

Chapter IV

Chapter IV: Karbi Cultural Tradition vis-à-vis Literary Tradition

4.1 Karbi Cultural Tradition

Kabis are one of the oldest tribes which have lived in Assam for centuries and are one of the most important of tribes who have added to the composite culture of the state. The culture of the tribe is as varied and rich as the tribe itself. According to Suren Kramsa, Karbi culture is as vast and deep as the sea. Its stretch lies limitless as the horizon.¹ It has a long legacy of its culture. According to Karbi folk belief, its culture has developed centering around Rangina, the legendary musician who is the doyen of Karbi culture.² Rangina is the musical guru for them who is believed to have taught the tribe songs and spread it among the tribe. He is said to have given the tribe all knowledge about the origin and brought the tribe to light.³ It was a tradition among the tribe for a long time to have some sort of formal and practical education for the youths through Zirkadem, an assembly of the Karbi youths in a formal platform. The Karbis believe and remember with complete respect that it was also the contribution of Rangina, their musical prophet. So, they can never think of their culture without Rangina. Their culture is to be found in their myths, memories, metaphors, folktales, folk beliefs, folk songs, ballads, and in their oral history.

One of the most remarkable aspects of Karbi cultural tradition is that the tribe has kept the history of their rich culture alive through generations orally without written records. The Karbi forefathers have orally transmitted the stories of their migration to Assam from China, their life style in the pre-historic days, ways of production, village organization, origin of their social, cultural and political life, etc. through generations.⁴ It needs special mention of the fact that the Karbi forefathers have kept these stories of various phases of their development from generation to generation alive orally without any record or written document. These are the invaluable oral history of the Karbis every member of the tribe is proud of.⁵

The Karbis have their rich cultural legacy ingrained in their various cultural markers. Their tradition is spread through various phases of their migration, periods of turmoil and settlement. The tradition of their culture might be sought in their migration memories, age of hunting and acquisition, initiation of agriculture, origin of Chang-Ghar, food and food habits, dresses and ornaments, apparatus and weapons, origin of the chronology of the formation of village organization and the Karbi society, origin of Adam Asar or marriage institution, tradition of Zirkadem or bachelors' dormitory, origin of their art and culture, folk instruments, religious life, death and rebirth, folk literature, origin of king and administrative system, etc.

The life style of the Karbis, like other tribes of Assam, is varied and enchanting. Dependence on jhum cultivation, precedence of bamboo in material culture, predominant and inseparable role of Hor or country liquor made from rice in religious and social life, weaving of traditional dresses in local looms, ethnic and distinguished folk literature, etc are some very important hallmarks of Karbi life and culture.

The Karbis have kept many of their tribal cultural traits intact even though they have come into contact and absorbed elements of elite culture and have also influenced others in turn. Some of the cultural aspects of the Karbis have been discussed below.

a. Method of hunting in Karbi folk culture

Among the old, traditional methods of hunting of birds, fishes, deer, the following methods may be mentioned.

The Karbis take stem barks of the tree called Rihang Arong and dry it in the sun for 2-3 days. They make ropes out of it. The ropes thus made are very tight. They connect these ropes with a stick and make a trap. They trap birds like wild hen, rabbit, etc. They call this system as Phamatok or Phanketon.

They use gum from their local trees called Desam, Dhop, etc. and boil in cauldron. They also mix edible oil with it. They pour it on dishes and put layers of it on small sticks, about 50 cms in length. They place these sticks in places where birds come for prey. Small fishes are put

below these slender sticks as baits. When birds sit on these sticks with layers of glue, they get trapped. The Karbis then hunt these birds. They call this system De Kiton.

The Karbis also hunt birds with the aid of a piece of hollow bamboo, about 1-2 metres in length when they go hunting birds at night. First they take a piece of hollow bamboo and make it completely hollow cutting the wrists. They put a very sharp arrow attached to the end of the bamboo with a rubber strap. They put the bamboo at a small distance from the bird with the arrow pointing to the bird. They keep the bird fixed at its position lighting a torch. Then they release the rubber strap and the arrow hits the bird. They call this method 'Phanketon'.

The Karbis trap some water birds with the help of fishing hooks where they put small fishes or pieces of fish in the hook.

The Karbis hunt deer with trapping nets. In so doing the Karbis carry sharp cutting implements with them.

The Karbis also block small streams and catch fishes. They have another method of fishing through poisoning by local herbal mixtures which otherwise does not cause harm to the water.⁶

b. Draught in Karbi folk culture

The Karbis and the Tiwas living near the place named Aamsoi, sing traditional songs and dance they locally call Huchori. After they finish singing the song, they pour buckets and buckets of water on the

group members and make the yard muddy. In some places they take the *Dhenki* (a traditional grinding instrument/liver made of wood, bamboo etc) plough, gate, etc. and place them secretly in the ponds. The landlords rebuke in bitter terms without naming the accused since not known. They believe that these bring about rainfall.

In the areas hit by draught, the Karbis celebrate *Rekopi Rongker* and *Rek Rongker* conducted and guided by the *Sarthe* or the village headman with much pomp. They sacrifice goats, pigs, fowls, etc. during these worships. Traditionally, after the worship is over, *Kathar Bura* sings three songs to conclude the programme.⁷

c. Karbi folk cuisine

Rice is the staple food of the Karbis. They take fowls including cock, duck, pigeon, etc. They take meat of pig, goat, rabbit, deer, etc., Larvae are very favourite among the Karbis. Fish, including dry and smoked fish are also very favourite among the Karbis. They dry fish in special ways unique to their own. They take betel nut and leaf. They do not generally take cow milk. They prepare beer in their own ethnic ways made of rice. They also take plaintain spike, bamboo shoot, corns, vegetable etc. which they produce through *jhum* cultivation.

The Karbis take meat and fish in their own ethnic ways. They use little edible oil and spices. Boiled food items are generally noted in their culture.⁸

d. Wine or country liquor in Karbi folk culture

Wine or country beer is called Horlang in Karbi. The Karbis collect about 101 bitter leaves of trees and mix it with rice powder. They make cakes out of it and then let it dry up on special trays kept above their oven where they light firewood. These cakes dry up and become tight. They call it *Thap or Thinkur*. Then they half-boil a special rice called '*Ankari Xali*' and spread it on bamboo mats for cooling down. The cakes are ground into powder and are mixed with the rice. Then they spread pieces of plaintain leaves on the ground, spread the rice mixture on it and cover it with another piece of plaintain leaf. Then they put it in containers where it is let for fermentation. It becomes ready to take after about seven days. The Karbis call this *Karbuk*.

The Karbis make a special glass of tiny bamboo sheets and they call it '*Alang Ahar*'. This special glass is put inside the container where the rice beer is placed for fermentation. When it is done, the beer comes up inside the glass. Then this beer is kept out with spoon made of dry skeleton of gourd. When this beer is taken, the remainder of the rice mixture is squeezed further to derive more beer. They call it '*aap ahar*'. The remaining of the rice mixture is used as fodder. The Karbis prepare country liquor in earthen pots called *Koloh* and it is done in different ways. They have various faiths, beliefs and methods of the preparation of such liquor. One among them is that the earthen containers are to be touched only by the women who make the liquor and that while

preparing the liquor, one should not take any sour item, otherwise, it is their belief that the liquor will also be sour.⁹

e. Folklore claims of some medicinal plants as antidote against poisons among the Karbis

The Karbis use a number of plants as medicines. They use whole plant, root, stem, bark, rhizome, fruit, leaf, tuber, etc. of plants and herbs as medicines and as antidotes to poison.

Some medicinal plants used as antidotes by the Karbis of Assam.¹⁰

1. *Helminthostachys zeylanica* (Linnaeus) Hooker
2. *Aristolochia platanifolia* (Klotzsch) Duchartre
3. *Hibiscus sabdariffa* Linnaeus
4. *Averrhoa carambola* Linnaeus
5. *Rauwolfia serpentina* (Linnaeus) Benthamex Kurz
6. *Nicotiana plumbaginifolia* Viviani
7. *Boesenbergia rotunda* (Linnaeus) Mansfeld
8. *Begonia roxburghii* (Miquel) DC
9. *Zingiber officinale* Roscoe
10. Fruits of *Sapindus mukorossi* Gaertner

11. *Kaempferia galanga* Linnaeus;

12. *Marsdenia tinctoria* R. Brown

In diseases like pox, small cuts and burns, toothache, ear disease, back pain, cut in the feet while ploughing, problems of lactating mother and child, eye diseases, malaria, etc. The Karbis use various ethnic medicines to treat and cure cows too.

Regarding these folk medicines of the Karbis the words of Robindra Teron and S. K. Borthakur are worth quoting:

“Plant-based folk antidotes are still vibrant among the Karbis; selection of medicinal plants is partly guided by their world views and the Doctrine of Signature. Folk medicines or traditional medicine practice may not satisfy scrutiny of modern science but cannot be discarded as well. Folk medicines need urgent documentation before it is too late and such practices may be validated through modern biological principles and tools. Pharmacological study of traditional medicines presents viable option for determining the active principle and mode of action.

Folk medicines need not necessarily be replaced by modern one but the existing practice (if found safe) can be encouraged for the benefit of rural folk. Food-medicines overlap exhibited in many food cultures can be an interesting area of investigation.”¹¹

f. Astrology and augury in Karbi folk culture

The Karbis, like many other tribes and communities in the long past, could not decipher the causes, meaning and significance of certain events of nature as well as diseases. They believed that these diseases and supernatural events to be the acts of imp and spirits, deities and demons, etc. They sought every possible ways to propitiate them. Their ways of propitiating them through worship, animal sacrifice, etc. took the form of religious rituals and through this primitive Karbis sought to have reign on animals, overpower and annihilate enemies, have cure from diseases, have ways of livelihood, etc. These prayers and worships took the form of magic and charms. The system of astrology or augury is associated with this. The traditional diviners or astrologers decipher the plight of men and women with things like grains of rice, yolk of eggs, liver of chicks, etc by raised platform of earth, or by drawing lines on the ground or by cutting a piece of bamboo lengthwise.¹²

The Karbis have a number of traditional systems of augury. One such system is that of doing it with rice grains. The diviner or astrologer brings out a few grains of rice from an earthen pot called Koloh in small clusters of five or ten rice grains. Then they begin to deliberate on the plight of patients. If he happens to get odd couples of rice grains, it is believed that the patient will not recover. The astrologer repeats the process and if he gets the same odd combination, he says the same about the future. If he gets only three rice grains at last, it is believed that the patient is being in the possession of evil spirits.¹³

Another system of such augury is performed by some *uchepis*. They make some small raised earthen (seeming like tiny hillocks) platform and put them in a plain surface in equal distances within a circle. Each of these small tiny platforms are considered and named after a god or a goddess. Then they throw an egg with force towards the middle of the circle. The side of the platform near which the yolk of broken egg falls is named after the god 'Lava'. Thereafter the *uchepi* goes on to decide on the well-being or otherwise of the patient.¹⁴

There are other methods including those with a *dao* (a small cutting instrument like a sword with handle of bamboo, wood etc) and chanting mantras, drawing three lines on the ground and using *kori* (a round object), etc.

The relationship of tantric practices with this system of augury in Karbi society is very intrinsic. They believe in a number of magical practices.¹⁵

g. Religious practices:

Traditionally the Karbis were neither Hindus nor Christians; they had their own unique animist religion having resemblance with some of the cults of Hinduism. But now, many of the Karbis profess Hinduism, many profess Christianity. The Karbis who practice Hinduism call themselves 'Honhari'.¹⁶

The Hindus among the Karbis are worshippers of gods and goddesses. Arnam Hemphu, Hemari, Porigya, Peng, Dengjaduri, Mohadai (Mahadev), Mohamai (Mahamaya), Brahma, etc. are the main gods and goddesses of the Karbis. The purpose of worshipping various gods and goddesses are different. They believe in re-birth and hence keep the names of the newborns as those of the diseased.

The most notable aspect of Karbi folk religion is that they worship both demons and deity together with equal reverence and fear. They have a combined phrase to mean these demons and deities together which is *Hi:i-Arnam*. The Karbis feel and believe in the existence of a number of deities as well their arch-rivals or evil counterparts. However, interestingly, both of them enjoy equal status in Karbi folk rituals. This inherent duality and unity in the folk religion of the tribe is a very noticeable one. It is also remarkable that the epithet *Hi:i-Arnam* is never uttered in reverse. The basis of Karbi folk religion is this all important unity and duality between these contrasting forces and the 'balance' sought to be brought about by equal worship of both of the forces.

Another remarkable aspect of Karbi folk religion is the ancestor worship, particularly during Thi Karthi or Mosera. In their funerary rituals we see the celebration of death as well as celebration of life. The Karbis believe that without the heart rending wailing the soul of a deceased cannot reach its pre-defined destination. Only then the soul will travel through the specified routes back to the village of its ancestors.

This going back of the soul to the original village is not equated with either hell or heaven.¹⁷

h. Organization in Karbi folk culture

The Karbi administrative system was different at different places in the old days. The kings, ministers and other officers could hold their offices on verbal approval and instructions from the elders of the society. When a position fell vacant, the son or the brother or other near relatives of the concerned officer could be appointed to that post. In the Ronghang area, however, nobody except one from the same clan could become a king. Women were not appointed in any post in any hierarchy of administration. They formed a particular area with 12 (twelve) provinces called 'Longri' which they called 'Zeroi'.¹⁸

The official hierarchy in the Karbi Longri was like this-

Bor Habe or Bor Habai or Habekong, Haboros, Burotmen, Mutiar, Basapo, Hemai and Sarthe or Kang Burha (Gaonburha or village headman). The population living under the Sarthe were called Mekar.¹⁹

The twelve Longris at that time were- Kiling, Umlarong, Umaha, Chongkhili, Dera, Nokbere, Bhoitiri, Rongcheis, Rongpi, Ronghan, Rapati and Habepi.²⁰

H. I. Kathar relates the origin of the village organization to 'father figure Langan Sarkari (who) mooted more elaborate system of village-

government. ...the formation of “Ser-van-kep,” the village organization was completed which consists of ten dignitaries who would look after the problems of the village in all matters.’²¹

Kathar further lists and enumerates the ten posts and functions of these dignitaries thus²²:

1. The village head, who was also the head of the organization, was the Rong-asar or Sarthe. He establishes the village and so he is called the “Ser Kangthim,” meaning ‘undivided authority’. He can be crowned or appointed only by the one who has provided him the village land. If the Rong-asar has found a piece of land not claimed by any other man, in that case he can simply declare himself Rong-asar by throwing a feast publicly.

2. Riso-Basa, who is the assistant Rong-asar.

3. Phumen-phulok akong

4. Phumen-phulok akibi

5. Hemai akong

6. Hemai akibi

7. Pherangke akong

8. Pherangke akibi

9. Mekar akleng

10. Klengsarpoh, who is the Youth leader.

The Karbis call their king Lindokpo had the power of sentencing a person to death or having an amnesty on him.²³

The Kathar Bura was far above the other officers in administrative, religious and intellectual matters. He could even perform the royal duties temporarily in the absence of the King.²⁴

The administrative hierarchy of the Karbis varies from region to region. For example, in the Dimoria region the Karbis have a different hierarchy of administration.²⁵

i. Crow in Karbi Society

The Karbis believe that crows are the harbingers of evil messages for the society. They believe that if a crow caws while deciding time about spending the night in the jungle for hunting they have to change the place immediately or there will be impending danger for them.²⁶

j. Fish in Karbi Folk belief

The Karbis are very fond of fish as they are also of pig, fowl, goat, etc. Such is the relation of the Karbi society with fish that their proverbs too speak a lot about their love for fish. There are proverbs in society which are based on the social experience of centuries. These proverbs express the nature of a particular community or tribe. There is an intrinsic relationship of the proverbs with the empirical experience of the

social life. It is therefore, that such proverbs have become an important part of folklore research. In the Karbi society too, there are proverbs which speak of their empirical experience regarding fish. These proverbs also establish the place and importance of fish in Karbi society.

Fish, being one of the major foods of the Assamese people, is also very popular among the Karbis. It is an inseparable food item for them which is invariably required for their social and cultural events. The following proverb best exemplifies the role and significance of fish in Karbi society.

“Aveongte cheheta ok.”

(Meaning: In the absence of fish, even a crab is also a fish.)²⁷

The proverb bears significance in that crab is completely banned in Karbi society. The Karbis are not even allowed to take a crab inside their homes. It is their faith that if they do so, their god Hemphu will be angry. Their belief is that Hemphu becomes angry if they take crabs insides and if this happens, some misfortune takes place at home. But in spite of such all pervading fears, the use of crab as a substitute of fish, as expressed in the above mentioned proverb, establishes firmly the popularity of fish in the Karbi society.²⁸

Along with fresh fish, dry fish and items from it is also very popular among the Karbis. They relish dry fish according to their own culinary tastes.

Karbi place names and names of rivers also originate from names of fish in Karbi which indicate that the Karbis once inhabited these places. Some such examples are-

Place names: *Ak sek, Ak kereng, Kaki, Nuboipi Apam*, etc.

Names of rivers-*Luthilangso, Tengeralangso*, etc. ²⁹

k. Folk games and sports in Karbi culture

Among the traditional games and sports of the Karbis, a few are-

Kipatu (See-saw game)

Pengbari (Jongkrang Akong): In this game a number of competitors walk fast together. Whoever reaches the destination first becomes the winner.

Diving (Langkarbipo): About 10-12 competitors take part in this game where some of them act as fishes and the other competitors try to catch them.

The Karbis in this traditional sport try to catch hold of swimmers as they swim. It is called Langkibek. Through this sport they become expert swimmers.

Kokang Kiwar (throwing a piece of stick to the sky and trying to hit it with other pieces): Here too about 10-12 competitors take part who have a piece of stick each in their hands. Whoever has the shortest stick

can throw the stick to high above in the sky. Others try to hit that piece. Who can hit it is supposed to 'die'. Whoever cannot hit it gets the chance to throw again and again.

Lipit or lepeti (Stick) where about 6-7 players take part. Each of them takes a stick in their hand. The one with the shortest stick puts the stick on the ground. Others in turn have to cross their stick through below that stick on the ground. Whoever can do so wins and whoever cannot has to place his stick on the ground. The same process is repeated.³⁰

I. Mental illness and social response-a Karbi perspective

The Karbis have different perspectives about mental illnesses of various kinds. They approach astrologers or diviners for determining the cause and the cure. The Karbi perspectives of mental illnesses in patients have been succinctly put by Morningkeey Phanco in an article posted in his blog www.karbi.wordpress.com³¹

'If a person suffers from any or some of the following ailments/symptoms, a 'sang kelang abang' or a diviner is called to determine the cause. He picks out of the pot the unbroken grains of rice (sang) and places them by fives and tens in pentacle or other fashion. He then counts by couples and if in the counts the odd numbers predominate, the omen is good. And if there are no odd grains over, the omen is very bad. Then all are swept again and arranged in three or five heaps. Each heap is counted and a god is named, and if after counting,

again by couples, three single grains remain, the god named is propitiated. If three grains do not remain, the process is tried again.’ ‘Sometimes, cowries are also used instead of rice grains. In another method, a nokjir or iron sword with long handle with a crosspiece is used. This iron sword is held upright in the hand by the ‘sang kelang abang’. It shakes by itself when the charm is cited: ‘Let your spirit come!’ The holder asks of the nokjir of what illness the person is afflicted with and what are the cures or whether any god is to be propitiated. The nokjir shakes by itself at the right answer. The charm ends with — ‘if you tell lies, you will be broken up and made into needles!’ To determine the cause/s of the following abnormalities, the ‘sāng kelāng abāng’ also uses one of above mentioned methods to find out whether the sick person is got hold of by the spirit or devil (ahī:i) of the maternal uncle (ong or nihu). The abnormalities may include one or more of the following when a person is —

not cured by treatment or medicine (sē langta mémè)

sickly and anemic (lok:hu lokphlep)

absent minded (bokuliti)

biting nails (ari ahi kachecho)

eating mucus (anap kachecho)

eating wax of ear (ano ahi kachecho)

wearing no cloths even after puberty (pe:rì en:é)

suffering from rectal-prolapse (ami angpong jang:er)

aggressive (kachechokji matha:é)

hateful of mother/father (api-apo chelangelet varet)

unrinating/defecating in bed even when grown up (ape:arì chephi:ing varet)

devoid of the senses of shame or concerns about the surrounding (therak thekthédet)

chewing cloths (pe kormir)

There are several other abnormalities, which indicate various phases of mental illness. In such cases, a ‘sāng kelāng abāng’ is approached, a diviner who determines the causes. The cause of the disease is then said to be ‘nihu kepachoi’ or ‘seeking mother’s brother’. The ‘sāng kelāng abāng’ determines exactly which particular brother of the mother is to be ‘sought’ by the patient. In any case, the patient is not despised or ill-treated by the family or the society during his/her illness. In fact, in old times, such abnormalities in a person are not considered to be a disease at all, because it was then popularly believed that by observing certain rituals, the abnormalities could be cured. The rituals involved paying respect or obeisance to the brother of the mother or a maternal uncle determined by the diviner.”³¹

m. Fear and respect for religion and faith in rebirth:

The Karbis are a religion fearing tribe. They have deep faith on religion and have their equal share of fears for it too. They firmly believe in rebirth. Their faith of rebirth of a deceased person is so complete and deep-rooted that they name the newborn babies after deceased person.

n. Jambili athon

Jambili Athon is the universally accepted cultural symbol of the Karbis as a tribe. Among the popular festivals of the Karbis, Chomankan is the most notable one. This festival is celebrated by the entire number of clans and sub-clans of the Karbi tribe unitedly with much merriment. The Karbis adorn themselves with colourful ethnic dresses and use a number of traditional musical and other instruments. Jambili Athon is the most important and most inseparable one.

“...It is made of a particular tree called the ‘Bengvoi’ (Wrightia coccinea sims) bearing red flowers. It consists of a central axis called Athon pi (Athon –branch, pi– large, main) and a whorl of four branches called Aro Athon (branchlet/small), all with beautiful carvings on it and the apices are perched with different species of birds. At the apex of the central axis, that tops the four lateral branches, a local bird known as Vojaru (racked-tailed drongo) is placed and to the apices of lateral branches another local bird named, Vorale (spangled Drongo) is placed. The Karbis regard the vojaru as the king of birds, who is always

*followed by other birds traditionally referred as atoi –ani (followers) and are compared to ministers and soldiers. The Vojaru is portrayed as the Karbi king, who protects his people symbolized by smaller birds and enjoys peaceful co-existence among themselves. It is also believed that 5 branches of the Jambili Athon refers to the five clans of the Karbis, i.e., Kronjang, Hanjang, Tunjang, Ejang, and Lijang. Jambili Athon is exhibited during a festival called ‘Chomangkan’ and during other special occasions.*³²

o. Rangsinā, the musical doyen and father of Karbi culture

The legends of the Karbis tell us that their culture is centred round the legendary doyen named Rangsinā, who is believed to have taught the tribe their songs and spread them in the society. Rangsinā is also believed to have taught the tribe the theories of the origin of the world, the tribe and showed them light. Like Mahapurush Sankardeva in the pan Assamese context, Rangsinā established a socio-cultural organization in Karbi society named ‘Zirkadem’ for the youths where they could learn all formal lessons like in a school. Hence, the tribe can never think of their culture without Rangsinā.

p. Bottle guard and country beer or Hor in Karbi culture

Another marker of Karbi folk culture is the extensive and almost universal use of *Bong* or gourd shell. It is an integral part of Karbi culture which is almost invariably used during traditional Karbi marriage

called 'Adam-asar' and worship. Karbis believe that the seeds of this integral cultural object were gifted by a Karbi god named Sonsar Recho who was the creator of the Karbi ancestors and is the keeper of all crops. They still believe the seeds of the Bong as invaluable assets. The use of this Bong is however, not an exclusive character of the Karbis; it is also used by some other tribes of Assam as well as from the entire North East states like the Kacharis, Boros, Garos, Tiwas, Dimashas, Kukis, Naga, Mizo, etc. It is also used by the Suba, Rai, Gurung and Lama among the Nepalis who are not a tribe.³³

The Karbis equally use Hor or hor alank or horlang, which is a locally prepared rice beer that finds place in many occasions including adam-asar, and others. Bong and hor go hand in hand. Bong is used to take this hor. So the use of hor or bong is complementary to each other.

q. Bamboo in Karbi culture and its place therein:

The tribal people usually live in the forest areas, thus they have a very close relationship with the natural resources. They try to utilize most of the resources available in the natural environment according to their needs. Apart from economic, political and cultural, their religious aspects are also associated with the flora and fauna. The ritual practices of the Karbis are associated with a number of ritual traits which are wholly collected from surroundings.

The Karbis have been using Bamboos for ages. The origin myth of the Bamboo called "*Chek keplang*" is found in the Karbi folk songs called "*chek keplang alun*" and it has been told by the from generation after generation through oral tradition. Here I am tempted to quote a few lines of "*Chek keplang alun*" where the origin myth has been narrated (as told by one villager) The Karbis are the son of *Hemphu-Mukrang*, and is religious and ritualistic so, to propitiate the God, *Hemphu arnam* used *Arjang* (A young bamboo branch) for *anghoi* to propitiate the God/deities).

There is also a belief that *Songsar Richo*, send *Sairikpo* (some belief *Songsar recho* send two female *Rik kropi* and *Rik Beypi*) to the mother earth for the cultivation of bamboo. So, that human being can used this sacred plant for rituals and for other material proposes. It is believed that the use of bamboo in ritual was first taught by *Hemphu* in Karbi society. The Karbi also believed that, a mythical person known as *Thireng-vangreng* was the first ever person to teach the preparation of bamboo made crafts.

A variety of bamboo tree locally known as *Kaipho* is not to be planted in the household premise, because for the Karbi it is a cultural taboo for them. With regard to cultural taboos, it is believed that if the bamboo is used for any impure purpose like dead, then the whole clumps of bamboo cannot be used for rituals and other household related problems, more over the bamboo which are broken during its young

stage but they attain a full maturity in the later part, and it is also cannot be used for ritual and for household purpose. Further the clumps of bamboo which are covered fully with a creepers then it cannot be also used for ritual and for household purpose.

The bamboo made products were used to sell in the market. Different agricultural and fishing implements were prepared by bamboo. It is also believed that if any impure thing is touch on the bamboo, then that whole clumps cannot be utilized for rituals and household purpose.³⁴

4.2 Karbi Cultural Tradition and Its Chief Markers

The rich and varied cultural tradition of the Karbis can be seen through a number of distinguishing markers. Karbi culture or its present form today is basically kept recorded and alive by the legends and myths or oral tales. Their legends have a number of important features. Karbi forefathers, with their limited knowledge, have created songs with metaphors and allegory regarding how the tribe developed from the barbaric stage to their present position. Thus the legends and myths of the Karbis provide important oral history regarding the cultural heritage of the tribe.³⁵

The chief markers of Karbi cultural tradition can be listed and discussed as follows:

The legends and myths

The legends and myths of the Karbis in song forms are an inextricable part of their history and tradition of culture. Though there will be many who will be reluctant to accept the veracity of these myths and legends during these days of science and technology. They express doubt whether the myths and legends could be taken as reliable materials of writing history. However, a number of researchers in history have deep faith in these myths and legends. Some researchers like Lewis Henry Morgan, V. Gordon Childe, Dr. Koushambi, etc. have shown us how primitive history can be traced and studied without written records. It needs to be mentioned, however, that the method they followed thus, was surely a very laborious, difficult one calling for a rare degree of patience and talents.³⁶ These myths and legends surely contain imaginary descriptions and exaggerations but they also contain material facts and we have to cull them out from serious studies. It is because, the birth of science can also be traced back to these myths and hence, science can be traced in them too.

Among these myths and legends from which Karbi history and culture can be known to some extent, mention may be made of:

Lakshi Keplang

Karbi Keplang

Songs of a Good King

Ballad of Mosera Kihir and the Plaintive Songs of 'Tawar Kethan'

Rong Kekim

Thap and Bongkrok Keplang

Mosera tradition and the Egg origin

The Mosera Kihir, the traditional Karbi way of past recounting whereby the, Karbi tribe is made aware of their past, gives us a symbolical description of the origin of the tribe, the names of other tribes and communities Karbi got into contact and which of these communities or races or tribes made them suffer.

The Karbis believe that their race and for that matter, all races originated from eggs. This belief is a hallmark of Karbi culture and there are many occasions, events, etc. in Karbi folk life where eggs play a very significant part.

Orality

Orality, like all other folk literature and culture, has been a defining aspect of Karbi culture, folk literature and tradition. It is such that most of the songs, folktales, invocations, lullabies, ballads, etc. have been transmitted to the present generation of Karbis only through orality. The written history of the Karbis of all these socio-cultural and literary aspects has been only of recent decades. The Karbi forefathers kept these aspects alive through their mouth and passed them from one generation to the other.

Markers of tribal culture still extant to great extent

The Karbi culture is tribal essentially and many aspects of tribal culture are still extant till today. They have kept the basic characteristics of their culture intact even amidst influences and pressures of various kinds.

Status of Women very high:

Although some tribal societies are matriarchal, the Karbi society is male dominated. Of course, the position of women in Karbi society is very high. The women are respected and given their due spaces. The married women carry their original surnames intact. Women are very laborious, active and hospitable. They are expert weavers.

Influence of the Evil Figure, Tisso Jonding on the Socio-religio-cultural Life of Karbis:

Tisso Jonding is one of the most feared evil figures among Karbis. Karbi traditional drummers called *Dohuidi* consider *Tisso* as their *kuru* (teacher) and always offer *hor* (rice beer) and seek *their* blessings before they take part in any ritual. In the past, *Tisso* even came down the hills and helped Karbis during their socio-religio-cultural occasions such as *Chojun*, *Chomangkan* and other important occasions. However, all *Tisso* return to their habitat (i.e., forests) at dawn and this specific period is popularly referred as *Tisso Rongdam* (*rong*: village; *dam*: to return). The tradition of guarding dead bodies among Karbis is inherited from *Tisso*,

who in the past were reported to feed on the corpse. Origin of *Tisso* subclan of Karbis is inherently associated with *Tisso*. *Hanso ke-et* (*Zingiber casumunar* Roxb.; Zingiberaceae) is taboo to *Tisso* and touching the plant is reported to make them unholy forever, lose divinity and become excommunicated from the grand *Tisso* family.³⁷

Rich folk literature:

The folk literature of the Karbis is very rich and their folk literature has got many regional characteristics. It needs special mention here that the Karbis have their written literature only recently. They did not even have any written record of their history till very recently. Their folk songs, riddles, proverbs, incantations, invocations, ballads, folk narratives, etc. could survive centuries orally from one generation to the other only by mouth. Of their folk literature, mention may be made of Sabin Alun or the Karbi Ramayana, lullabies, marriage songs, love songs, Mosera Kihir, Rukasen Alun, folktales, etc.

Shyness and remaining aloof:

As a tribe, the Karbis are rather shy and they prefer to remain aloof. Their previous history of suffering, ordeal, their habitation in the jungles, lack of exposure of many of them to the mainstream of life, etc. might be some of the causes for their shyness and the habit of remaining mostly aloof.

4.3 Karbi Literary Tradition and its Present

The Karbis have their rich literary tradition in so far as their folk tales, folk narratives, ballads, myths and legends, folk songs, riddles, proverbs, incantations, invocations, epic poems, love poems, etc are concerned. From the point of view of folk-lore and folk songs, the Karbis are very rich. It has been mentioned earlier that they have their own version of the Ramayana called Sabin Alun which has been handed down from one generation to another orally. Besides, they have Hii-mu Alun, Oso Sepadok Alun, (lullabies), Thelu Alun (marriage songs), Bong a Alun (Love songs), Mosera Kihir (recounting of past memories), Rukasen Alun, etc which have enlivened and enriched Karbi folk literature and culture. These branches of Karbi folk literature have reflected Karbi social life, rules and regulations, customs, popular beliefs, emotions and aspirations, pleasures and pains, etc. These have great similarities with the mainstream Assamese life, literature and culture.

All elements of folklore, like social rituals, legends, historical tales, ballads of love and separation, folksongs of Ram-Ravan, love songs, fables, magic chants and proverbs etcetera, have been kept alive through oral literature.

Among the first written texts in Karbi language, Karbi Catechism, a propaganda newsletter printed at the Christian Missionary press at Sivasagar in 1875 is the first. Then in 1898, two textbooks for primary schools Plipli and Kalakha, written in the Roman script were published

by Rev P. E. Moore, Sir J. M. Carwell and Rev W. R. Hutton, and these continued as primary texts for almost five years. Subsequently, these books were also published in the Assamese script. The first Bachelors' degree holder among Karbis, Samsonsing Ingti and Basapi Ingti were the main forces behind the re-printing of the textbooks in Assamese script and they continued to be taught in schools for another four years.

The contribution of the Christian missionaries in bringing literacy and education among the Karbis is undeniable. They not only printed the above mentioned textbooks but also other books like A Dictionary of the Mikir Language, Tomo Puru, Arleng Alun Athui, Mikir Third Reader, Bituso Akitap, Ning Arjan, Pilgrim's Progress and Karbi-English Vocabulary. Rev Hutton also edited a Karbi journal, Birta, for 15 long years. He also wrote various religious books in Karbi.

The development of Karbi language and literature can be divided into two phases: pre- and post- independence. In the post-independence era, a handful of Karbi writers like Bonglong Terang can be mentioned. Terang published three books in the Karbi language in 1937: Ha-E, Rukasen and Adam-Asar. Adam-Asar is a collection of traditional wedding songs. Rukasen is a description of the activities of the headman of a Karbi village; it also describes how Karbis established villages and also contains some folksongs about the origins of paddy and the chilli. Ha-E is contains a ballad about the eternal love of a young couple. After the formation of the Karbi Anglong district, this writer

composed Karbi Kapusan, Dinmir, Sar Lamsam, Ser Hangtham, Ranglin, and Aran Ateng. Another writer of note in this period is Raghunath Teron who is a Karbi from the plains of Assam and he authored the book Karbi Po.

After the formation of the Karbi Anglong district, a few conscious citizens began to write and publish in their own language. Various organizations for the social and economic upliftment of the Larbis also began to publish their newsletters in Karbi. Besides, the catholic missionaries have been contributing through the publication of not only their monthly magazine Samfri Atur but also other books like Baibel Kangthir and Karbi Self-Thought. Even though they are not very large in numbers, a few Karbi journals and magazines have been in publication: Owe Kimi, Karbi, Klirdap, Towar Kimi, Nakwe, Manjir, Lamde, Loti, Atur Kimi, Longsar, Lokim, Wojaru, and so on. Writers who have been contributing regularly to the development of Karbi literature through their various compositions include Lunche Timung, Bidarsing Kro, Sabrasi Timung, Longbiram Ingti Kathar, Bidarsing Rangpi, Suren Kramsa, Bidyasing Rangpi, Khayasing Hanse, Bapuram Teron, Ananda Rangfar, Jit Kumar Rangpi, Pari Rangpi, Gandhi Takbi, Sarklim Taro, Langkamar Timung, Deben Timung, Rongbong Terang, Arun Teron, Jarsing Bey, Mandal Sing Bey, Sarkrat Hanse, Sing Kro, Logkam Teron, Samsing Teron, Khirla Teronpi, Ruplan Ingtipi, Sadhana Rangpipi, Rina Patarpi, Ruhini Teronpi, among others.

In 1966, the Karbi Lammet Amei, or the Karbi Sahitya Sabha, was formed along the lines of the Asam Sahitya Sabha to work towards the development and spread of Karbi literature. Longkam Teron and Padmashree Rongbong Terang were the president and secretary respectively. The books published by the Karbi Lammet Amei include: short story collection like Lammet Esang, Samfri Apunsir, Kasanghang; poetry collections like Sengwe Amir Sikidupupe, Dampijuk Singdi, Ruptaine, Jengjeri, Kungriso Mirdan; collection of tales like Tomo Puru; anthology of articles like Khei Aharsi, Jutang Amung, Rongtheang Angtang, Ser Langsar, Lamjir Afar, Lamjir Kangdak; compilation of folksongs like Pengsomir, Dimir Alun; collection of biographies like Langri Amelur; dictionaries like Akemi Karbi Lamthe Amarjang; etc.

It is deplorable that despite the passage of more than half a century since the formation for a separate district for the Karbis, the development of Karbi language and literature has not met expectations. This is because the Karbi Anglong District Autonomous Council has not taken adequate steps in this direction. It is however laudable that since 1998 with a grant from the Indian government and the World Bank, the District Primary Education Project has included Karbi Anglong within its ambit. Under this project, efforts are being made to develop an individual policy for the progress of Karbi language and literature. Many textbooks were published under this project after the completion of which the Karbi Anglong District Autonomous Council has set up the

Karbi Language Development Board. In 2003, the government declared that Karbi language will be granted official recognition and up to 200 subject teachers will be employed to teach the language in government schools. This is a welcome development, and for Karbi language and literature to grow to its full potential, sincere and well-meaning policies are required.

In the literary field, Padmashree (Prof.) Rongbong Terang, Mr. Longkam Teron, Dr. Phukan Chandra Phangcho, Mr. Lunse Timung, Late Samsing Hanse, Mr. Jeet Rongpi, Song Bey and many others have made significant contribution for the development of Karbi literature. In this connection, reference of "Karbi Lammet Amei" (Karbi Sahitya Sabha) may also be made.

The Karbis have their unique legacy of tradition, culture and literature. Their cultural tradition is rich and unique and it stands apart from the other tribes in spite of having many striking similarities in different aspects. Their cultural tradition is one of which every Assamese should be proud of. In their folk literature we get all elements of folklore, like social rituals, legends, historical tales, ballads of love and separation, folksongs of Ram-Ravan, love songs, fables, magic chants and proverbs etcetera, have been kept alive through oral literature. The most striking feature of their culture is that it is agri based and the places of jhum cultivation provide them all the materials, colours, enthusiasm and spirits for their socio-cultural activities. All of their cultural tradition

has ethnic qualities which are inseparably intertwined with the greater Assamese society and culture. It is right time we got acquainted with their life, literature and culture so that we may help creating an environment where each ethnic tribe of Assam can know and respect the literature and culture of each other tribe. This can bring the revolting tribes closer to each other. There can be no better way to know each individual tribe but through studying, knowing, understanding and appreciating the uniqueness in their culture and literature. The Karbis have still enough in these areas to be explored.

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