri lepu, kethe atheng nang-ri lepu

Timung asor tangte lepu, Rongphar asor tangte lepu

Pap klemkle dolang lepu, pun klemkl dolang lepu

Ri asekk kechok lepu, keng asekk kechok lepu

Laphan-le recho batnang lepu, laphan-le kethe batnang lepu

Lasi asot kedo apot lepu, abot kedo apot lepu

Lasi sot recho pukok lepu, bot recho pukok lepu

Meaning: ...And then the children of Sum and Sang. We also can have our king, our great leader and so let's ordain a king, a leader. Let's look for one befitting a king. Thereafter the search for one befitting a king ensued. There is one among the Timung and Rongphar clan. He has not committed any sin or he has not committed any wrong doing. He possesses strong arm and legs. We ordain him the king, we ordain him our leader. Because he is holy and he is pure. Therefore he is called the holy one, the pure one.¹⁶

This version of Mosera further talks about 'passing through the navel of the earth':

Lasi inglong kangthir tangte lepu, arlok kangthir tangte lepu

Pirthe la achetedet lo lepu, mindar la achetedet lo lepu

Lasi pirthe la achete adim, mindar la achete adim

Ahem la kimpidamlonang lepu, arit kimpidamlonang lepu

Ansi Karbi aso atum, ansi Karbak aso atum

Ahem kimpidampo kepu, arit kimpidampo kepu

Lasi loti jokje lepu, tovar jokje lepu

Lasi sadu jokje lepu, lasi same jokje lepu

Bang ing-long komchen tangte lepu, bang arlok komchek lepu

Meaning: Therefore mount of holiness, canyon of purity is where earth's navel or the universe' navel is. Then earth's this navel, universe' this navel. Then Karbi followers commit to build homes and commit to build hearth. Then passage not being free, access not being free. They mountain surrounded, they canyon surrounded.¹⁷

The Mosera further gives a description of the Karbis' flight to the land of '*white sky and white earth*', '*white mountain and white canyon*'. It mentions about the other migrating groups including the Kuki-Chinpi, the Dukpa, the Lepcha, the Lama and the Tamang. The following verses give an idea of the Karbi migration:¹⁸

Bang Kuki-chinpi atum tangte, Kukichinpo atum tangte

Do adim cherai lepu, La thak adim cherai lepu

Dak nedung tangte lepu, Dak nerey tangte lepu

Nangtum Dukpa atum tangte lepu, Nangtum Lepcha atum tangte lepu

Nangtum Lama atum tangte lepu, Nangtum Tamang atum tangte lepu

Do adim nangjangponpe lepu, thak adim nangjangponpe lepu

Meaning: They, the great Kuki-Chins demarcated their areas to dwell. Here surrounding us... You Dukpas and Lepchas... You Lamas and Tamangs... Cannot be accommodated we are told...

The ordeals of the Karbis continued further. They had to fight battles, they had to suffer, they had to contemplate for long and they had to roam here and there.

The narrative says further:

Bang Kukichinpi atum, bang Kukichinpo atum

Ron chepho lepu, mai chepho lepu

Si Karbi atum tangté, si Karbak atum tangté

Ron kapheredun lepu, mai kapheredun lepu

Lasi Karbi atum chingvai lepu, Karbak atum chingvai lepu

Dak bang ron dokok lepu, dak bang mai dokok lepu

Jo arni chithu lepu, Jo arni chithat lepu

Lasi sining kelok lepu, lasi longle kelok lepu

Inglong kelok tangte lepu, arlok kelok tangte lepu

Dodun adim ave lepu, thakdun adim ave lepu

Lasi dakpen be lonang lepu, Lasi dakpen che lonang lepu
Lasi Karbi atum tangté lepu, Lasi Karbak atum tangté lepu
Lasi nangbethu lo lepu, Lasi nangchethulo lepu
Sining ta kanphuri vanglo lepu, Longle ta kanphuri vanglo
lepu.....

Meaning: They the great Kuki-Chins...Battles among them ensued...So Karbis all of them.... Being afraid of the battles... Here a battle is being fought.....Every night killings took place, every day killings took place... So in sky-white, in earth-white...Mountian-white and canyon white...Accommodation not available here...So from here we flee, from here we disperse....So Karbis we ... Therefore dispersed again...Sky we roamed around, earth we roamed around...¹⁹

The Mosera further narrates the ordeals of the Karbis which continued as they were driven out from ‘the land of the White Mountains’. They had to avoid the battles that killed ‘every day, every night’.²⁰

The Karbi encounter with the great Tais at Mungri-Mungram is narrated here. The Karbis are displaced from the Mungri-Mungram after their defeat at the hands of the great Tais. The Karbi ‘*Mungri-Mungram*’ seems to be directly derived from Mungri-Mungram⁴ of the present day Burma where the first Ahom Kings Khunlung-Khunlai were believed to have descended from heaven. The reference to Tai seems to indicate the ‘Tai-speaking’ Man people of Burma, a

small number of whom live in present Karbi Anglong district. But Karbi settlement did not last long there as they further move for shelter in the shadows of the great Arakan mountain range of Burma. The Karbis thereafter confront with the great Burmese who force them to leave their land towards the great river valleys of the Kapili and Kolang in the present day Assam through the lands of the Nagas.²¹

Referring to a Karbi tradition JH Hutton and H Bareh mention that southern Nagaland offered land route to the “.....tribes migrating from Burma via Manipur hills through which a passage was made by tribes who preceded the present people of the Patkoi mountain. The other preceding tribes are described to have Austric and Karen affinities”. But before their final sojourn to their present habitat, they make the last few stopovers in Burma.”²²

The exodus into the present NC Hills is narrated in the ‘*mosera*’ of the *Rongkhang* version. They wandered across to the Jaintia-Khasi land.

The Karbi migrants in their wanderings across NC Hills have many present day references. A reference to ‘*Vo-Amir*’, literally meaning ‘flower of bird’ (the flowery crest atop a bird’s head), is also found in the Karbi elegiac (*kecharhe*) and the present memory of the location points to Maibong in NC Hills.²³

6.5 A description of Karbi Folk Life reflected in Haimu Alun-epitome of Karbi folk song on Love

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 who proposes to marry Haimu, already married. As fate would have it, Haimu died, leaving the 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.²⁴

This love song shows the Karbi folk life and its ideals of love. The song also highlights the agri-based life-style of the Karbis, their nature of life, their daily activities centering round the jhum cultivation. The heart-rending love song underlines the fact that love cannot be bought with riches and luxuries and that love knows not anything save love.

6.6 Reflection of Karbi concept of heroism in Karbi Folk Literature and oral history

The Karbi folk memory has a list of 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 while 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 following^{25, 26}:

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. His valour remains a legend and a subject of great veneration among the Karbis.

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 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 mentions only 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 with the king's order to produce milk for tiger cubs. During her days of

leadership, 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 and protect the people from the combined forces of the enemies. 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 or dishonest king' (Sot=Honest, Recho=king) According to legends, he was a deeply religious man. Ruling from the present area of Rongkhang, and he looked after his subjects quite well. There is,

however, a debate as regards whether the king really lived or not. Legends say it in the affirmative. It is quite possible that a good Karbi potentate was later on remembered as 'pure king'.

- b. Thireng Wangreng:** He was a Karbi lawgiver and is remembered in connection with initiation of the Chomangkan festival. He is also known to have 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.

The Karbi description of these local heroes and their concept of heroism reflect the tribe's concept and imagination of heroes and their deeds, the qualities they seek in heroes, the deeds they adore and esteem high, their veneration of a savior etc. The descriptions also speak a lot about the sufferings the tribe had to suffer at various times in the hands of various rulers.

6.7 Karbi Life reflected in the Sabin Alun or the Karbi Ramayana

Sabin Alun or the Karbi version of the Ramayana, the Hindu religious epic, shows Karbi folk-life in its entirety. The epic has been beautifully adapted to suit the socio-cultural and economic situations of the tribe. The stories of Rama and Sita from Sabin Alun frequently figure among the various stories a Karbi grandmother tells her grandchildren. 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 social life and its tribal culture. The Karbi version of the Ramayana gives us a realistic picture of the actual life situations of the tribe.

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

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*.’

It is noted that the time of composition of the Karbi Ramayana with local elements is contemporary to the composition of the

Assamese Ramayana in the fourteenth century. It is stated 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 Rama-katha. Sufficient grounds exist of believing that the story of Sabin Alun that transmitted orally among the Karbis was a composition inspired and coloured by the 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 and hence it is possible that his genius might have influenced the lives of the Karbis. That is why it can be said that Rama-katha contained in the Sabin Alun is the echo of the Ramayana translated by Madhava Kandali, with local elements. That is why the heritage of the Karbi Ramayana also can date back only up to the fourteenth century.

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 in that version.

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.

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.

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’.

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 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.

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.

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.

In all these ways, the Karbi poet has enlivened the Karbi society in narrating the stories of Rama, Sita and Dasaratha. 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 and appropriate 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.

6.8 Karbi folk life in their folk tales

The Karbis are great story tellers. They can tell stories with 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.

6.9 Karbi Life reflected through their ballads

The ballads have enriched Karbi folk literature. The Karbis, who love and live amidst nature and for whom nature is an inseparable part of life itself, have created quite a good number of ballads which truthfully reflect their life and its colours. It is notable that still there is not a complete compilation of the Karbi ballads even though a few of them have been collected and compiled by one or two individual writers. It is equally sad that many of them have already been on the verge of extinction. On the other hand, some others among them are only in fragments instead of in full form. Among the most notables, Hai-i by Bonglong Terang and Romir by Samsing Hanse need special mention. Kehai Bey did a commendable job in collecting a number of ballads in fragments such as Mir Tahin, Dengsamet, etc.

The ballads present the Karbi society and its life-line very truthfully. Hai-I, one of the two most celebrated ballads, is a jewel of Karbi folk song and is a rare creation. The most notable aspect of the ballad is its mode of expression which is unparalleled. As Rong Bong

Terang says, there has been no parallel to this mode of expression in the Karbi language. The coherent narration of the story provides us a vivid description and natural expression of realistic characters. It has given us an accurate depiction of the 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. While developing the story of Hai-I, no supernatural power has been resorted to. On the contrary, the anonymous lyricist created vivid description of the sorrows and feelings of human beings in an artistic way. Though the creator of the ballad remained unseen from the humane eye, from the way Hai-i was addressed, it can be easily presumed that the composer was a person sharing the same fate as that of Hai-i.”²⁶

In Bonglong Terang’s Hai-i, there are altogether eleven chapters. However, there is no incoherence in the arrangement of the chapters. The remarkable aspect is that it depicts realistic picture of human life is depicted coherently in every chapter. In the first chapter the narrator of the ballad has tried to delineate a pen picture of the societal structure of the Karbi society in its true form. The narrator depicts the working of a Karbi society in a village headed by the Sarthe or the village-head who looks after all important aspects of the village like social, economic, cultural, etc. These aspects have been beautifully depicted in the ballad.

It describes the picture of the village thus:

La rong tharve phongjang (ke)

Ram tarchhing doyphlan

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 having a beautiful handle.

After completing the auspicious rites, Sar Longki shifted the village towards the up-streams of the river Amterpeng. At that time the fathers of Hai-i and Long were youths in Jirsong. After reaching the new village, Hai-'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. It was 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.²⁷

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.²⁸

Karbi folk literature and Karbi folk life are inseparably related to each other. There is not a single aspect of Karbi life which has not been depicted and reflected in the various genres of their folk literature. The folk literature of the Karbis is just the creation of their folk life and hence both are complementary to each other. The simple life style, love of nature, fear of demons and deities, love for various objects of nature, the mystic outlook, pleasures of cultivation and harvesting, the yearning for love and the pangs of separation, etc. have been very realistically depicted in the Karbi folktales, folksongs, oral history, ballads, proverbs, lullabies, chants, etc. Karbi folk life is most remarkably depicted in the greatest storehouse of Karbi folk literature-i.e., the Karbi folk songs and folktales. Besides, Karbi life is also realistically presented in the Karbi Ramayana - Sabin Alun. Above all, we also get a glimpse of the Karbi concept of heroism in their legends.

It is pertinent to mention here that a lot of valuable materials of Karbi folk literature are yet to be traced before they are permanently lost. Some ballads are already on the verge of extinction. Some legends and Karbi heroes are yet to be researched and recorded. If it is done, we may get some other reflection on Karbi life, society, history and matters related to their migration.

References

1. Das, Basanta, Karbi Sanskritir Itihas, pp. 248-49
2. Ibid, pp 249-50
3. Ibid, p. 250
4. Ibid, p. 250
5. Kalita Dr. Dilip Kumar, (Trans.) A Glimpse of Karbi Literature and Culture, originally written by Terang, Rongbong, pp. 40-41
6. Quoted from the book of Tanmay Bhattacharjee titled Sociology of the Karbis, pp. 151-163
7. Das, Basanta, Karbi Sanskritir Itihas, pp. 251
8. Kalita Dr. Dilip Kumar, (Trans.) A Glimpse of Karbi Literature and Culture, originally written by Terang, Rongbong, pp. 31-32
9. Ibid, p. 33
10. Ibid, quoted verbatim, p. 34
11. Ibid. The song and its meaning has been reproduced verbatim from the book, pp. 32-33
12. Ibid, The song and its meaning has been reproduced verbatim from the book, pp. 32-33
13. Ibid, pp. 32-33
14. Ibid, p. 34
15. Quoted from Morningkey Phangcho's article posted on his blog www.karbi.wordpress.com
16. Ibid
17. Ibid

- 18.Ibid
- 19.Ibid
- 20.Ibid
- 21.Ibid
- 22.Ibid
- 23.Ibid
- 24.Bhattacharjee, Tanmay, Sociology of the Karbis, pp. 176-185
- 25.Katharpi, Maggie, Karbi Heroes,
<http://www.museindia.com/viewarticle.asp?myr=2010&issd=31&d=1949> accessed on 21 December, 2014 where the writer acknowledged the credit to the Souvenir of First Karbi Book Fair, 2008
26. Kalita Dr. Dilip Kumar, (Trans.) A Glimpse of Karbi Literature and Culture, originally written by Terang, Rongbong, pp. 13-24
- 27.Ibid, pp.13-24. The translated text has been quoted verbatim.
- 28.Ibid, pp. 13-24 The translated text has been quoted verbatim.

