CHAPTER III

3.00 THE KARBI SOCIETY AND CULTURE

3.1 Social system: The Karbi society is very interesting for its well-organized nature. This society is considered of five clans. The Karbis do not maintain discrimination amongst them. Although prior to this stage of social classification, they grouped themselves into small units consisting of five or six persons. Especially during the famine or food scarcity, these groups were of immense help to the whole community. Their function was to collect food. Each group looked for one particular food. Particularly each group is branded after the bird or the insect or the animal it hunted and used as its staple food. The bird or the animal which is considered as the 'totem' of a particular class was prohibited from using as food or was a taboo for the clan i.e., 'We Terang' (hornbill) is the taboo bird for the Terang clan. Similarly 'wodudu' bird is the totem for the clan 'Timung'.

3.1.1 For the administrative purpose the Karbi state was divided into twelve divisions. These are Duar Baguri, Duar Kathiatali, Duar Bamuni, Duar Salona Rangkhang, Duar Dikhoru, Duar Amalaparbat, Jamuna par, Langpher, Lumding Mikir. The last two are new mauzas, the opening, out of which is due to the Assam-Bengal Railway, which traverses the tract. Each
Mouza has a Mikir mouzadar or revenue collector. One division (Langri) consisted of several villages. In each village there is a village chief, called 'Charthe'. He is selected by the whole villagers. Now-a-days, of course, the chief is often appointed by the Government. There is a 'Habey' in each division. A 'Basapa' is appointed over three or four 'Habey'. Generally the Habey draws more respect from the community than a village chief. The common people carry one 'horlong' while going to the Habey's house as a sign of honour. This tradition is being continued till this date by the Karbis. Amongst the Karbis, dacoits and other anti-social elements are surprisingly rare. But the 'Habey' or the 'Charthe' act as judges to any dispute that may arise in the society. Very few go to the court.

3.1.2 The Mei system prevails in Karbi society is easily comparable with 'mel' (village court) system. The 'Mei' is presided over by the village chief who is elected by the members. The head village chief or the 'Mouzadar' is entertained by offering wine by the other village chiefs. Then a grand feast is arranged with pig and wine. 'Mei-pi' is superior body, above 'Mei' which conducts the cases of social misconducts such as adultery, seduction etc. Moreover, any action that goes against the established norms of

1 Bardoloi, B.C.(ed):1982: Wazaroahi - the souvenir of Asom Sahitya Sabha, Diphu session article on 'Karbi Paramparat Baguwa Bai', p. 72
their tradition is considered as unlawful. For example any person who enters into someone's bedroom or kitchen is supposed to be breach of social custom. Debauchery and adultery act with maternal uncle as marriage is also considered as a crime. Such criminals are liable for awarding death sentence. The guilty person is punished with death penalty and he or she is put on a canoe made of the banana trees and then pushed out into a river. Then the other people standing around kill him by pelting stones, arrows and spears at the guilty one. Sometimes the criminals are exiled to the across the river Brahmaputra.

3.1.3 'Zir Kedam' is one of the bachelors' dormitory of the Karbis, commonly known as 'Farla'. It is an educational institution. The Karbi youths are given craftman training on bamboo handicraft, especially making a bamboo tray (Beleng), a riddle (Ingkra), a box (Hakmayang), a loom (Fe-therang), a basket (Tan), a block of wood (Inghoi), a bamboo mat (Tan), etc. Moreover, lessons on Karbi traditional dance and music are also given to the youths there. Lessons on cultivation are also imported to them. The house used for such purposes is called 'Rissa Aterong', where they can mix up freely as per their social laws and customs. For supervising and maintaining the 'Zir Kedom' a committee is formed called 'Zir Chang'. The president of the Zir Chang is termed

2 Langkara, T. 1974: Karbi Janagosthi, p.19
as 'Kleng Churpo'(king). The Kleng Churpo is followed by one 'Klengdum' (vice president), 'Chadar Kethe' (assistant leader). 'Chudar chu' (sub-assistant leader), 'Chahrai' Kethe' (Main leader) etc. Moreover, there are twenty or thirty members. This institution takes care of all the nook and corner of the society. It also looks into the social welfare and other problems of the society. Each village has such one club house. But now-a-days the popularity of 'Rissma-Aterang' is gradually losing.

3.1.4 The Karbis maintain the patriarchal family system. But the girl maintains the parental titles after their marriage while the children of such ladies identify with their father's titles.

3.2 Marriage: The Karbi people are simple and easy living. The marriage system of Karbi people are interesting. This system of marriage are not related to the religion. It is one type of agreement. Normally the age for marriage is from eighteenth to twentyfive years for the boys and thirteenth to twenty years for the girls.

3.2.1 There are two types of marriage of the Karbi people. Firstly, the boys are allowed to select their own partners. If a boy likes a girl he sends his father or parents to the girl's house and leaves a betrothal ring or bracelet with the girl. Such negotiation is not allowed
within the same clan; bride and bridegroom must belong to separate clan. Marriage within the same clan is not approved by the society. Each clan of Karbi people is exogamous.

3.2.2 Secondly, the marriage between a boy and his maternal uncle's daughter is approved by the society. In case of agreement a boy puts a ring on the finger of the girl. It is called 'Kerai dun' or 'Hanjeng kekok'. If the girl is not available in uncle's house or he dislikes to marry his cousin, he can marry from the abother clan.

3.2.3 Generally Karbis are monogamous. Widow marriage is allowed in the Karbi society. It is good if the widow marries with her husband's relatives. If brother is died his wife is allowed to marry his younger brother. This system is called 'Pateng Panju' in their own language. The married girls do not use 'sendur' like the Hindu girls. The ornaments and dresses used by the widow are not removed after death of her husband as done in case of Hindu society.

3.2.4 The love marriage or self-arranged marriage is called 'Lai-senem' in their own language, which was initially disallowed by the society. If the girl becomes pregnant before her marriage, she is to marry someone from a separate clan. In this regard Mr.Stack reported, when he made his

---

3 A word borrowed from the Khasi language, the original word is 'laisman'.
enquiries that there was little intercourse between the sexes. Seduction rarely occurred, but when it did the parents of the girl had to give her to the lad in marriage. There is another system of society. The bridegroom belonging to illegal marriage is liable to stay in the house of the bride for two or three years. This system is called 'Pichakemen' in their language. After marrying the girl the bridegroom can come back to his house. Amongst the Karbi when the bride happens to be the only daughter of the parents the bridegroom shifts to the wife's house. Now-a-days society is liberal towards such 'Lāi-Senem' to some extent. The modern education has influenced the society and some changes are noticeable in respect of the orthodoxy in marriage. The society has also shown some liberal attitude towards such sporadic changes.

3.2.5 In case of negotiated marriage, the Karbi people generally follow the systems as noted below:

(i) Nengpi nengsa kachingki - i.e. the first conversation for negotiation between the two parties;

(ii) Picho-kehang - i.e. the formal proposal for offering the girl in marriage to the boy;

(iii) Lum Kepathik - i.e. the final negotiation for the marriage; and

---

4 Stack and Lyall:1908: The Mikirs, p.19
5 Teron, L.:1974: Karbi Janagosthi, pp.26-33
(iv) Azo Arni Kepha - i.e. the fixation of date of the marriage.

3.2.6 The marriage engagement is carried out by the mothers of the bride and bridegroom. The first step after the engagement is to send a few articles to the bride's house. It includes a bottle of rice-beer or wine, a fine pair of betel nut. In the next step the parents of the bridegroom go to the bride's home along with the village chief and relatives. They spend the night in the bride's house. They ask for the bride through songs. On the third step they decide the date of the ceremony. Again the bridegroom's father entertains the bride's parents with wine and rice-beer. On the fourth step the marriage ceremony takes place. The bridegroom goes in procession along with his friends and relatives to the bride's home. They also carry with them huge quantity of wine and rice-beer. The same way the bride's family also prepares a grand feast. The Karbis perform the marriage rites through songs and folk songs. The women are debarred from participating in the folk songs. The singers are called 'Adamachar' and the songs are called 'Thelu alun'. The bride and bridegroom offer betel nut to each other. When returning home the bridegroom takes a package of rice on the way. The next day they perform 'Hemphu puja' at the bridegroom's house. For a happy conjugal life they perform 'Murkrong' and 'Rachinza'. The main festival of marriage is called 'Pichapangri' or 'Adamachar'.
3.2.7 Unlike the other Hindus the Karbis consider it as evil omen, if it rains. Moreover, when they see birds like egal and kites etc., they take it for a bad omen. Polygamy is not common. But a man can have a second marriage. Unmarried persons are also seen among them.

Like the Assamese society, the Karbis do not have the system of dowry. But non-Karbis in the modern society of Karbis are practising this system of dowry. Divorce is generally not allowed in their society. Only the village council is authorised to allow divorce when necessary.

3.2.8 The Karbis are not matriarchal like Khasis. The Karbi girls do not change their own titles after marriage. But their children of such ladies identify with their father's titles. Only the boys inherit the father's properties. The daughters are deprived of family fortune. If someone has got no son then he is allowed to adopt some boy as son from his nearest relative who generally inherits the properties. If the deceased has no son or brothers, the widow can retain the property. But all other relations revolve round the mother. Descendants of the same mother are considered brothers or sisters at the family. Maternal uncle 'Nihu' is respected more than others. The relationship between the wife's elder brother and the younger sister's husband is like brother of the same mother. In Karbi family the elders are respected by the youngers with 'Kardom'. The elder brothers of the husband
do not hold talks with his younger sister-in-law directly. Mothers-in-law is treated as one's mother. Their hospitality is cordial. They offer 'Horlang' in honour of guest. In short, the Karbi people live in great harmony.

3.3 Foods and Professions: The principal foods of the Karbis are rice, dry fish, vegetables, egg etc.

3.3.1 They also domesticate fowls, goats and pigs etc. which are also used as food. Fowl is offered to God in sacrifice and then they take such sacrificial offerings as food. They never take milk as food like other hill tribes. But nowadays educated Karbis domesticate cows and buffaloes for commercial purpose. In the interior hill areas the Karbi people never domesticate cows, they rear the cows on Adhia system i.e. fifty-fifty profit basis with the Nepali graziers.

3.3.2 The rice beer 'horlang' is their main drink. They prepare rice beer in home and they use this prepared drink widely in all social ceremonies and family festivals. They prepare a typical tea of the leaves of jungle bamboo and take it without milk. They prepare blank tea without sugar. But the urban people have developed the habit of drinking tea with sugar and milk.

3.3.3 Cigarette smoking is no less than a sign of honour. Betel-nut is used by young and old alike. Opium was smoked
freely till it was prohibited by law. They also smoke tobacco.

3.3.4 Vegetables are grown in their home. The sesamum is widely used in Karbi society. They prepare various kinds of food items from rice, such as, rice cooked in bamboo in plants leaves and various rice cakes.

3.3.5 The Karbi people are chiefly agriculturists. Terrace farming or the jhuming is the traditional mode of cultivation among the Karbis. They do not plough their tract of land like the people of the plain. They till it by spade. First, they cut down weeds and jungle of the hilly area, and then set fire to it. After spading the area they sow the seeds. When the land becomes infertile they shift from that place to a fertile one. The village chief divides the cultivable land to the villagers. Each can change his plot after a period of two or three years. But now-a-days they do not change their plots for economical progress. They do not cultivate twice in a year. Like other neighbouring tribes the Karbi people have resorted to settle cultivation in the plains portion of Karbi Anglong and at the initiative of the district council implementing various land reforms and other appropriate measures for cultivation. The evils of 'Adhiyas' or 'Paikas' system of subletting land by the Karbi people have been abolished by the District Council Act, 1979.

6 Report of the District Council (Karbi Anglong) dt. 8.8.79
Cotton and rice cultivation are the two important cultivation of Karbi Anglong. Moreover they cultivate yans, maize, caster plants, turmeric, ginger, sesamum etc. The cultivation of maize is very popular and they do it very widely as it grows quickly at the beginning of the monsoon. The paddy cultivation begins in the summer season and harvesting takes place during the months of November and December. The cotton and sesamum are also broadcast in a separate plot in the months of July and August.

3.3.6 The young man's club is called 'Zircang' which is just like 'Dekacang' of the Mishing and Naga etc. and they work in a group in the paddy field. A zircang is built with a wooden platform on bamboo posts and raise it near their paddy field to keep watch over their field and crops, also they perform all other social constructive activities from this house.

3.3.7 The Karbi men like hunting. They put up traps and nets to catch deer and other animals. The Karbi men and women take part in fishing by trapping rod and line and poisoning. The Karbi women are expert weavers and most of the cloths for domestic use are produced in their family loom.

3.3.8 The Karbi can do the work of the blacksmith, carpenters, goldsmith, weavers and potters. They make sword, spear, daos and knives, fishing hook etc. They make their
own gold and silver ornaments. Now-a-days a few Karbi people have been serving under the Government of Assam.

3.3.9 Dress and Ornaments: The Karbi people have a unique style in their dress and custom is concerned. They are very skilled weaver. Producing colourful cotton cloths is a rich cottage industry among the Karbis. They produce the necessary material from their indigenous cotton plantation. They use various dyes. In olden days the Karbi women dressed themselves with a typical rope over their chest made of silk cotton and barks of the trees. But with the passage of time they learnt the skill to produce their own dresses and customs. The Karbi people can be easily recognized by their dresses and other ornaments they use. They often copy the natural objects such as trees, animals and birds for fabrication and embroidery. The important components of the weaving are 'herpi' (a kind of reel for winding thread on), 'hon' (thread), 'honthari' (bobbin), 'honthari' - 'langpang (spool), 'thelang' (a weaver's shuttle), 'thepun' (a rope used in a Mikir loom), 'therang'(loom), 'takeri' (spindle) etc.

3.3.9.1 The Karbi dress is more or less similar with the Khasi dress. The Karbi gents use a typical turban on their head which is called 'Pahu'. They also use a hat either black or red and it is called 'Phutap'. The Karbi gents use a type
of lengti which is called 'Rikang'; it is often embroidered. The colourful shirt made of some pieces of coloured cloths is called 'cai'. It is a short-sleeves shirt and covers up to the waist and coiled threads hard all around. The gents wear fork tailed shrike' bird's feathers to beautify their heads. In the winter season, they use a thick wrapper made of endi like of the plain people. It is called 'Peinki' in Karbi dialect. The menfolk use some typical ornaments made of bamboos.

3.3.9.2 The women wear a black peticoat named 'Fini' that comes down up to knee. 'Won kok' a string thin ribbon is tied over the peticoat. They tie round their chest a methani called 'Ziso'. But after the marriage they put it off. They put on another saddar like Assamese 'Cheleng'. In the interior regions the elder women often are seen with bare breasts. Mills said, "the women in their villages do not cover the breast, they are nevertheless chaste and in their moral behaviour superior to the people of the plain."

3.3.9.3 The young damsel takes the dresses. 'Prejangphang', 'Khangjari', 'Duku Dukphiros', 'Pejang frot'. The daughters-in-law put on 'Pebru' and 'Pe-charpi'.

3.3.9.4 The Karbi women draw a black mark from their forehead down the nose to the chin. There is a tradition

7 Moffutt, A.J.: 1853: Report of Assam,
that during the Burmese Invasion the Karbis had to wander about the high hills to get rid of the barbarous atrocities. During those days the Burmese often carried on inhuman torture upon the Karbi women. To save themselves from their hands they used to distort their facial appearance by such means as marking the face with black lines. This, in course of time, became a tradition. It is called in their language 'Duk Kaciduk'. But modern town dwellers have discontinued this custom.

3.3.9.5 The Karbi women use 'Nek' (used in neck), 'Nathengpi' (in ear), Nalangpong (a bamboo made earring), 'Roy' (used in hand), Narik (earring), Arnan (ring) etc. all different types of ornaments to adorn their beauty. But after marriage they use scant ornaments. The ornaments are generally made of iron and silver.

3.3.9.6 The Karbi people dye their teeth with a black pigment. It is made from the ash of 'Chaik' tree. They believe that the black dye keeps their teeth intact.

3.3.9.7 The rich tapestry of colourful drawings that Karbi women embroider their customs with a unique example of their skill and craftsmanship. But gradually their traditional style wears on influence from the mixed culture of their neighbours. The Karbi girls and women are using their traditional dresses of modern trends.
3.4 Status of Women in the Karbi Society: The women in Karbi society occupies an inferior status. There is no restriction of works for Karbi womenfolk. The principal duties of the Karbi women in their families are food preparation, collection of the fire wood from the jungle and rearing children. They also help menfolk in cultivation. Like the other hill tribes the Karbi women are more labourious than the menfolk. They are to work in their lands, also to cut down the weeds and set fire to their jhum cultivation. The Karbi women take equal part with the males in keeping their paddy-field properly to protect their cultivation from the wild animals.

The bartered system is still prevailing in the Karbi society. The Karbi women exchange their surplus goods with their needed commodities. Such articles are salt, dry fish, ornaments and glass-made utensils.

3.4.1 There are some taboos in respect of women in their society. The Karbi women are not allowed to attend any village court. In the community feast also they are not allowed to take food alongwith the menfolk. They cannot perform worship socially. It is also seen that the Karbi women do not inherit the husband's properties, but her children inherit such properties. Even the women after death of her husband have no right over her personal properties.

Now, as a result of education the Karbi society
has been changed to a great extent. The women are also prose-
cutting higher studies in college, university etc. They are
properly fitted to get employment in various walks of life.
There are good number of Karbi women, having graduation
degree in Medicine. Karbi women produce very fine cloths in
their looms. They also produce different qualities of cotton
yarns from their own spinning wheels. In recent days they
have also learnt and developed the modern techniques of
weaving, knitting, tailoring, embroeder etc.

3.4.2 In the Chamangkanceremonies the boys and girls
equally take part in dance. A particular selected lady plays
the prominent role in traditional ceremonies, specially in
Chamangkan. She invites the departed souls of the fore-
generations to the earth through her songs; this lady is
called 'Ucepi'. She takes the leading role in this ceremony.
She prepares food for the soul who are called in the ceremony
to their house. This way she prepares food on three diffe-
rent occasions.

3.5 Festivals: The Karbis observe several religious
and non-religious festivals. The main festival celebrated by
them is 'Rongker', which is the most popular annual village
festival. In the beginning of cultivation in summer season
i.e. before going to the field for cultivation Karbi people
celebrate this function every year in every village. In some
villages this function is celebrated in winter season.
3.5.1 There are various types of this 'Rongker' function. They are: (1) Rek Rongker, (ii) Rekpi Rongker, (iii) Waphang Rongker, (iv) Dengza Rongker, (v) Pirdu Rongker, (vi) Azu Rongker. These two types i.e. Rek Rongker and Rekpi Rongker are celebrated collectively under the responsibility of a 'Habe'. When there is a famine or other natural calamities like diseases the Karbis perform these festivals with animal sacrifices such as pigs, cocks and fowls etc. But they do not kill animal for feast at this festival, they believe that if they kill the animal then the paddy, which they bring home, would be less in quantity.

3.5.1.1 'Waphong Rongker' function is held in every five years. Originally they offered and slaughtered human being as offering to the soul. But this human sacrifice is totally abolished now. This function is held for two days. They worship 'Lakhi' on second day.

3.5.1.2 'Dengza Rongker' function is performed after three years. Previously human sacrifice was also allowed in this festival, but now this system is abolished.

3.5.1.3 The Karbi women are not allowed to participate in the festival of 'Rongker'. In this festival Karbis build up an alter at the corner of the village and a goat is sacrificed to the God 'Arnam Pharo' and some fowls to the god 'Than Arnam'. From the day preceding this festival the main priest abstains himself from women. The priest sleeps in a
separate house on the previous night called 'Hong Pharla'. The Karbi people pray and recite some songs in their own language. It has some resemblance with the 'Rangali Bihu' of the Assamese people.

3.5.2 The 'Chamangkan' is a very important religious ceremony of the Karbi people. The 'Chamangkan' means 'Shraddha' ceremony in memory of forefathers. The Karbis believe in life after death.

3.5.2.1 It is difficult to give a definite answer about the origin of the word, 'Chamangkan'. The word 'Kan' is derived from the Assamese word 'Gan', where 'g' becomes 'k' in Karbi language. The original word 'gan' means songs. Kan has retained the same meaning. Dance and songs are both denoted by the transformed word. In another theory 'Cham' means 'Jama', 'Kan' means dance i.e. the soul of dead is called in reborn in the world with song and dance to satisfy 'Jama'. This type of festival is called 'Chamangkan'.

3.5.2.2 The origin of the word 'chamang' is peculiar. The Karbi people call the Khasi as the 'Chamang'. The 'Chamangkan' technically means Khasi-dance. The Chamangkan is organised only for purifying the soul of dead person like the customs of Khasi-Jayantia. This death festival is called 'Arleng Kachi' in their language. The Yama and Jama have become a household word in the Karbi language. The word is also

8 Appendix of the thesis, (iv)
pronounced as Chama by the people. The Karbis believe that the soul goes back from where it comes. They believe in fate. They observe three days and nights fasting when someone dies. In this shraddha they offer all the things the man needs when he is alive.

3.5.2.3 The Chamangkan is divided into three classes, such as 'the Kan Phlaphla' which is a general shraddha, the 'Langtak' the middle class and the 'Harne' which is the Higher class. There is no fixed day or date of Shraddha. The members of the family of the deceased fix the date according to their convenience. The chamangkan ceremony must be performed on a particular date.

3.5.2.4 In brief, the youths dance and sing for three days and nights continuously in this chamangkan function. The main significance of the festival is to exchange the feeling of the boys and girls by musical instruments such as 'drum, pepa, flute and gagana' etc. The women also take part in the festival with the man. Ladies have also played an important role in Karbi society. They believe that the soul of the dead is not liberated unless this chamangkan is performed. Influences of the Khasi culture is also seen in this festival.

Although this festival is observed through the medium of music, the relatives express their sorrows. On the first day of chamangkan the relatives of the deceased and the neighbours go to the cremation ground and request the dead to come back to the earth and receive the offerings. A lady
called 'Uchepi' is to continuously sing in tragic voice praising the virtues of the deceased. The youths dance and sing with debased language.

3.5.2.5 On the second day musics are also begun. This is called 'Kanpi'. A bottle of wine is offered to the people who join in chamangkan and take dinner with cheers and joys. This is called 'Langpana'. In the evening of the third day they beat the drums for the dead body. The beating of the drums causes the corpse to raze on the pyre and thus it is concluded.

3.5.2.6 The whole ceremony is divided into three different parts, such as sacrifice, ritual and social meeting. On the occasion of this ceremony they offer a goat and a fowl. In this ceremony generally the maternal uncle of the deceased plays the main role. If the maternal uncle is dead already, then his son or daughter plays the role.

Many Karbis are converted into Christianity and it appears as a great social problem to them. Now to them the Chamangkan is considered as an excessive ceremony and morally indefensible. So they do not observe this ceremony gorgeously.

3.5.3 Like the Assamese Hindus the Karbis have also great reverence for the Goddess of wealth or Goddess of paddy whom they call 'Pi Lakhimi' (the Goddess Lakhimi). This festival is called 'Chakheri' in their language. The Karbis sing the
'Lakhimi Kepla' song in this festival. This song narrates the past history i.e. evolution of paddy and its relation with the Kuki-chin people.

3.5.3.1 The songs and dances played in this function are called 'Hacha Kekan'. The Karbi people take their harvest feast collectively which is made of new rice. Moreover, they use wine and dry pea. Usually the Karbi youths celebrate this festival after harvesting. It is closely associated with the cultivation.

3.5.4 The 'Chojun puja' is a religious festival, which is held for the God 'Darithe' or 'Indra'. He is in the highest position. This puja is generally held in full moon alternatively every two or three years. When it is held on the public platform, it is called 'Rekapirthat'. In this festival arum, fern and 'mehok hanthu' are collected. At the place of the worship a platform is raised on four legs of 'Fongrang' tree. An altar is erected and insects like grasshopper, crabs and chenga fish etc. are placed on the altar. A cock is tied and placed on it as an offering to sun God. Betelnut and pithaguri are offered.

Generally through these worships the old and the revered ones of the society are honoured. At large number of items including rice, tamarind, charcoal, banyan tree and bamboo leaf etc.

9 Appendix of the thesis, (iv)
3.6 Karbi songs and Folk-tales: The Karbis have a rich tradition of folk songs and folk tales. They are rich in content and also in number. They can be said as music lovers in comparison to the other tribes. The Karbis did not have the advantage of a written script. These songs have been handed down to generation after generation through oral medium. Innumerable songs such as prayer songs, folk songs, pastoral songs, 10ka geet, nichukani geet, harvesting songs, satirical songs, love songs, duha geet, lunse kleplang, dihun alun, didi alun etc. have come through many generations before. Some of these songs have been published as books by both Karbi and Assamese authors.

3.6.1 T. Bhattacharjee has divided the Karbi folksongs into two categories as follows:10

```
Karbi Folksongs

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Indigenous</th>
<th>Foreign accepted and remodelled</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Songs narrating social rules which include origin, birth, death, marriage rituals</td>
<td>Cultural, including love songs and stories</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
```

10 Bhattacharjee, T.: 1986: Sociology of the Karbis, p. 152
A vivid description of nature in all these folk songs is available. The Karbis live in a very close environment of nature surrounded by trees, jungles, rocks, wild animals etc. The silk cotton tree (simalu) and the corul tree (moder) are a very familiar reference in these songs. Looking at the cyclic change of the natural season, the Karbis are fond of love songs.

Fish is an indispensable element of their folk-songs, social rites and other religious functions. Fish is used as a symbol of women's beauty in Karbi songs.

The nursery rhymes are also popular among the Karbis. The wonderful world centering round one's mother is the main source of all these rhymes. The natural world is not reflected. The Karbis sing these songs or rhymes to lull their little children to sleep either at home or on their rest home near the field, when even they get leisure.

In the love songs of the Karbis there is a note of sadness fraught in them.

3.6.2 The epic Ramayana gets translated in legendary rites of Sabin Alun. The Hindu epic Ramayana has a distinct appeal of the Karbi mind. They have a lengthy tale all events connected with the Ramayana. In the festival one person, who is called 'Lunse' describes the whole epic by

11 Appendix of the thesis, (iv)
the music. The simple lifestyle of the Karbi gets reflected in the songs like 'Rukachar', 'Adam Achar', Hōl etc. The Karbis have been singing the songs of the 'Ramayana', the 'Mahabharata' since the time immemorial.

3.6.3 In some Karbi folk tales the great Creator of the Universe is also narrated. The story was narrated by Iru Kachen, who composed the songs which are called 'Hacha Kekan'. These songs give us an idea about the Karbi conception of high God and the Universe was first created by Brahma. Like the Hindu, the Karbis worship Brahma and Ram. The Hacha-Kekan is not exactly based on the folk tales.

3.6.3.1 The festival is called 'Sok Keroi' which is held in the paddy field in the time of harvesting. In the festival, the origin of agriculture is described through songs; like the Hindu, they also consider rice as the sign of prosperity.

During the Chamangkan ceremony of the Karbis, the tale of 'Musera Kehir' is narrated by the people. The 'Musera Kehir' are very sacred virgins. Therefore, these are told only at the time of the Chamangkan. All other festivals among the Karbis are performed with songs.

3.6.3.2 The Karbis use many types of musical instruments, namely Muri (Pipe), Ponchi (Flute), Chengkumbang (drum made

12 Bhattacharjee, T.: 1986: Sociology of the Karbis, p.44
of bamboo), Kum (Violin), Changlangpong (long drum narrow in breadth), Chengbrup (drum which is played on one side only), Chengpi (big drum) etc.

3.7 Religion: Some religions are practised at the grass-root level in the tribal society. They always consider the various elements with supernatural powers within their surroundings, as gift or symbol of containing spiritual things. This way the concepts of God or Goddess come into their minds from fear; this way they consider water, rain, sky, tree, rivers, forests, brooks and rivulets, fire, Borun, the moon, the sun, snake etc. as God. These natural phenomena are not within their powers and so, they worship such phenomena. Some Karbi people keep a solid stone or metal block at home which is called a 'Bor'. This they believe, brings wealth and riches to the family.

The Karbis are deeply religious minded people. They have tremendous faiths on the supreme being, whom they call Hampatin. The Karbis could not develop the art of temple building. They have no idoles, temples or shrines.13

Most of the Karbis believe their own religion. A portion of them have accepted Hinduism. The Karbis believe the same path of religion as the Hindus follow Rigvedic religion. Every religion, it seems, is the symbolisation of the power of nature. They have used few Karbi words to

13 Lyall & Stack: 1908: The Mikirs, p.30
indicate the various names of gods and goddesses except Brahma, Mahadeva and Mahamaya. 'Rama' the Hindu God is accepted as their God, who is called 'Chabin Alun'. They worship the Hindus' deities, 'Saraswati' and 'Durga', who do not represent any natural phenomena. Most of the Karbis accepted Hinduism during the Ahom reign.

3.7.1 Their gods are innumerable in number and they worship them in different times and occasions at different places. The Karbis are of two categories: (1) God to be supplicated and (2) God to be propitiated.

The names of the Karbi gods are given below. Obviously the list is not all inclusive and many gods are worshipped in the villages.  


Henru Ehong (Arnam), Ingru Ning Tong, Nihong Nijang Aze, Dor, Rikangpi, Meipi, Longri Aze, Puthe Ningre Avor, Arnam Avor, Hemphu Avor, Thengtom Epong, Ram Chhong Katoi Avor, Arol Avor, Kona Avor, Rek-Anglong (Mountain god), Arnam Kethe.

Hemphu is another household god. Hemphu has a brother named Mukrang and a sister named Rachingja. According to their belief Hemphu is their protector. Mukrang is the creator and Rachingja is the mother nature. This god is worshipped with the sacrifice of a goat or fowl.

Peng is another powerful household god. Peng lives in the house. This god is worshipped once in a year with the sacrifice of a goat. This again is done to preserve peace and prosperity of the family by keeping off all troubles. This is also observed as a festival.

Arnam Pharo is another important god, who is worshipped by offering rice, pithaguri and betel nut. He too is offered a goat. He is worshipped during the Rangkar festival for better harvest.

Arnam Kethe is considered as the very powerful household god. Every family worships this god once in three years with a view to keep off diseases and other calamities. On the occasion of this they kill a pig and invite the villagers for a feast with wine. They believe that Arnam Kathe lives in heaven.
To the Karbis 'Rek Anglong' is another important house god who is worshipped in the field and who as believed lives on the hill.

Moreover they worship the following Gods to recover from different kinds of diseases such as cholera, malaria, typhoid etc. Such names of Gods are given below: 15

(1) Chomany Aze - the Khasi fever
(2) Keche Aze - the god of rheumatism
(3) Se Meme - 'Evil pain' - to god who presides over the barrenness in women.
(4) Ajo Aze - the night fever. He is the deity of cholera. He is propitiated with suitable offerings.
(5) Thengthon or Ok Langno - He is the god who presides over recurring diseases and he is propitiated with a pig or fowl.

Stack found some Karbi gods which are mentioned below: 16

(1) Phun Kang - the swollen throat- Goitre.
(2) Si-i - cough, pthisis
(3) Ingthak - stone
(4) Pok Kangsi - Diarrhoea

15 Lyall & Stack : 1908: The Mikirs, p.12
16 Ibid.
(5) Keehe Aze  - Rheumatism
(6) Bab Aze  - Neuralgia
(7) Pi-Amir  - Small pox
(8) Si-i  - Leprosy
(9) Man-Arak  - white Leprosy
(10) Kengtong  - Elephantiasis
(11) Pak-Kapavi  - Bleeding of belly, dysentery.

3.7.2 The Karbi women worship 'So memo' God to protect themselves from pain. The Karbi people worship the ferocious animals like tiger, elephant, bear etc. to protect themselves from them. They believe in rebirth of human being and in the immortality of the soul. They generally name their children after their dead relative because they believe that the deceased come back to the world

At present in the Karbi society, Christian people diverted their unsophisticated mind of Karbi towards the spiritual supremacy. As a result a smaller section of Karbi people has eagerly accepted the new faith of Christianity. But like the other hill tribes of the region, Christian missionaries have not yet much headway among the Karbis, because of the proximity of their habitat to the plains. In fact many of the Karbis living in plains have become undistinguishable from the Assamese.

3.8 Faith and Belief: Superstition is still with the Karbi people. Many of them even now believe in the
enchantment and magical care. When someone of them becomes ill or suffers from fever, they make ghosts and demons responsible for it and to get rid of them, they take the help of incantation and witchery. In the Karbi language they call it 'Maza'. They have also fortune-tellers. 'Uche' is the name of male fortune-teller and 'Uchepi' is the female one. In the practice of fortune-telling and many other superstitions practices we see much resemblance between non-Karbi and Karbi people of Assam. They also take the help of rice and cowri for fortune-telling.

3.8.1 The superstitions hold so much sway above the Karbi mass, that because of it, many people die of ill treatment, false diagnosis. But now-a-days, with the development of literacy and emergence of the educated class, the belief in superstition among them is somewhat lessoning. The increasing awareness of modern science among the Karbi people is seen today. Not many people die today as that of olden days in the hands of doctors.

3.8.2 In the Karbi society, the practice of swearing finds prominence. In trial or of judging a guilty person, sometimes it so happens that there is lack of sufficient evidence they take the help of the method of searing. In the Karbi language they call 'Cheme Kepi'. The guilty swears with a handful of rice above his head. At that time he is supposed to speak the truth, because otherwise his future is sure to
be miserable like the dingy soil. And these people believe in it. The finger ring of ivory of tiger's teeth of the 'Uche' i.e. the male fortune teller or the head priest is dripped in the water and the guilty one is made to swear after he has drunk Cheme of those magical liquids.

3.9 Language: The Karbi people are generally bilingual. Most of them can converse both in Assamese and in the Karbi language. A small section of the Karbi people cannot speak Assamese, but they can understand this language. Within the Karbi population there is a small section who can neither speak nor understand Assamese. This small group of the Karbis are monolingual, while the vast majority are bilingual. Thus it appears that the Karbi population are depending solely on the Assamese language outside the community and to some extent within the community. The linguistic picture of the Karbis is very interesting for their bilingual behaviour. Normally they speak in Karbi in their domestic or community life while they speak Assamese to the non-Karbi. Assamese has been accepted as first language by the Karbis for all academic purposes. The Karbi language has been introduced very recently in primary schools both as a subject as well as a medium of instruction. A very limited number of books on different subjects have been published in the Karbi language where the authors follow several principles of their spoken Karbi i.e. conversational Karbi. The language is written with the Assamese script i.e. Purbi Lipi, which is
also the accepted script for preparation of text books in Karbi.

3.9.1 The names of the books on the Karbi language are noted below:

Text books -

(i) Kimlākhā - (a) ici ādeň
(b) hini ādeň
(c) kethom ādeň

(ii) Lāmlet pānrum - (a) ici ādeň
(b) hini ādeň
(c) kethom ādeň

(iii) Prithe ālam - (a) ici āphāi
(b) hini āphāi

(iv) Chantham pācini - ici and hini ādeň

All these have been published in 1978 by the Assam State Text Book Production and Publication Corporation Ltd., Guwahati.

Non-text books -

(i) Lāmmet Ečhaň by Chamching Hanche (edited) 1979.
(ii) Rāncinā Chārp āru Kārbi Saṃj by Dilip Kalita, 1982.
(iii) Kārbi Charlamthe by Kehai Be, 1981.

3.9.2 The Karbi people are gradually in the process of modernisation after having the touch with the other communities in their neighbourhood. As a result, they are gradually giving
up some tribal nature and habits. After their active participation in various administrative activities with the Government they have developed their ideas and thoughts in different spheres of life. They have got the ideas of modern and up-to-date westernised educated life, which are gradually entered into their society.

The Karbis living in urban and semi-urban areas are maintaining such modernised life. Of course in the rural areas this change is quite negligible while in the hilly and interior regions they are still keeping the old traditions and customs almost in tact.

3.9.3 The Karbis are very much influenced by the surrounding Hindu population of the hills and plains. They follow their traditional Gods and Goddesses, besides they worship many of the Hindu Gods and Goddesses by joining different festivals organised by the Hindus in the locality. Moreover, some of the Karbis are also converted into Christianity and they are giving up their old customs and traditions a bit quickly.

3.9.4 The Karbi language\textsuperscript{17} possesses seven vowel phonemes : /i, e, ɛ, ə, a, ɔ, u/ and nineteen consonant phonemes : /p, ph, b, t, th, d, k, kh, c, ch, z, h, m, n, ŋ, l, r, w, y/. The Karbi does not possess voiced aspirates : /bh, dh, gh, jh/ and voices unaspirates /g/ consonant.

\textsuperscript{17}Chapter V of the thesis.
The Karbi speakers are scattered both in plains and hilly areas and some phonological and morphological differences between the plain Karbi and hill Karbi are observed. Because of such contact the Karbis have also influenced the Assamese language and they have also taken some elements from the Assamese language.

18 Chapter IV of the thesis: 4.4.3 to 4.3.3.2
19 Chapter I: Introduction
20 Chapter I: Introduction