PART II

THE KARBI PEOPLE AND THEIR CULTURE
CHAPTER II

2.00 THE KARBI PEOPLE

2.1 The Karbis are one of the predominant tribes of Assam. They are considered as an integral part of the Tibeto Burman races scattered throughout the state of Assam. The present home of the Karbis is the central Assam mainly Karbi Anglong district formerly known as Mikir hills district which shows two different broken parts without any common boundary. The Mikir hills and North Cachar district is created\(^1\) by the new Constitution of India on 17.11.51. Later on, this Mikir hills district and North Cachar hills were bifurcated\(^2\) on 11.2.70 and the Mikir hills district was called Karbi Anglong\(^3\) with effect from 14.10.76.

The district covers an area of 10,332 sq. Km.\(^4\) and divided into two civil administrative sub-divisions viz., Diphu and Hamren. The total population in the district is 3,79,310 according to the 1971 census, but the tribal population\(^5\) is 2,10,039, which includes not only the Karbis

\(^1\) The Government Notification, No. TAD/R-31/50 3209 dt. 3.11.50

\(^2\) Ibid No. AAF/134/68/22 dt. 11.2.70

\(^3\) Ibid No. TAD/R/115/74/47 dt. 14.10.76

\(^4\) A Hand Book of Assam: by Directorate of Information and Public Relations, Assam, 1976, p. 27

but Dimasas, the Lalungs, the Garos and some other such tribes also. On the other hand the Karbi population in the district is less than the above figures, which is estimated as 1,30,154 in this district. The Karbi population are also available in some other districts of Assam, Meghalaya and Nagaland. Taking all these Karbi people together, at present, the total Karbi population comes up to 1,77,194 and by language it is 1,68,523.

2.2 They are mainly settled down in the hilly areas or in the rural areas, where they get ample scope to run their professions like agriculture, hunting, fishing etc. Normally they use to live together many families in a village.

2.2.1 The Karbi people generally live in the interior areas of the hill district. The villages are thinly populated. The villages are generally situated in the midst of dense jungle, and after staying in a particular place for few years, they move to further interior areas where fresh land is taken up for cultivation. They do not like to live in open hilly places. At present the Karbi people spread over a few open non-hilly areas in the other neighbouring districts.

2.2.2 The Karbis live in joint families. But now after independence on economic grounds, such family forms new unit by splitting themselves. Such units are nuclear unit consisting husbands and wife with unmarried children, vertical unit consisting of man, his wife and their children including grand children, horizontal unit consisting family children, brothers, sisters etc. These three types of families are available in Karbi society.

2.3 Origin of the Karbi word: Every tribal people has their separate name for self identification. Thus the Mikir people called themselves 'Arleng' or 'Karbi' in their own dialect, which means 'man' in general, who would be called 'monit' or 'munit.' But the tribe was popularly known as Mikir till the other day. Dr. Grierson has also used the same term. They believe that Mikir term was given by Assamese. In the words of Borkataki 'Mikir is a name given to the tribe by the Assamese. They call themselves 'Arleng' which means 'man'. But the tribe has considered this term as a misnomer. They feel that term has been used by the non-Karbis or non-Mikirs after the nature, habits and customs of the people. There are some legends or popular stories regarding the origin of the word Karbi.

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7 Saikia, F.D.: Changes of Mikir Society, p.17
2.3.1 In ancient time the Karbi people used to live in the sloping areas of the hills; such sloping side was called 'Arleng' in the language. So they identify themselves by the term Arleng as 'dwellers in the slopes of hills'. But the word 'Arleng' is confined into a narrow scope as it means a particular man.

2.3.2 There is another belief. According to some people, a Karbi king had a cat and it was lost somewhere and some Karbi people were searching for it in the house of Assamese people who lived in plains. The Assamese people were surprised to see the unfamiliar Karbi people and asked them 'what man you are?' Then the Karbi people answered as 'Mengkiri' i.e. 'Meng' means 'cat' and 'kiri' means 'to seek'. Ultimately this word was changed into 'Mengkiri' Mikir. There is another legend: long back the Naga people fought with Mikirs, so the Mikir people treated offering a girl named 'Makri' to the Naga king. The Naga people called 'Makri' as 'Makiri' or Mikir. The name 'Makir' was articulated as Mikir and their descendants are known as 'Mikir'.

2.3.3 Another folk-belief is that the tribe offered to God, wine, flesh, dry-fish etc. in various ritual ceremonies. According to their such customs they were named as 'The Karbi' ( The Karbi ) the word 'Karbi' may be a derivative form of this 'The Karbi'.
2.3.4 There is another theory on the etymology of the word Karbi that it is developed from 'me ākar be'. From the very ancient period this tribe was kept ready fire in their house. Because 'me' means 'fire', 'ākar' means 'burning' and 'be' means 'keeping the fire in flaming position'. So they are 'me ākar be' i.e. 'Karbi' tribe.

2.3.5 The article "Mikirar Adi Katha" by Thenkur Sing Ingti gives the information that the king Brichakaida of Mikir had three sons. His second son was called Karbi or Arleng, because he was very peculiar and had not any resemblance to his other brothers and the people of his kingdom were thus called Karbi or Arleng.  

2.3.6 According to another popular belief the word Karbi is a derivative of 'Cha Akibi'. Hemphu is the household God of the Karbi tribe. He had a brother named, Mukrang and a sister named, Rachingja. Rachingja was married to Mukrang. Their descendants were identified as Karbi. Thus the Karbi people get their present identification as Karbi. 'Cha' means 'son' and 'Akibi' means 'younger' that is Hemphu means 'elder Mukrang' and Rachingja means 'younger' i.e., Hemphu. Thus it means the young descendants of Mukrang.

2.3.7 The word Mikir is also considered as a corrupt form of the word 'markat' or 'shakhamrig'. It has been suggested that the term of Karbi is derived from a Sanskrit word, Krabra and Krabrad > Karbe > Karbi.  

2.3.8 There is no documentary evidences on the origin of the word 'Karbi' and so the proofs collected from the legends, popular stories or the folk etymologies are the only means to give opinion on it. Thus depending on these beliefs it is presumed that the term 'Mikir' or 'Karbi' was given by the other people of its neighbourhood.

2.4 Physical appearance: Karbi Anglong is a hilly district covered with evergreen forests. The low hills are surrounded by the high hills. Its climate is damp. The climate exerts a marked influences over this physical conditions of its inhabitants. The Karbis are frequently afflicted with three diseases namely Malaria, Typhoid and Leprosy. The Karbi people, generally are not so beautiful to look at. Borkatangi remarks that 'one does not find among the Mikirs that fair skin and rosy cheeks that greet you in the neighbouring Angami Naga and Jaintia lands.' But the girls are generally pretty looking. There are very few of black skin. They are muscular and physically stout. Average height of the male is 5½' to 6' and the female is

10 Baruah, G.:1972: Assam Buranji, p.17
Generally they have a broad face with short blunt nose. Their eyebrows and beards are very thin. From their physical structure they resemble the Mijos and Kukis of the Tibeto-Chinese branch. Their resemblance with race of the Assamese community is also significant.

2.4.1 The elders grow long hairs and tie a hairy knot behind the head. But some others shave their head frequently keeping a little tuff of hair on the top.

2.4.2 The Karbi people are very mild and amiable nature. According to Edward Stack 'They are a mild and unwarlike people and are said to have given up the use of arms, when they place themselves under the protection of the Ahom kings.'

The Karbis are pious and very labourious too. But inspite of being labourious, they are lagging behind the other hilly tribes in many aspects. They are comparatively idle and less labourious than the other hilly tribes, and so, educationally they are very backward.

2.5 Domestic Life: The Karbis are orthodox by nature. The houses of the Karbis are made of bamboos and woods. They build the floor of the houses several feet above the ground. Normally they build their houses nearby water. The

12 Lyall and Stack:1908: The Mikirs, p.5
common tradition of the Karbis is to live more than one family in one house.

2.5.1 The houses are divided into separate compartments. The big rooms are divided into small compartments with the help of bamboo-made partition. These compartments are called 'Arpongs' or 'Narcekarpong'. Again the main house is divided into two parts, 'kam and kut'. The other part of such room is called 'kam' which contains fire places. The fire place is called 'mehip'.

There is only door of 'kam' on the right side of the room. In 'kam' there is a partitioned off for sleeping purposes called 'tibung', which is made of bamboo. 'kut' is divided into separate rooms by the partition and it is called 'Wa-rai', which is generally kept the fowls, goats and other domestic animals at night. The space before 'kut' is called 'damthak' where the storage or godown of paddy stands. There are two fire places in 'kam', if the house is large. The front varanda before 'kam' and 'kut' is called 'hangkup'. The front door is called 'hangthu' and the back door is called 'pan-hangthu'.

2.5.2 They select the place build performing traditional ritual depending fully on rice with plaintain leaf. They have a strong belief on this ritual. At the time of constructing the house they invoke their 'House God' i.e. 'Hemphu'.
to come into their house for the overall protection of the family.

2.6 Various groups of Karbi: The tribal group in Karbi Anglong district was divided into three different groups i.e., clans, such as, Chinthang, Ranghang and Amri. The Chinthang are the inhabitants of the Mikir hills areas of the former Golaghat and North Cachar Hill. The Ranghang group of people lives in the plains of Nagaon district and the Amri are the dwellers in the district towards the Khasi Jayantia Hills.

2.6.1 The Karbi people, actually, belonged to five different clans, which are Terang, Teron, Ingty, Inghi, Timung. The group is called 'Kur' by them. This 'Kur' is a loan word from the Assamese word 'Kul'. Edward Stack has also suggested it as a loan from Khasi, Assamese Phoid. Each of these five clans is again divided into various sub-clans or sub-kurs.

2.6.1.1 Terang is the clan of soldier. It is divided into six sub-clans. These are - Terang Dili, Terang Rong Checho, Kro, Be dum, Be-ke-et and Be-ke ik.

13 Ibid, p.16
14 Teron, L.:1974: Karbi Janagosthi, op.7-8
2.6.1.2 Teran is the clan of cabinet. It is divided into six sub-clans, such as, Kongkat, Langne, Milik, Ai, Chir-Ang and Tro-op.

2.6.1.3 Ingti is the clan of priest. This type of clan is also divided into five clans, such as Ingty Kathar, Ingty Henchek, Tarou, Engleng and Ingty Kiling.

2.6.1.4 Inghi is the clan of administration. It has thirty sub-clans, such as, Inghi, Rongpi, Ronghang, Ticho, Hance, Lekthe, Ke-up, Bongroong, Kramcha, Rongpi Amri, Rongpi Chinthong, Rongpi Ronghang, Rongpi Lindok, Rongpi Migi, Ronghi, Rong Chehon, Rongo, Kete, Kereng, Keloom, Doorang, Tichoo Rongphu, Tichoo Rongling, Ticho Mathou, Ticho Rong Chitim, Ticho Rongchecho, Hance Chinthong, Hance Nangpip, Hance lingdok and Ronghang lingdok.

2.6.1.5 Timung is divided into thirtyone sub-groups. These are Timung, Rangphar, Chingnar, Tokbi, Phaocho, Kiling, Timung Phara, Timung Rangpi, Timung Killing, Taktiki, Chingnar Migi, Chingnar Patar, Takbi Dera, Dera, Kleng Rangphar, Rangphar Phura, Rangphar Rangheng, Phanco Zuiti, Phanco Langteroi, Phance Ingnar, Phaneo, Wazaru, Chingnar Muciki, Mucophi, Nakbare, Chengnat, Calut Chengnat, Takbi Chinthang, Takbi Ranghang Nangdu, Nanglada and Dara.

2.6.2 There is no rac' l discrimination in the Karbi society although this society is constituted by various clans.
All of them can accept food and wine equally. Indeed, there is racial discrimination in social institution. This discrimination is seen specially in three clans, which are divided on the regional basis.

2.6.3 According to their social customs the marriage is not allowed within the same clan. But the Chinthong, Rangha and Amri are allowed to marry within their clans. Indeed, these three clans include another five clans. This type of marriage develops a feeling of unity among these five clans and no disparity is seen amongst them. The words 'Chinthong' and 'Amri' are not original Karbi words, except Rangha. These two words, Chinthong and Amri are considered as Austric loan.

2.6.4 There were three kings of Karbi Anglong district, namely, Ranghang, Chingthang and Amri. Ranghang is considered as the eldest. He possessed sufficient landed property. Chingthang and Amri have comparatively less landed property. Ranghang ruled over in his kingdom with the advice of four ministers while Chingthang and Amri administered in their kingdoms with the help of three ministers. Ranghang uses the bird (moina) as royal emblem. The fork-tailed shrike is the emblem of Chingthang and Amri kings. The Karbi kings used the wings of moina and fork-tailed shrike in their umbrella, made of silk or Muga.  

They speak their own tongue to their own people. This colloquial Karbi again varied from place to place. The entire district is full of hills and the people cannot mix-up as happened in the plains area. So, the speaking tongue shows some differences, which are nothing but dialectal variations. But this common language is Karbi.