CHAPTER II

THE KARBIS

2.1 History and Migration

The Karbis, previously known as Mikirs, is one of the scheduled tribes of Assam as given in the schedule caste and schedule tribes Lists Modification Order, 1956. The non-mikirs in general, principally the Assamese, called this tribe as Mikirs, while they call themselves as Karbi or Ar leng, of which the former term, i.e; Karbi is more common in use. The etymological significance of the term ‘Karbi’ as the legend tells that the name ‘Karbi’ comes from the latter half of the word ‘Thakar-kabi’, meaning ‘offering of sacrifices at the beginning of worship of god’, integral to marriage ceremony, harvesting of crops and birth of a child, etc., which is called ‘Thakar kibi’. The word ultimately got transformed into ‘Karbi’, thus omitting ‘tha’ and ‘ki’ of the word. (Das, 1978:73).

According to Lyall(1908; 4-5), Ar leng properly means a Mikir man and not a man in general who would, according to him, be called ‘monit’-‘munit’. Further, according to him, the etymological significance of the name ar leng came from the fact
that their forefathers generally used to dwell on the hill slopes and so they were known as arleng or hill dwellers or hillmen. According to another legendary source the term Mikir originated from the word ‘mengkiri’, meaning ‘carrier of cats’, as they used to carry cats and later from mengkiri the people were called Mikirs (Baruah 1990:3). Another group of people are of the opinion that ‘Mikir’ means hill people and other say it is derivative of the Assamese word ‘Mitir’ meaning friend. Though the Karbis do not like themselves to be called as Mikir, even today the term Mikir is used to a great extent.

The Karbis are principally hill dwellers but due to various reasons they are distributed over different parts of Assam. Karbis residing in the plains of Kamrup and Morigaon district of Assam, and the Ri-Bhoi districts of Meghalaya identify themselves as the Dumrali or plains Karbis. The folk-lore’s of the plain Karbis, however, indicate that during the long past, once they used to live on the banks of the rivers the Kalang and the Kapili and the entire Kajiranga area, the famous National Park situated in Assam, was within their habitation. During the reigns of the Kachari kings, they were driven to the hills and some of them entered into Jaintia hills, the erstwhile Jaintia kingdom and lived under the Jaintia suzerainty.

While a section of the Karbis remained in the Jaintia kingdom, others moved towards north-east by crossing the river Barapani, a tributary of the Kapili and entered into the Rongkhang Ranges. There they established their capital at a place called Socheng. Those who continued to live under the suzerainty of the Jaintia king had to face constant harassment at the hands of the Jaintias and this had compelled them to migrate north ward. A good number of them had entered into the Ahom territory and
prayed for protection from the Barphukan at Raha. Thus migration took place at the beginning of the 17th Century. The Karbis who migrated to the Ahom kingdom had to face the Burmese invasion. The Burmese who invaded Assam perpetrated inhumane oppression on the people. The Karbis took refuge in the deep jungles and high hills leaving their hearth and home in the sub mountain regions. In order to save themselves from the greedy eyes of the Burmese invaders, the young Karbi girls started to use a black line from the forehead to the chin which is known a *Duk* with a view to making them ugly looking. While some of the Karbis migrated to lower Assam, some had crossed the Brahmaputra and settled in the north bank, (Das, 1978:73).

### 2.2 Habitat

The Karbis are one of the most numerous and homogeneous of the many Tibeto-Burman races inhabiting the province of Assam (Lyall, 1908: 1). The Karbis inhabit in greatest strength the hills called after them the Karbi Anglong district of Assam, the isolated mountainous block which fills the triangle between the Brahmaputra on the north, the Dhansiri valleys on the east, and the Kapili and Jamuna valleys on the west and south; this tract is now divided between the Nagaon and Sibasagar districts. They are also found in considerable numbers on the northern skirts of the Assam Range, in Nagaon, the Khasi and Jaintia Hills, Kamrup of Assam, and were once found numerously in North Cachar as testified by the local place and river-names in this area. They have also settled in the plains and taken to plough cultivation in Nagaon and Kamrup district, and have also established recent settlements in the north of the Brahmaputra in Darrang. The great bulk, however, remained a hill tribe,
occupying the forest clad northern slopes of the central range of Assam, and practicing
the primitive method of cultivation the jhum or shifting cultivation.

2.3 Physical Features

The interesting account of Lyall (1908: 4) throws some light about the physical
characteristics of the Karbis. “In features the man resemble Assamese of the lower
classes more than most of the Tibeto-Burmese races. Their colour is light yellowish
brown and the girls are often fair. The men are as tall as the majority of the hill races
of Assam”. Waddel’s eighteen specimen averaging 1633mm. or 5.454 feet in height,
the tallest being 5.583 feet and the shortest 5.108 feet. The average head measurements
in those specimens were length 181mm.; breadth 141mm; cephalic index 77.9. The
nose is broad at the base, and often flat, giving a nasal index of 85.1 , and an orbital of
107.7. The facial hair is scanty, and only a thin moustache is worn. The front of head is
sometimes, but not generally, shown. The hair is gathered into a knot behind, which
hangs over the nape of the back. The body is muscular, and the men are capable of
prolonged exertion. (Lyall, 1908).

2.4 House Type

Traditionally, the Karbis are pile dwellers and houses are built on wooden
piles. Floors and walls are made of flattened bamboo and the roofs are covered with
thatch. A traditional Karbi house consists of a single room which is longitudinally
divided by a partition arpong or noksek-arpong into kam, the guests or servants
chamber and kut the livingroom of the family. Kam is on the right side as you enter
and the only door into the house that leads into it. In kam a platform or chang, called
*tibung* raised above the floor the diameter of a bamboo, runs along the outside wall; this may be divided off literally into rooms for sleeping. The *kut* is separated off by a partition on the side of the outer wall called *vo-roi*, in which the fowls and goats are kept; it has a door called *voi-roi-amehen*. In *kut*, towards the back, there is a fireplace *mehit*. The space before it is *dam-pahak*, where the family sleeps and the bamboo paddy stands. Behind the fireplace is *dam-buk*, a vacant space, where the grown up daughters and old women sleeps. Between the fireplace and the *vo-roi*, is the rice storing basket (*sang-rangtik*), holding the stock of husked rice. Between the fireplace and the partition (*arpong*) is the *kut-athengthor*, a space for miscellaneous articles. Above the *vo-roi* a shelf is raised under the roof, called *vo-harlip*, for pots, etc. Opposite to the fireplace is a door leading into *kam*. The front veranda is called *hong-kup* and the back veranda is known as *pang-hongkup*. Under the house are the pigsties, *phak-roi* and in front is a yard (*tikup*), usually fenced around. (Lyall, 1908).

The Karbis in the plains are very much similar to that of their Hindu neighbours to whom they are closely allied. The houses are mainly thatched, one storied houses of which walls are made of reeds or bamboo strings. The houses are not built closely—and therefore the village does not appear to be a compact one. Almost every village in plains are located at the foothills or hillocks except in Nagaon districts where few villages are located in close proximity to the tea gardens.

### 2.5 Food

Rice is the staple food of the Karbis. Fowls, goats and pigs are kept for food, but eaten mainly after sacrifices; eggs are also eaten. Meat and fish are often smoked
and kept for future use. The students living in the boarding houses also carry dry fish (beng/manthu) to relish with their food. A delicacy food known as chrysalis of the eri-silk worm (attacus-ricini); is eaten roasted and curried. Children (but not grown folk) cook and eat crabs and rats. The first meal is cooked and eaten at 7or 8am, and consist of rice. The evening meal is cooked after the day’s fieldwork is over, unless there be a cook in the house. At each meal a pinch of the food is kept aside for the god(arnam).

Food plays a central role in Karbi culture—in both hills and plains, it represents prosperity, generosity and community support. Hospitality is extended to visitors who are usually asked to share a meal. However, the manner of taking food and also food schedule varies from society to society. Similarly, type of food taken on various occasion is controlled by the ethics, norms and taboos of that society. The food taken on daily basis may not serve the purpose during a ceremonial occasion or a festival. In traditional societies people strictly follow their food habits on all occasions. This is also observed among the plains Karbis. They are very sincere and devoted to their customs pertaining to food habits.

The plain Karbis due to contact with other castes and tribes have abundant influence on their cuisine. Rice in various forms is traditionally eaten by the Karbis living in plains. Their diet also includes various other cereals such as dal and fresh vegetables, fish and nuts. Fruits, fruit juices, nuts are eaten in abundance, while milk and other dairy products are not common. Coconuts and banana are plentiful. Karbis eat rice every day and at every meal. It is taken with other subsidiaries such as vegetable curry, pulse, curry fish, meat and egg, dal and various other green vegetables.
During the festive occasions, food occupies an important place. Every ritual or festival have some specified food and drink according to the availability of a particular food item. But the traditional likes and dislikes have now tend to disappear under economic pressure and several other factors. The consumption of rice beer is also gradually coming down due to the strict enforcement of excise laws, which is a healthy sign for the socio-economic growth of the society.

2.6 Drink

The Karbis are habituated to drink local beer which is known as hor. This is a ricebeer prepared by each household for its own needs. There are different kinds of ricebeer prepared by them, viz. arok which is the strongest variety, thap a medium strength liquor and hor which is mild and idle for a common family drink. Gourds are used for keeping rice as well as for carrying it about for outside hills. Hor figures prominently in the observance of their ceremonies and festivals. Tobacco is also widely in use by the grown up males and small tobacco pipe thenghong is used for smoking. Opium and tobacco are grown by them though in small quantities. Betelnut kove together with betel vine leaf and lime purchased from the market is heavily consumed by both sexes, an indulgence which is common among all people of Assam.

2.7 Dress

The Karbi males, commonly put on a piece of cloth (rikong) which is wrapped around the loin and on their heads they wear turbans called poho which is similar to that used by the male Khasis of Meghalaya. Males also use a waist coat called choi with a long fringe which covers the buttocks and comes around infront. An endi cloth
called *peinki* is used by them during the cold season. Women put on a petticoat known as *peni* which is fastened around the waist with an ornamental girdle of old silver coins *vankok*. Another cloth known as *pekok* is used by the women to cover the upper part of the body. This cloth is tied under the arms and drawn tight over the breasts. The hair is combed straight and tied in a knot (*chubi*) on the head. No footwear is used by them. During the performance of *Chomangkon* (death ceremony) young girls use a special *Endi* scarf called *Dokherso* (Das, 1978:73).

### 2.8 Ornaments

In the bygone days, a Karbi man used to put on brass made ear-rings called *narik*, silver bracelet (*prinsoroi*) and heavy silver necklaces called *lekrooa* and *lek-enji*. However, nowadays, no male person of this tribe is found to have used them. The most beautiful ornaments put on by aged Karbi woman is *nothenpi*, a pair of very big earring made of silver. It is about two and a half inch in length having a diameter of about half inch. This earring is detachable into two parts. The women and girls use silver bracelets called *rup-aroir*. Besides, the necklace made of white beads (*lech-lo-so*), the women are also found to use a kind of necklace made of silver coins and red beads *lek-chike*. A characteristic ornament is a large silver tube inserted into the lobe of the ear, this is called *kadendchinro*. The ordinary hanging earring (suspended from the outer part of the ear of gold or silver is called *no-rik*. Necklaces (*lek*) are worn, of gold or silver and coral beads by the women. The men do not tattoo any part of the body. The women, on attaining puberty, usually tattoo a perpendicular line with indigo down the middle of the forehead, the nose, upperlip, and chin; no other part of the body is tattooed. (Lyall, 1908)
2.9 Economic Life

The economic life of the Karbis is simple and the whole lot of them depend for their livelihood mainly on cultivation. The Hill Karbis practiced slash and burn cultivation, where they produce different varieties of paddy, maize, tapoiria, arum, turmeric, ginger, gourd, leafy vegetables etc. in the same plot. In plains they practice permanent cultivation. They tilt land with plough and yoke harnessed by a pair of bullocks. Paddy is the principal crop in the plains which is grown in the low land. In comparatively high land they produce mustard, sesame, different kinds of vegetables etc. Livestock occupies the next important place in respect of the sources of wealth of the village. The rearing of livestock such as pig, goat, fowl etc. is also important for both ceremonial and religious reasons apart from their economic value.

2.10 Hunting and Fishing

The Karbis are very fond of hunting and fishing, especially the latter, in which both men and women generally take part. The hunting season is usually done during the winter months when all are not occupied with cultivation although only male folks take part in hunting. The chief implements used in hunting are the spear (chir), bow (thai) and arrow (thai aso), while dogs are used to track down animals. Fishing is also practiced with as much interest as hunting and both men and women take part. A fishing part is also sometimes organized and every member carrying fishing baskets (hak) and traps set out for the nearby streams.
2.11 Weaving

Weaving occupies the position of a very important household industry among the Karbis. A crude wooden loom called *petherange* or loin-loom is employed in weaving. The spinning wheel by which cotton raised in their fields is spun into thread is known as *mithongrang*. Weaving is done mainly by women which has been their skill and pride from time immemorial. The chief products of the loom are *rikong* (a cloth used by man to wrap the loins), *peinki* (worn by women around the waist) etc.

2.12 Traditional Skills

Bamboo and cane works and blacksmithy are practiced only in few places and by those who know the art. These two household industries are done by men and the industries are taken to much for their personal use than for sale. Any male knowing the art of basketry, make bamboo or cane baskets of various kinds according to the use to which they are put. For example, baskets for carrying and storing paddy, for keeping clothes and ornament, for storing food grains, etc. Cane tables, chairs, *murha* (low stool) are also made by them, particularly those who are living in the urban areas. Blacksmithy is practiced only by *Senar* and *Milik* the sub-clans of *Timung* and *Teron* respectively.
2.13 Marriage

Among the Karbis the age for marriage is from 14 to 25 for the men and 10-15 for the girl. Child marriage is unknown. If a young man fancies a girl (from meeting at dances and he likes), he sends one or both parents to her father’s house, and if the girl parents agrees, the boy’s father leaves a betrothal ring or bracelet with the girl (this rite is called *ke-roi-dun*); sometimes a gourd of rice beer is taken and accepted, and in that case, if she subsequently marries another, the village council fines her family 25 to 35 rupees; otherwise only the betrothal ring or bracelet is returned. The length of the engagement is not fixed, but the actual marriage does not take place till the puberty. When the marriage day is fixed, both families prepare beer; if the bridegroom is rich he provides drink for the whole villagers (*hor-hak, hor-tibuk*). The bridegroom’s party, giving a gourd of beer to each village they pass through, arrives at the bride’s house in the evening. There they sit awhile, and then offer one gourd of beer to the bride’s mother on the *hong*. (Lyall,1908)

If the wedding is *akejoi* i.e., if no payment is to be made for the bride, the girl goes with her husband next day to her new home. Her parents accompany her and they are entertained by the groom’s family with food and drink, returning the following day, (Das, 1978:73).

If the weeding, *akemen* (literally, ripe) the groom stays in his father-in laws house. He rests one day and then work for his father-in-law for a year or two years or even it maybe for life, according to the agreement. There is no money payment in this type of marriage. If the girl is an heiress or only daughter the marriage is usually
akemon; but in the great majority of cases it is akejoi. The neighbours of both villages assemble at the marriage, and when the bride goes to her husband house, the neighbors of the village accompany and are hospitably entertained by the groom’s family.

Widow remarriage is allowed among the Karbis. Divorce is rare but permissible if there is no offspring or if the girl goes home after marriage and refuses to return to her husband’s house. In that case the husband takes a gourd of beer to her parents and declares himself free, both parties, after the divorce can marry again.

2.14 Sub-groups

The Karbis are divided into four endogamous groups, viz., Chintong, Ronghang, Amri and Dumrali and these are again sub-divided into various exogamous clans or kurs. It is to be noted that all these four groups are sub-divisions of the parent tribe based on geographical division and do not form separate entities, (Das, 1978:73)

2.15 Family and Household

The Karbi family is of simple type, i.e., of nuclear family consisting of husband, wife and unmarried children. The joint family, i.e., where married children live along with their parents, if found, is only for a short period, because according to their usual practice, the married children usually live in a neolocal residence, but presently there is no such compulsion, particularly among those who are living in near the urban centres, here joint family is not uncommon due to the economic pressure. The size of the joint family usually consists of four to six members, however, sometimes there are families
with more than eight to nine members. Generally the father is the sole authority in the family. In the absence of the father, the eldest son, if an adult, shouldered the responsibility and takes full charge of the family. The mother is the mistress of the house, next to the father and is much respected. Both men and women enjoy equal status in the family as well as in their society.

Patriarchal social system is dominant among the Plain Karbis. Male member is the head of the family and he gives the final decision on every matter. The common family norm for them is a nuclear family consisting of father, mother and unmarried children, having a common hearth. However, various types of joint family system is observed, through few families remained more or less stable till they were pursuing agriculture. But with the shortage of agricultural labour and homestead land it has led to the raising of separate residential units.

2.16 Property and Inheritance

The Karbi society is patrilineal and the descent, inheritance, succession, authority and residence after marriage are traced through male line. On the death of the father, the eldest son if unmarried, takes over the responsibility of the family, and also inherits the property, otherwise the responsibility of the family falls on the younger son. Generally the father divides and allot the property among his sons during his lifetime giving the eldest one the lion share, this is because he has to take the sole responsibility after the father’s death. Incase there is any dislike of the parent with their eldest son then the younger son inherits the property and also shoulders the responsibility of the family after the death of the father. Daughters have no claim at all
to the father’s property, but they share the property of their mothers who distributes her property like clothes, ornaments, etc. equally among her daughters, during her lifetime. Immovable property like land is distributed equally among sons after the death of the father. Incase the father does not have any male issue, his property passes to his male kins, generally to his brother’s who divide and distribute the property equally among themselves and under no circumstances shall his daughters inherits the fathers property. It is the duty of the son or the male kins to look after the well being of the daughter’s of the deceased, who are looked after this manner as they are unmarried. Similarly, the wife of the deceased is also cared for as long as she stays as a widow.

Just like the hill tribes the plains Karbis follow the patriarchal norms in their society. Marriage within the clan is prohibited and property is transmitted through the father’s line. Mother’s movable items are shared between the daughters.

### 2.17 Kinship

The Karbis have five clans (kur). These are Terang, Teron, Enghee, Ingti and Timung. Each of the five clans has a number of sub-clans. While Enghee and Timung have thirty sub-clans each, Terang and Teron have six sub-clans each and the remaining clan Ingti has only four sub-clans. These clans are rigidly exogamous and marriage between a boy and a girl belonging to the same clan can never take place since the children of the same clan are considered as brothers and sisters. Violation of this customary law obviously leads to ex-communication of the couple involved. Even in the cremation ground called tipit or thiri, area is kept demarcated for each clan.
Although all the five clans are socially on an equality, Ingti being a priestly clan was supposed to have a higher status in former times.

Among the Karbis, the kinship terms express certain obligations, privileges, rights, etc. and these terms are inherently depended upon the structure of the society. A study of the Mikir kinship terms clearly reveals certain traits. Lyall noted the following facts:

(i) Most of the names are the same for both the sexes and that the sexes are distinguished only by words, as pointed in the index for the males and the females. *po* is the index for the male, *pi* that for the female.

(ii) Again, the same words appeared to be used in different sense, as ‘ong’ is maternal uncle but ‘ong-so’ is the wife’s brother; ‘osa’ is both nephew (sisters son) and son in law. *Te* is sister but *tepi* is brother’s wife. Similarly *kor* is sister (or brother), *korpi*, is wife’s sister, *korpo* sister’s husband and so on.

(iii) It is observed that brothers and sisters and brother’s in law and sister’s in law is different form of address when speaking of their relationship.

The Plain Karbis like that of the Hill Karbis also have several groups which they call Ghar or gharia or sometimes Kur as used by the Hill Karbis. They have classified them into five groups or Gharias—these are Terang (or terang Gharia), Teron (or Teron Gharia), Ingti, Enghee and Timung. Each of these five clans have many sub-clans. While Ingti and Timung have 30 sub-clans each, Terang and Teron have 6 sub-clans each and the remaining clan Inghi has only 4 sub-clans. They follow the patriarchal system of family structure and the line of descent is traced through the male
members only. Thus, every Karbi must belong to the clan of his/her father. The clan members are believed to have descended from the common ancestor.

These clans are completely exogamous and marriage between a boy and a girl belonging to the same clan can never take place since the children of the same clan are considered as brothers and sisters. Such happening is considered as the greatest offence. It amounts to incestuous union between the brothers and sisters and the prescribed punishment for such an offence is excommunication from the community.

2.18 Village Organization

The routine administration of each village is run by the village councils known to them as mei. Each council is presided over by a headmen or goanburha called sarthe. All adult males of the village are members of the mei known as ckakri. It is the duty of the Sarthe to summon the members chakri of the mei to a sitting and it is he who puts forwards proposals relating to the affair of the village and the members to give their verdict. The Sarthe can only preside, over the mei but he cannot make any decision without the consent of the other members. Under the Sarthe there are assistants called sarso (assistant goanbura) to help him in his duties and sometimes take over charge of his duties in the event of his illness or absence from the office. When death occurs in the village the mei informs the whole village of the incident so that they can go and help in the house of the death, until cremation is over. The mei also tries to set up disputes regarding land, property, adultery, assault, etc. It may impose fine on the defaulters. Disputes that cannot be settled by the mei are referred to the District Council.
The political structure of the plain Karbi society shares the features of both traditional and modern elements. They are today at least part of three administrative agencies in addition to their traditional administrative set up. These agencies are the local police, local revenue authority and urban local body.

*Khel System and the Mel*: Before going to discuss their traditional political system, it is necessary to discuss the main body of the village political unit called *khel*. This is another important organization in the social life of the plain Karbis. The system provided that members of each of the villages must be a member of the *khel*. Each village has one prominent *khel* and usually the villagers are members of that *khel*. But some villagers may also opt out from their own village *khel* and join the *khel* of another village. The *khel* organization plays an important role in the day-to-day life of the Plain Karbis. In the life cycle events, it is a *khel* that takes care of the whole proceedings. In case the death of a person, persons from the deceased *khel* must arrive and then only the proceedings start. This is true even when the deceased belong to a khel of a distant village. Thus, *khel* system is a very strong organization among the Plain Karbis and almost plays like a clan.

Each *khel* has a small council which is similar like the executive body of a political unit. This small council comprises of five to six persons and this number varies from village to village. This council is headed by the Bangthai—or the village priest. He is assisted by a Riso bangthai (Bisar Dhara), Talukdar, a Kotowal, Oklengsar, and a Bharali etc. These posts are named differently in different villages. Each village has a traditional headmen called Bangthai, appointed by the elderly people of the village. All the village disputes are settled in the village through social norms. The dispute maybe
either very grave or of serious nature and any person who is at fault is inflicted with punishment according to the gravity of the offence made. A court, commonly known as Burha mel is called to settle such disputes which sits in a common place usually in the than (an open worshipping place). This mel in a sense exercises customary judicial powers where the person committing any offence is compelled to take oath in front of the mel and say the truth. Burha Bangthai usually presides over the mel. Apart from the interests parties, other villagers who wish may remain present in the mel. The decision of the mel is final. The punishment is inflicted in the form of fine etc. Apart from the settlement disputes, the mel also decides about the performing of various festivals in the village and modifies rules. There is also another mel called he Deka mel. For all the mel held for rituals etc. the venue is Burha Bangthai’s place or the open space in the village, but for deciding a case of violation of norms, the venue is the Deohal than.

2.19 The Bachelors' Dormitory

The bachelors' dormitory of the Karbis, which is variously known as the Terang Ahem, Terang Hangbar, Farla, but more popular as Jirkedam. In the plains area of the Karbi Anglong district where there are no bachelors' dormitories, the Risomar of the youth club, serves more or less the same purpose although the functionaries are different. The Jirkedam was originally designed to include males only but now the females are also accompanied although they do not occupy any officer of consequence. The Jirkedam has 10 office bearers with its leader and deputy leader known as Kleng-Sarpo (king) and Klengdun (chief minister), Suderkethe (commander), Sudersu (prince designate), Barlanpo (surveyor), Motan- are and Motan- arbe (guides) Chengbruk- are and Chengbruk- arbe (small drum beaters),
Than are and Than arbe (convenors) Me apai (fire keeper) and Lang apai (water keeper) (Das, 1978:73).

The dormitory is generally constructed in a central place of the village with locally available construction materials. This traditional institution is, however, gradually dying as it fails to withstand the onslaught of rapid changes brought about by development activities including the spread of education. But, the spirit of offering a helping hand to the needy by the youths of a Karbi village has not yet been eroded by the absence of the building of the bachelors' dormitory.

The system of bachelor's dormitory (Deka Chang) is absent incase of Karbi of the plains although the hill Karbis maintain this system. But the Karbis of plains have youth clubs which they consider as the institution of social work. It performs social services for the village in general and families in particular as and when such occasions arises. The member do not claim any monetary remuneration from the concerned family for the services rendered.

2.20 Religion

Traditionally the Karbis are animist. They believe in a number of dieties collectively known as Arnum akum who are invoked and propitiated occasionally so that they may grant prosperity and happiness. Some of the deities are benevolent while most of them are malevolent. They have no idols, temples or shrines, but they believe in the form of a fetish locally known as bor which are pieces of stone by keeping which the people believe that they can acquire peace and prosperity. Some of the important dieties are Hemphu, Peng, Arnam Kethe, Riso arnam, Chinthong,
An important ceremony known as *Rongker* is usually observed when an epidemic breaks out in the village which is believed to be caused by the Gods *Ajoase*. Illness or trouble of any kind is ascribed to *Thengthon* the god of jungles and tress and a goat or pig or fowl is sacrificed depending upon the economic condition, for the propitiation of the gods. Barrenness in women is believed to be caused by *Someme* and a fowl or a goat is offered to appease the deity to ensure fertility in women.

A large section of the Karbis living in the plain areas have adopted Hinduism while a section of them have adopted Christianity abandong their pristine Animism. Hinduism in its crude form finds manifestation in their worshipping of gods, goddess and deities. They believe in the concepts of immortality of soul, life hereafter and reincarnation. They also believe the God as the creator of this universe along with the innumerable deities, some of whom are considered to be benevolent and some malevolent. Each disease is associated with a presiding deity.

For the appeasement of deities, the Plain Karbis observe many rituals throughout the year where the sacrifice of pigs and fowls and use of rice beer are indispensable. They also believe in witchcraft and magic. As traditionally the Karbis are animists, in the life of the converted Karbis also traces of animism is conspicuous. The Karbis of plains have worshipping open places known as the *than*. The megalithic tradition is still in vogue among the both plains and hills Karbis.


2.21 Birth of a Child

The Karbis believe that the birth of a child is in God’s hand. Male children are preferred by them though the female child also is received warmly and with great joy in the family. They also believe it depends on the will of God who may bestow on the family any sex He desires. Among the Karbis no parental practice or ceremony is performed. The naming ceremony of a child known as Osamenkeir is performed after a week of the birth of child or so according to the discretion of the parent and also depending upon their economic condition. In the case of a male child a cock is sacrificed while in the case of a female one hen is sacrificed as a offering to the god Hemphu. Neighbours and relatives from far and near are invited to the ceremony in which rice, meat, a rice-beer are served to the guests. There is no hard and fast rule regarding naming of a child. Names are given to a child according to the will and liking of the parents, friends and relatives suggest name for the child for which if the parent like maybe retained for the child. Among the Karbis there is no initiation ceremony.

2.22 Death

The Karbis believe that if a man does good deeds in this world, he may go safely to chon arong (paradise) after death, otherwise a man may again be born in this hard ridden world and he cannot have a place in a paradise after death unless he lives an honest life. Cremation is the usual method of disposal of the dead and it is done after performance of some ceremonies. The cremation ground is located always outside the
village. However, the body of a still born child or a child who dies soon after birth or a mother who dies during childbirth is buried without any ceremony. Deceased of smallpox or cholera are buried shortly after death, but the funeral rites for these deceased are performed latter when the dead body or bones are dug up and cremated according to the convenience of the decease’s relatives. In the case of a person killed by a tiger the body or his clothes, if found, are buried at some distance from the village because the tiger is suppose to visit the burial place. Such a person if he has done good deeds during his life time, cannot gain admittance to chon arong or dead man’s paradise unless elaborate funeral ceremonies are performed.

2.22.1 Natural Deaths

In natural deaths the body is generally kept inside the dwelling house for one day after death, and if an elaborate ceremony is held the body may lie for as long as three to four days according to the convenience of the family of the deceased. The body lies in the kut part of the house and members of the same kur clan seat around the dead body though it may be noted that there is no bar for members of other clans to come and sit around the dead body. Generally only the close kins of the deceased seat around the dead body. The members of the family cook and eat in the kam (place for the guests). Friends and relatives flock to the deceased house to console and sympathizes with the bereaved family and pay their last respect to the deceased person. The deceased body is washed and clothed by the old man and women of the family as the case maybe. The bier (dola) for carrying the dead body is prepared by the young men of the village who work in the cremation ground (Das, 1978:73).
2.22.2 Chomangkan

After the cremation of the deceased, a death anniversary known as chomangkam is performed by the relatives of the deceased about a year or two later or more, depending upon the economic condition of the family concerned.

2.22.3 Chom Arang

This ceremony is generally performed by the mother’s or father’s brother or in the absence of mother’s or father’s brother by any male relative by either the father’s or mother’s side. This ceremony generally lasts for three days and the family goes to mourning and feast is given to friends and relatives.

2.23 Festivals

Among the festivals observed by the Karbis, mention may be made of the Chojun or Swarak, Rongker, Chokk-eroi, Hacha-Kekan, Chomangkan, etc. While the former four festivals are socio-religious in nature and the latter is a social one.

The spot to observe Chojun or Swarak is generally selected near the house of the family who wishes to perform the rite. The deities in this festival are Barithe, Shar Arnam, Arni and the Devil Hii-i and other smaller Gods. Hemphu, the high God of the Karbis is also propitiated in this ritual. The rite is performed for the welfare of the family.

Rongker is performed at the beginning of the new year by propitiating the different gods and goddesses for the well being of the entire village. The deities are worshipped
by all the elderly male people of the village so that with their blessings the people of the village could be free from diseases, natural calamities during the year and the families could have a good harvest. The women are not allowed to enter into the worship arena. There is an another kind of Rongker performed in a greater scale. This type of Rongker which is performed at the beginning of every five years is called Wofong Rongker. This Wofong Rongker is performed for the well-being of all the people of the villages that fall within the jurisdiction of a Mauza (a revenue administrative region consisting of a number of revenue villages). Each revenue village is represented by the village headman and a number of village elders (males only) in the performance of the Wofong Rongker. While the Rongker performed for a village is only of one day's duration, the Wofong Rongker continues for two days.

Sok-erroi festival is observed when the paddy field is ripened to the fullest extent. The ripened paddy is cut and taken to a place specially cleared in the field. Then the paddy is dehusked on that spot and the paddy is collected. A large number of youngmen go and collect paddy in bags and carry it to home. There starts a great rejoicing and the young ones dance to their hearts' context. Sok-erroi means the carrying of the paddy from the field. In this festival, one person is selected as the leader who provides the leadership in dancing and singing and is called 'Lunse'.

The Hacha-Kekan is not exactly based on the folk-tales. Hacha-Kekan festival is associated with the after harvest rejoicings. There is no fear element in it and there is no need to propitiate any god. Hence it is to be assumed that the Hacha-Kekan is secular in its activities and differs substantially from another festival - Rongker because, the latter needs the propitiation of god.
Although, the Karbis perform the funeral ceremony at the time of the cremation of
the deceased, they also perform the death ceremony called *Chomangkan* at a later date
for the eternal peace of the deceased. It is the most elaborate and expensive socio-
religious ceremony of the Karbis which continues for four days and four nights non-
stop. The ceremony does not require any formal invitation and all are welcome to it. In
spite of the sad undertone, it is the proud day for the family and they welcome all with
great warmth. They come in batches and everyone carries a symbolical rod with five
branches and at the end of each branch, there is a wooden bird, which is called in
Karbi *Vo-rali*. The whole rod is called *Jambili Athan*. This is the symbolical
representation of the tribe and it is also the symbol of clan unity. The *Jambili* is a very
interesting phenomenon. The tribe has five Kurs or clans and the Jambili has five
branches. Under the cover of it, the Karbis listen the story of their origin. It is called

Karbis of plains celebrate various festivals some of which are traditional and some
are acquired due to close contact with their neighbouring Assamese communities. All
three Bihus are celebrated by them with enthusiasm. They also celebrate various pujas
like Durga Puja, Lakshmi Puja, Ganesh Puja etc. in all their own way.

The plain Karbi generally perform four main social festivals:

(i) Domahi

It is celebrated in the months of March-April. It is a festival of thanks giving to
the almighty Hemphu, the traditional God head of the Karbi Household. During the
festival all the ancestors of the village are remembered and worshipped, which is
indeed very similar to the practice of their hills Karbis. This practice is known as *Sar*
*Kacherdung* which means the remembrance of the ancestors. This festival is same as *Sar Anthok* found among the Hill Karbis.

(ii) Mono Ke-en

Literally Mono means Paddy or Rice and Ke-en means to take. It is generally an affair of 2 days, once in five years. All unmarried males and females of the village are to take part in the occasions. In the house of Riso Bangthe (an authority concern with the affairs of the youth of the village) the traditional folklore about the origin of rice and the route of migration taken by the Karbis from the place of their origin are retold.

(iii) Rong Kehum

Literally Rong Kehum means Village Curfew. It is generally a three days affair once in five years. Just like the name suggested a kind of curfew is imposed in the village with all the roads leading to the village being blocked with thorn and bushes. No outsider is welcome to the village during these three days affair. However they can come and witness the ritual by taking non traditional route. This festival is generally celebrated during the winter. It is very much similar to the Rongker of the hills Karbis. This is all male affairs and no female is allowed during the rituals. The fences are broken and lots of hue and cry is created during the rituals as a symbol to chase away evils from the village during the night using a long stick. If any person comes out of the house during the ritual then he might be killed assuming to be an evil spirits and no blame is to be confer upon the evil spirits chasers.

(iv) Johong Kachir Dom
The Johong Kachir Dom is a religious rite that is observed for a week, beginning from the day of the Assamese Goru Bihu by the plain Karbis. The preparation of Johong Puja starts a month before the Puja would be celebrated, the villagers start brewing home made rice beer, which is called Horlong. The celebration of the Johong Puja is confirmed with the holding of a meeting at the house of the Bangthe in the month of Chath. When all the villagers agree that the Puja should be performed, the Horlong is poured out in the name of the God from a clay pot called Karik. The Puja is performed in the courtyard of the Bangthe headmen of the village. Earlier, when the economic condition of the Karbis was sound, the Johong Puja was performed annually in every villages but nowadays in most of the Karbi localities the Karbis perform the puja every alternate year. The Puja is cancelled if there is an occasion of birth or death in the houses of the Bangthe involved in the celebrations. On the day of the Garu Bihu, after bathing the cows, the villagers assemble at the house of the Bangthe and raise a shed like construction where the Johong worship is performed. After that, the villagers proceed towards a river, beating drums and other traditional instruments for a purification process called Birkikut. This purification process is very important as it confirms man’s communion and existence with Nature. The list of requirements for this purification process is quite long. The things that are needed are Thalbong, a plant that looks like sugarcane and grows atop the hills, tender bamboo shoots, pieces of thorns, a special kind of grass, eggs, hay, etc.

As the flowing waters of the river purify the body and the soul, the villagers realize the importance of Nature in their lives and the need for a harmonious co-existence with Nature. After the Birkikut, the villagers come back to the Bangthe’s
house and invoke the God and Goddesses. This Puja is performed by the Karbis to appease the Gods, so that no evil befalls in their locality. Horlong and ripe bananas are crucial ingredients of the ritual. Animal sacrifice is made and the meat is cooked and offered to the Gods, along with rice beer, pachala (a type of food prepared from plaintain) and rice.

Music and dance is integral to the celebrations. But it is mainly the male members, who take part in the dance. The male members also stay back for the night to clean up the place and the animals that were sacrificed. The community feast is relished the day after Bihu and all the villagers partake of the meat of the sacrificed animals. On the seventh and concluding day of the Johong Puja, the people again gather at the house of the Bangthe, and this time the Gods are offered a preparation of dried Goroi fish with Pachala. A very wonderful feature of this last day’s ritual is that garlands are made of Nahar leaves, flowers and seeds of a tree called Jaariudal, and each villager is seen adorning such a garland on his head. This community which has been blessed with a culture inspired by Nature, does not spare any occasion to establish their rapport with Nature. The earthen lamp which was lighted on the first day of the Puja will be placed before the main pillar of the house of the Bangthe after the rituals are over. The main pillar in every Karbi household is regarded as auspicious by the community. They bow before the main pillar and seek its blessings, so that the house and family is protected from all evils.

2.24 Language and Literature

So far as the Karbi language is concerned, it belongs to the great family of Indo-Chinese speech called Tibeto-Burman. Grierson’s Linguistic Survey of India
places it in the Naga-Boro sub-group. It has also definitely affinity with the Kuki-Chin
group of languages. There are considerable differences between the speech of the
people living in the hills and those in the plains. The plain Karbis speak their own
dialect but when communicating with other people they speak in Assamese language.
The most uncommon phenomenon between the hill Karbis and the plain Karbis is that
the plain Karbis also use Assamese in their day to day conversation which is due to
close association with the Assamese Hindus while this feature is not present incase of
their hill counterpart who rarely use Assamese in their household conversation. In
many villages, where this study has been conducted, people are found using only
Assamese as household language. Even while speaking Karbi, they frequently use
Assamese words replacing the Karbi words. Many Assamese words have entered into
the plain Karbi language.